

# BEOWULF

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

BURTON RAFFEL

*and with a New Afterword by*

ROBERTA FRANK



SIGNET CLASSICS

**Burton Raffel** has taught English, classics, and comparative literature at universities in the United States, Israel, and Canada. His books include translations of *Beowulf*, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Chairil Anwar*, *From the Vietnamese*, *Ten Centuries of Poetry*, *The Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam* (with Alla Burago), *Poems from the Old English*, and *The Annotated Milton*; critical studies including *Introduction to Poetry*, *How to Read a Poem*, *The Development of Modern Indonesian Poetry*, and *The Forked Tongue: A Study of the Translation Process*; and *Mia Poems*, a volume of his own poetry. Mr. Raffel practiced law on Wall Street and taught in the Ford Foundation's English Language Teacher Training Project in Indonesia.

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Published by New American Library, a division of  
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,  
New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,  
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,  
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,  
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,  
New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632,  
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,  
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:  
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Signet Classics, an imprint of New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA)  
Inc. Previously published in a Mentor edition.

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ISBN: 978-1-1012-1299-8

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*For Brian and Blake*

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## *Introduction*

No one knows when *Beowulf* was composed, or by whom, or why. A single manuscript managed to survive Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, and the destruction of their great libraries; since his name is written on one of the folios, Lawrence Nowell, the sixteenth-century scholar, may have been responsible for *Beowulf's* preservation. The manuscript is a copy, in two distinct handwritings: how many other copies existed, or how close to the original this particular version was, will probably never be known. Indeed, since careless binding, plus an unfortunate fire in 1731, led in the course of time to serious deterioration of the manuscript, some words in *Beowulf* are known only from two transcripts made, in 1786–1787, by the Danish scholar Thorkelin. Other words, and lines, had either crumbled away before Thorkelin saw the manuscript, or are simply missing, or are incomplete; gaps have to be filled in by guesswork—and sometimes by ultraviolet photography.

But we do have the poem, and we are remarkably lucky to have it: not only is it unique, the sole survivor of what may have been a thriving epic tradition, but it is great poetry. Approached as an archaeological relic, it is fascinating. Taken as a linguistic document, it is a marvel, a mine of revelations and controversies. It gives us vital information about Old English social life and about Old English politics and about many things that scholars would like to have much more information on. But *Beowulf's* position as a great poem must remain primary; the other purposes it serves are important but peripheral to this central fact of sheer literary merit.

It is essentially an aristocratic poem, concerned with kings and kingship:

...He ruled

Lands on all sides: wherever the sea  
Would take them his soldiers sailed, returned  
With tribute and obedience. There was a brave  
King!

(8–12)

Strength and courage are basic virtues for both followed and follower. But where the follower's overriding commitment is to loyalty, the king's position is more complex.

...A king  
Born, entrusted with ancient treasures  
And cities full of stronghearted soldiers,  
His vanity swelled him so vile and rank  
That he could hear no voices but his own. He deserved  
To suffer and die....

(908–913)

Thus Hermod is described, a king indisputably brave, incontestably strong, but unable to balance the requirements of absolute obedience with generosity and concern for his people's welfare, unable to simultaneously lead and sustain his soldiers. The poet immediately contrasts this savage brute, who would descend to drunken rages and kill his closest companions, with Beowulf, "a prince well-loved, followed in friendship, not fear."

The poem was composed in England perhaps four centuries before the Norman Conquest. And this England of roughly the eighth century A.D., as reflected in social patterns ascribed to sixth-century Geats and Danes and Swedes, is rigidly feudal, highly civilized and highly violent, and rather newly Christian. Layers of morality and tenderness and piety are intermixed, in *Beowulf*, with the glorification of war, death, and fame; such humdrum occupations as farming, fishing (except for sport: see lines 1432–1441), and the care and feeding of both adults and children are all denigrated, casually, when they are mentioned at all. Slavery is taken for granted: when a slave accompanies Beowulf and his men to the dragon’s wasteland den, the poet does not include him in the count. There were *twelfa sum*, Beowulf and eleven others, we are told in line 2401, but five lines further on the poet adds that a *þreotteoð a secg*, a “thirteenth man”—the slave—was also with them. The important tools, in this poem, are weapons: proven swords and helmets are handed down, from father to son, like the vital treasures they were. Swords have personalities, and names; servants of course have neither.

Much of the poem is ruminative rather than, as might be expected, more narrowly narrative. Beowulf’s three combats, with Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon, occupy a surprisingly small part of the epic. As in the ceremonial wrestling of Japan, preliminaries—speeches, advice, reminiscences—are fully as important as actual fighting, and take longer in the telling. The poet can capture a battle scene with magnificent skill and vividness:

Then the monster charged again, vomiting  
Fire, wild with pain, rushed out  
Fierce and dreadful, its fear forgotten.  
Watching for its chance it drove its tusks  
Into Beowulf’s neck; he staggered, the blood  
Came flooding forth, fell like rain.

(2688–2693)

And there can be no question of the relish with which warfare is contemplated, its dominant role in this masculine-dominated society:

...No female, no matter

How fierce, could have come with a man's strength,

Fought with the power and courage men fight with,

Smashing their shining swords, their bloody,

Hammer-forged blades onto boar-headed helmets,

Slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of points.

(1282–1287)

But the significance of battle, rather than its bare facts, is what grips the poet. He is interested in what makes a good fighter tick, what makes a hero heroic; he looks inside the minds of both good men and evil monsters:

...Grendel

Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws

Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at

His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,

But his power had gone. He twisted in pain...

(811–815)

When Beowulf takes up the sword, “hammered by giants,” which will give

him victory over Grendel's mother, the poet's description is basically an internalized one—though the action is not neglected:

...savage, now, angry

And desperate, [he] lifted it high over his head

And struck with all the strength he had left...

(1563–1565)

It is God who grants Beowulf victory, but only after he is “back on his feet and fighting.” The good fighter, the hero, the man who wins that most precious of all treasures, fame, is the man who never gives up, and who does not worry about the possible consequences of bravery:

...So fame

Comes to the men who mean to win it

And care about nothing else!...

(1534–1536)

Nor does it ever leave the hero, this driving will for glory:

...I am old, now,

But I will fight again, seek fame still...

(2512–2513)

...But the brave old Swede

Felt no fear: he quickly returned  
A better blow than he'd gotten, faced  
Toward Wulf and struck him savagely....

(2967–2970)

Perhaps the most striking example of the perspective from which the poet sees battle, the context of values into which he constantly tries to fit it, is the climax of the fight with the dragon. Beowulf, weakened by time and age, is being slowly but surely beaten—“a king, before, but now a beaten warrior.” His other comrades desert him, but Wiglaf stands watching, torn with indecision. About ten lines are given to his doubts (and his lineage). Then:

...Wiglaf's  
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow  
Shield and drew his sword...

(2608–2610)

Beowulf is in agony, “wrapped around in swirling flames,” and the decision to go to his aid has been taken; the sword is drawn, the shield raised, and what follows? A lunge at the dragon, a scene of desperate combat? Not at all. The poet stops (by our standards) in midstream, gives us first twenty lines about Wiglaf's sword and how his father won it in battle, then another thirty lines of reproach for the cowards who had deserted their king in his time of need, and then, only then, resumes the action. At that, Wiglaf manages to make a final eight-line speech of encouragement as he goes diving “through the dragon's deadly fumes,” running to Beowulf's side. The battle scene, tripartite now, is well worth waiting for; the point is that for the poet no battle is simply men hacking at each other (or at monsters of various descriptions). Battle is a way of life, a necessary function of the worthiest members of

society. Kings, and warriors generally (samurai), are the successful men of the time, the corporation presidents, the space explorers, and the movie stars. They are people to be known about, to be emulated, but not blindly, not only because they are successful (death being the supreme product of their occupation). Theirs is the good and the true path; in their words, their thoughts, and their deeds they are the embodiment of the Anglo-Saxon way of life.

This morality, born of its time and its circumstances exactly as our belief in elections and multiple (and opposing) philosophies of government is born of our time and our circumstances, does not sound particularly Christian. And yet the poem is full of Christian sentiments, joined with or superimposed onto this more or less pagan code of battle-heroism-kingship (shared with the Danes and the Swedes and peoples all across Europe). Early students of *Beowulf* sometimes doubted that a single hand had composed the poem, much as early students of Homer doubted that “Homer” had ever existed, as a single human brain in a single human body. It seems fairly clear, however—and I myself have no doubt—that *Beowulf* is the work of one man and that its author was a Christian.

...the poet's clear songs, sung  
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling  
The Almighty making the earth, shaping  
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,  
Then proudly setting the sun and moon  
To glow across the land and light it;  
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees  
And leaves, made quick with life, with each  
Of the nations who now move on its face....

(90–98)

This so-called “Song of Creation,” moving and eloquent as it is, enters the poem somewhat abruptly, following immediately on the introduction of Grendel, who is “living down in the darkness” and displeased that the Danes are happy in Herot, their new battle hall. Whoever wrote it was plainly a Christian, but we might say, having this before us and nothing more, that some monkish hand could have added these sentiments to improve and correct an essentially pagan epic. But most of the Christianity in *Beowulf* is not so easily dismissed as interpolation. “Let God be thanked!” (*Alwealdan þanc*), cries Hrothgar, for example, when the Danes assemble to celebrate Beowulf’s victory over Grendel. These are his first words; he goes on, almost at once, to assert with great feeling that

...the Almighty makes miracles

When He pleases, wonder after wonder, and this world

Rests in His hands....

(930–932)

It is God, as I have already noted, who leads Beowulf to victory over Grendel’s vicious mother, once Beowulf has proved that he is willing and able to help himself. The examples could be multiplied many times over: the essential nature of this Christianity may not be quite the same as that practiced in twentieth-century London or in California, but it is an integral part of the poet’s thought and of his view of life.

The “Song of Creation” shows, too, another of the poet’s many gifts: his descriptive genius. None of his descriptive passages are autotelic; they are all purposeful, meant to elucidate or set the stage or accomplish a transition.

And sometimes, when the path ran straight and clear,

They would let their horses race, red

And brown and pale yellow backs streaming Down the road....

(864–867)

This is intended, I think, to be a “true” picture rather than a “beautiful” one. The racing of horses was a proper and highly regarded sport; the animals were likely to be of these particular colors; and someone standing nearby and watching could easily see how accurate a description this was. The poet’s listeners—like most Old English verse, *Beowulf* was meant to be heard rather than read—had undoubtedly seen such races themselves, many times over, and they would nod their heads in recognition and approval. This was indeed how it was—or how it should have been. But for us, to whom kings are unimportant and monsters nonexistent, to whom horses are objects to bet on and roads created for hundred-horsepower motors, what comes through most forcefully is quite simply the clear, sharp beauty of the scene.

The descriptions of imaginary events are just as vivid:

They could see the water crawling with snakes,

Fantastic serpents swimming in the boiling

Lake, and sea beasts lying on the rocks

—The kind that infest the ocean, in the early

Dawn, often ending some ship’s

Journey with their wild jaws....

(1425–1430)

The poet had never seen anything like this lake of monsters; neither had his

audience. It was vivid to them, I am confident, not as an exercise in imagery but as a conjuring up of what must exist, somewhere, somehow.

There in the harbor was a ring-prowed fighting  
Ship, its timbers icy, waiting,  
And there they brought the beloved body  
Of their ring-giving lord, and laid him near  
The mast. Next to that noble corpse  
They heaped up treasures, jeweled helmets,  
Hooked swords and coats of mail, armor  
Carried from the ends of the earth...

(32–39)

The excavation of Sutton Hoo, a ceremonial and probably a kingly burial ship of perhaps the seventh century A.D., has shown how small a role fancy played in such descriptions. (The riches and wonders of Sutton Hoo need no cataloguing, here.) Like all poets, this one is capable of exaggeration, of stretching a point to make the story move more easily—but not in truly important matters, and the burial of a king was, for him, of an importance second to nothing. Even his talk of precious objects “carried from the ends of the earth” has been proven not a bit exaggerated: the Sutton Hoo burial treasures include a large silver dish stamped with the mark of the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius, who died in A.D. 518.

Almost most attractive to us, of all the many-sided excellences of *Beowulf*, is the poet’s insight into people. Combining, in a sense, his concern for Anglo-Saxon morality with his descriptive and narrative powers, his delineation of men like Hrothgar and Wiglaf, the care and the eloquence of

his portrayals, is deeply satisfying. Much of it is indirect, accomplished (like the best of contemporary fictional characterization) through his people's own words and movements. The eager excitement of Wulfgar, for example, hurrying off to announce Beowulf's arrival to King Hrothgar, fairly leaps from his five-line speech:

Our warmhearted lord will be told  
Of your coming; I shall tell our king, our giver  
Of bright rings, and hurry back with his word,  
And speak it here, however he answers  
Your request....

(351–355)

Wulfgar's enthusiasm is all the more remarkable when we realize that visitors to a foreign king's court were usually beggars, outcasts, men whose feudal lord had died, rebels, or the like. That it could be dangerous, too, to welcome such men is shown by King Herdred's fate: see lines 2380–2390.

I have commented, in my *Poems from the Old English*, on the gentleness and solicitude shown by Wiglaf. The most notable characterization in the poem, I believe, is that of Hrothgar, who is brought to life with a fullness and subtlety to which no amount of quotation can do justice. But lesser figures are evoked with much the same skill. Hrothgar's queen, Welthow, is masterfully done: the irony of her appeals, on behalf of her young sons, must have been apparent to all who listened. Addressing her husband, and Hrothulf, his nephew, she says:

...But your sons will be safe,  
Sheltered in Hrothulf's gracious protection,

If fate takes their father while Hrothulf is alive;  
I know your nephew's kindness, I know  
He'll repay in kind the goodness you have shown him...

(1180–1184)

Her view of the passion-filled Danish court, destined to erupt in treachery and murder after Hrothgar's death, includes such expressions of mistaken (or desperate?) good faith as this:

All men speak softly, here, speak mildly  
And trust their neighbors, protect their lord,  
Are loyal followers who would fight as joyfully  
As they drink....

(1228–1231)

Her helplessness is pathetically plain.

Characters whose appearance is little more than incidental are also handled with perception and care: even the slave who stumbles onto the dragon, and who is later forced to lead Beowulf and his men to the monster, is "afraid of both beast and men." The nameless Geats, Beowulf's companions on his dangerous journey to Denmark, lie in the darkness of Herot, awaiting Grendel,

...each of them sure that he was lost

To the home he loved, to the high-walled towns

And the fPrologueriends he had left behind where both he  
And they had been raised. Each thought of the Danes  
Murdered by Grendel in a hall where Geats  
And not Danes now slept....

(691–696)

Some of the more or less self-contained episodes, like the famous Finn section (1068–1159), are developed with a tight, concise skill that shows the poet at ease in small forms as well as large. (Apparent obscurities in the Finn section, and elsewhere, are more our fault than his: too many centuries separate us, and too many universal allusions have become blank spaces for scholarship to struggle to fill.) The elegy of the last survivor of some unnamed noble race, lines 2247–2266, is worthy of comparison with such famous Old English poems as “The Ruin” and “Deor” (see, again, *Poems from the Old English*). Indeed, though I have no evidence whatever, such is the poet’s power and virtuosity that I do not believe it possible for *Beowulf* to have been the beginning and end of his literary production. His other work, both early and late, may well have been destroyed, along with all the rest of what must be missing from Old English literature. But it may not have been destroyed; some new Vercelli Book of precious and unique poetry may someday turn up, in an Italian monastery or almost anywhere else.

A few things should be said about this translation, its sources, principles, and practice. My basic text has been F. Klaeber’s *Beowulf* (3rd edition, with 1st and 2nd supplements, 1950). I have also made extensive use of E. V. K. Dobbie’s *Beowulf*, in the indispensable Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records series (vol. IV, 1953). A few disputed readings of the manuscript have been drawn from C. L. Wrenn’s *Beowulf* (1953). Other works consulted with some frequency include Bosworth/Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1898); Toller’s *Supplement* (1921); J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (4th edition, with a supplement by H. D. Meritt, 1960); A. J. Wyatt, *An Anglo-Saxon Reader* (1919); R. Quirk and C. L. Wrenn, *An Old*

*English Grammar* (2nd edition, 1958); and J. and E. M. Wright, *Old English Grammar* (3rd edition, 1925). I have also consulted David Wright's prose translation, *Beowulf* (1957), and the R. K. Gordon prose translation, in his *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (1954). And I commend, to the interested and zealous reader, R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf* (3rd edition, with a supplement by C. L. Wrenn, 1959), and two excellent little books by Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (1951) and *The Beginnings of English Society* (1952).

If this listing of authorities makes the translation of *Beowulf* seem like a task weighted with scholarly apparatus (and implications), I can only admit that anyone working with a text so complex and, still, so imperfectly understood, must necessarily rely heavily on every authority he can lay his hands on. It may well be sufficient, at this point, to cite roughly *one-half* of Dobbie's note on the single word *higemæðum*, which occurs in line 2909:

This word has been variously explained, by some as dat. plur. of a noun, by others as dat. plur. of an adjective. Thorpe read *hige meðum* as two words, "with weary spirit"; all other edd. print as a compound. Sievers, *Beitr.* IX, 142 f., suggested emending to *higemeðe*, adjective, "weary of mind," referring to Wiglaf; this emendation was adopted by Holder (1 ed.), Holthausen (1, 2 ed.), and Sedgefield (1 ed.), but was later withdrawn by Sievers in *Beitr.* XXXVI, 419. Grein, *Spr.* II, 128, assumed a noun *higemæðu*, which he doubtfully glossed as "reverentia, diligentia"; Grein, ed., identified the second element of the compound with *mæð*, "measure," and translated *higemæð* (p. 139) as "geziemende Gesinnung, aufmerksame Sorgfalt." A noun *higemæð*, "reverence," is accepted by Wyatt (who glosses it as "mind-honour, heart-reverence"), Schücking, and Chambers. Sedgefield (3 ed.), note, translates, "'with balance of mind,' i.e. impartially"; see also his note in *MLRev.* XXVIII, 229. Rieger, *ZfdPh.* III, 413, would read *higemeðum*, dat. plur. of the adjective, referring to both the dead Beowulf and the dragon; so Heyne (4 ed.) and Socin.... For a more complete account of the scholarship on this word, see Hoops, *Bwst.*, pp. 137 f.

This is not in the least atypical; if it does not inspire awe, it should at least

create a feeling of sympathy.

My personal credo, with regard to the making of translations, has not changed since *Poems from the Old English*: the following comments from pages xxvi and xxix of that book are still applicable, here.

The translator's only hope is to re-create something roughly equivalent in the new language, something that is itself good poetry and that at the same time carries a reasonable measure of the force and flavor of the original. In this sense a re-creation can only be a creation.... Comparatively few lines would meet a *scop*'s exacting standards. Essentially, I have used a free four-beat line, without regard to the usual accent patterns of English verse: the translations are therefore not tetrameter, in the usual sense of iamb or trochee.

My practice has, however, varied somewhat, and particularly in the matter of alliteration. *Beowulf* is a poem of 3,182 lines; techniques adequate to a group of shorter works will not necessarily serve it equally well. I have felt it advisable, even obligatory, to alliterate much more freely, occasionally as the Old English alliterates, more usually in irregular patterns developed *ad hoc*. These patterns include everything from alliteration on the first and fourth stresses to alliteration that runs through and across several lines. I have also used part-alliteration; I have sometimes used paired alliteration—two words in a line alliterating according to one sound, and the other two alliterating according to a wholly different sound; I have even, though infrequently and, I hope, most discreetly, used a bit of internal rhyme. I should perhaps add that I have tried to let the weight and motion of each line determine where the stresses (four to a line) fall. The same word, therefore, need not be an alliterating word (i.e., a stressed word) each time it occurs.

Finally, I want to thank Professor Angel Flores, who commissioned a section of this translation and so got me started on a task the size of which had always frightened me away; Professor Robert P. Creed, who gave me most welcome encouragement, and who not only cheerfully but actually eagerly read through the entire manuscript, making many helpful suggestions en route; Professor J. B. Bessinger, of whom—though it seems almost incredible that a translator should have *two* such selfless readers—the same

must be said; and my two oldest sons, Brian and Blake, who bore with my preoccupation, who looked bright-eyed and interested when I retold the story for them, blow by blow, and who (age nine and age eight) promised to sit and read proof with me—and (age ten and age nine) did.

—Burton Raffel

# **BEOWULF**

## *Prologue*

Hear me! We've heard of Danish heroes,  
Ancient kings and the glory they cut  
For themselves, swinging mighty swords!  
How Shild made slaves of soldiers from every  
Land, crowds of captives he'd beaten

5

Into terror; he'd traveled to Denmark alone,  
An abandoned child, but changed his own fate,  
Lived to be rich and much honored. He ruled  
Lands on all sides: wherever the sea  
Would take them his soldiers sailed, returned

10

With tribute and obedience. There was a brave  
King! And he gave them more than his glory,  
Conceived a son for the Danes, a new leader  
Allowed them by the grace of God. They had lived,  
Before his coming, kingless and miserable;

15

Now the Lord of all life, Ruler  
Of glory, blessed them with a prince, Beo,  
Whose power and fame soon spread through the world.  
Shild's strong son was the glory of Denmark;  
His father's warriors were wound round his heart

20

With golden rings, bound to their prince  
By his father's treasure. So young men build  
The future, wisely open-handed in peace,  
Protected in war; so warriors earn  
Their fame, and wealth is shaped with a sword.

25

When his time was come the old king died,  
Still strong but called to the Lord's hands.  
His comrades carried him down to the shore,  
Bore him as their leader had asked, their lord  
And companion, while words could move on his tongue.

30

Shild's reign had been long; he'd ruled them well.  
There in the harbor was a ring-prowed fighting  
Ship, its timbers icy, waiting,  
And there they brought the beloved body

Of their ring-giving lord, and laid him near

The mast. Next to that noble corpse

They heaped up treasures, jeweled helmets,

Hooked swords and coats of mail, armor

Carried from the ends of the earth: no ship

40

Had ever sailed so brightly fitted,

No king sent forth more deeply mourned.

Forced to set him adrift, floating

As far as the tide might run, they refused

To give him less from their hoards of gold

45

Than those who'd shipped him away, an orphan

And a beggar, to cross the waves alone.

High up over his head they flew

His shining banner, then sadly let

The water pull at the ship, watched it

50

Slowly sliding to where neither rulers

Nor heroes nor anyone can say whose hands

Opened to take that motionless cargo.



# 1

Then Beo was king in that Danish castle,  
Shild's son ruling as long as his father  
And as loved, a famous lord of men.

55

And he in turn gave his people a son,  
The great Healfdane, a fierce fighter  
Who led the Danes to the end of his long  
Life and left them four children,  
Three princes to guide them in battle, Hergar

60

And Hrothgar and Halga the Good, and one daughter,  
Yrs, who was given to Onela, king  
Of the Swedes, and became his wife and their queen.  
Then Hrothgar, taking the throne, led  
The Danes to such glory that comrades and kinsmen

Swore by his sword, and young men swelled  
His armies, and he thought of greatness and resolved  
To build a hall that would hold his mighty  
Band and reach higher toward Heaven than anything  
That had ever been known to the sons of men.

70

And in that hall he'd divide the spoils  
Of their victories, to old and young what they'd earned  
In battle, but leaving the common pastures  
Untouched, and taking no lives. The work  
Was ordered, the timbers tied and shaped

75

By the hosts that Hrothgar ruled. It was quickly  
Ready, that most beautiful of dwellings, built  
As he'd wanted, and then he whose word was obeyed  
All over the earth named it Herot.

80

His boast come true he commanded a banquet,  
Opened out his treasure-full hands.  
That towering place, gabled and huge,  
Stood waiting for time to pass, for war

To begin, for flames to leap as high  
As the feud that would light them, and for Herot to burn.

85

A powerful monster, living down  
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient  
As day after day the music rang

Loud in that hall, the harp's rejoicing

90

Call and the poet's clear songs, sung  
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling  
The Almighty making the earth, shaping  
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,  
Then proudly setting the sun and moon

95

To glow across the land and light it;  
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees  
And leaves, made quick with life, with each  
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then  
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:

100

So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall  
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,

Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild  
Marshes, and made his home in a hell  
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,

105

Conceived by a pair of those monsters born  
Of Cain, murderous creatures banished  
By God, punished forever for the crime  
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove  
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,  
Shut away from men; they split

110

Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits  
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,  
A brood forever opposing the Lord's  
Will, and again and again defeated.

## 2

115

Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel  
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors  
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.

He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting  
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's

120

Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:  
He slipped through the door and there in the silence  
Snatched up thirty men, smashed them  
Unknowing in their beds and ran out with their bodies,  
The blood dripping behind him, back

125

To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.  
At daybreak, with the sun's first light, they saw

How well he had worked, and in that gray morning  
Broke their long feast with tears and laments  
For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless

130

In Herot, a mighty prince mourning  
The fate of his lost friends and companions,  
Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn  
His followers apart. He wept, fearing  
The beginning might not be the end. And that night

135

Grendel came again, so set  
On murder that no crime could ever be enough,  
No savage assault quench his lust  
For evil. Then each warrior tried  
To escape him, searched for rest in different  
Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,

140

Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.  
Distance was safety; the only survivors  
Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.  
So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,  
One against many, and won; so Herot

Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,  
Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king  
Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door  
By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped  
The seas, was told and sung in all

150

Men's ears: how Grendel's hatred began,  
How the monster relished his savage war  
On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud  
Alive, seeking no peace, offering  
No truce, accepting no settlement, no price

155

In gold or land, and paying the living  
For one crime only with another. No one  
Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:  
That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,  
Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old

160

And young, lying in waiting, hidden  
In mist, invisibly following them from the edge  
Of the marsh, always there, unseen.

So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,

Killing as often as he could, coming

165

Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived

In Herot, when the night hid him, he never

Dared to touch king Hrothgar's glorious

Throne, protected by God—God,

Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar's

170

Heart was bent. The best and most noble

Of his council debated remedies, sat

In secret sessions, talking of terror

And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.

And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,

175

Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell's

Support, the Devil's guidance in driving

Their affliction off. That was their way,

And the heathen's only hope, Hell

180

Always in their hearts, knowing neither God

Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord

Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear  
His praise nor know His glory. Let them  
Beware, those who are thrust into danger,

185

Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace  
In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail  
To those who will rise to God, drop off  
Their dead bodies and seek our Father's peace!

### 3

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son  
Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom

190

Or strength could break it: that agony hung  
On king and people alike, harsh  
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.

In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's  
Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater

195

And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—  
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror  
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,  
Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,  
Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,

200

Now when help was needed. None  
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much  
As he was loved by the Geats: the omens were good,  
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf  
Chose the mightiest men he could find,

205

The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen  
In all, and led them down to their boat;  
He knew the sea, would point the prow  
Straight to that distant Danish shore.

Then they sailed, set their ship

210

Out on the waves, under the cliffs.  
Ready for what came they wound through the currents,  
The seas beating at the sand, and were borne  
In the lap of their shining ship, lined

215

With gleaming armor, going safely  
In that oak-hard boat to where their hearts took them.  
The wind hurried them over the waves,  
The ship foamed through the sea like a bird  
Until, in the time they had known it would take,

Standing in the round-curved prow they could see  
Sparkling hills, high and green,  
Jutting up over the shore, and rejoicing  
In those rock-steep cliffs they quietly ended  
Their voyage. Jumping to the ground, the Geats

225

Pushed their boat to the sand and tied it  
In place, mail shirts and armor rattling  
As they swiftly moored their ship. And then  
They gave thanks to God for their easy crossing.

High on a wall a Danish watcher

230

Patrolling along the cliffs saw  
The travelers crossing to the shore, their shields  
Raised and shining; he came riding down,  
Hrothgar's lieutenant, spurring his horse,  
Needing to know why they'd landed, these men

235

In armor. Shaking his heavy spear  
In their faces he spoke:  
“Whose soldiers are you,

You who've been carried in your deep-keeled ship  
Across the sea-road to this country of mine?

240

Listen! I've stood on these cliffs longer  
Than you know, keeping our coast free  
Of pirates, raiders sneaking ashore  
From their ships, seeking our lives and our gold.  
None have ever come more openly—

245

And yet you've offered no password, no sign  
From my prince, no permission from my people for your landing  
Here. Nor have I ever seen,  
Out of all the men on earth, one greater  
Than has come with you; no commoner carries  
Such weapons, unless his appearance, and his beauty,

250

Are both lies. You! Tell me your name,  
And your father's; no spies go further onto Danish  
Soil than you've come already. Strangers,  
From wherever it was you sailed, tell it,  
And tell it quickly, the quicker the better,

255

I say, for us all. Speak, say

Exactly who you are, and from where, and why.”

## 4

Their leader answered him, Beowulf unlocking  
Words from deep in his breast:

260

“We are Geats,  
Men who follow Higlac. My father  
Was a famous soldier, known far and wide  
As a leader of men. His name was Edgetho.  
His life lasted many winters;

265

Wise men all over the earth surely  
Remember him still. And we have come seeking  
Your prince, Healfdane’s son, protector  
Of this people, only in friendship: instruct us,  
Watchman, help us with your words! Our errand

270

Is a great one, our business with the glorious king  
Of the Danes no secret; there's nothing dark  
Or hidden in our coming. You know (if we've heard  
The truth, and been told honestly) that your country  
Is cursed with some strange, vicious creature

275

That hunts only at night and that no one  
Has seen. It's said, watchman, that he has slaughtered  
Your people, brought terror to the darkness. Perhaps  
Hrothgar can hunt, here in my heart,  
For some way to drive this devil out—  
If anything will ever end the evils

280

Afflicting your wise and famous lord.  
Here he can cool his burning sorrow.  
Or else he may see his suffering go on  
Forever, for as long as Herot towers  
High on your hills.”

285

The mounted officer  
Answered him bluntly, the brave watchman:  
“A soldier should know the difference between words

And deeds, and keep that knowledge clear

In his brain. I believe your words, I trust in

290

Your friendship. Go forward, weapons and armor

And all, on into Denmark. I'll guide you

Myself—and my men will guard your ship,

Keep it safe here on our shores,

Your fresh-tarred boat, watch it well,

295

Until that curving prow carries

Across the sea to Geatland a chosen

Warrior who bravely does battle with the creature

Haunting our people, who survives that horror

Unhurt, and goes home bearing our love.”

300

Then they moved on. Their boat lay moored,

Tied tight to its anchor. Glittering at the top

Of their golden helmets wild boar heads gleamed,

Shining decorations, swinging as they marched,

Erect like guards, like sentinels, as though ready

305

To fight. They marched, Beowulf and his men

And their guide, until they could see the gables  
Of Herot, covered with hammered gold  
And glowing in the sun—that most famous of all dwellings,  
Towering majestic, its glittering roofs

310

Visible far across the land.

Their guide reined in his horse, pointing  
To that hall, built by Hrothgar for the best  
And bravest of his men; the path was plain,  
They could see their way. And then he spoke:

315

“Now I must leave you: may the Lord our God  
Protect your coming and going! The sea  
Is my job, keeping these coasts free  
Of invaders, bands of pirates: I must go back.”

## 5

The path he'd shown them was paved, cobbled

320

Like a Roman road. They arrived with their mail shirts

Glittering, silver-shining links

Clanking an iron song as they came.

Sea-weary still, they set their broad,

Battle-hardened shields in rows

325

Along the wall, then stretched themselves

On Herot's benches. Their armor rang;

Their ash-wood spears stood in a line,

Gray-tipped and straight: the Geats' war-gear

Were honored weapons.

330

A Danish warrior

Asked who they were, their names and their fathers’:

“Where have you carried these gold-carved shields from,

These silvery shirts and helmets, and those spears

Set out in long lines? I am Hrothgar’s

335

Herald and captain. Strangers have come here

Before, but never so freely, so bold.

And you come too proudly to be exiles: not poverty

But your hearts’ high courage has brought you to Hrothgar.”

He was answered by a famous soldier, the Geats’

340

Proud prince:

“We follow Higlac, break bread

At his side. I am Beowulf. My errand

Is for Healfdane’s great son to hear, your glorious

345

Lord; if he chooses to receive us we will greet him,

Salute the chief of the Danes and speak out

Our message.”

Wulfgar replied—a prince

Born to the Swedes, famous for both strength

350

And wisdom:

“Our warmhearted lord will be told  
Of your coming; I shall tell our king, our giver  
Of bright rings, and hurry back with his word,  
And speak it here, however he answers

355

Your request.”

He went quickly to where Hrothgar sat,  
Gray and old, in the middle of his men,  
And knowing the custom of that court walked straight  
To the king’s great chair, stood waiting to be heard,

360

Then spoke:

“There are Geats who have come sailing the open  
Ocean to our land, come far over  
The high waves, led by a warrior  
Called Beowulf. They wait on your word, bring messages

365

For your ears alone. My lord, grant them  
A gracious answer, see them and hear  
What they’ve come for! Their weapons and armor are nobly  
Worked—these men are no beggars. And Beowulf

Their prince, who showed them the way to our shores,

370

Is a mighty warrior, powerful and wise.”

## 6

The Danes' high prince and protector answered:

“I knew Beowulf as a boy. His father

Was Edgetho, who was given Hrethel's one daughter

—Hrethel, Higlac's father. Now Edgetho's

Brave son is here, come visiting a friendly

375

King. And I've heard that when seamen came,

Bringing their gifts and presents to the Geats,

They wrestled and ran together, and Higlac's

Young prince showed them a mighty battle-grip,

Hands that moved with thirty men's strength,

380

And courage to match. Our Holy Father

Has sent him as a sign of His grace, a mark

Of His favor, to help us defeat Grendel

And end that terror. I shall greet him with treasures,  
Gifts to reward his courage in coming to us.

385

Quickly, order them all to come to me  
Together, Beowulf and his band of Geats.  
And tell them, too, how welcome we will make them!”

Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed  
The waiting seafarers with soldier’s words:

390

“My lord, the great king of the Danes, commands me  
To tell you that he knows of your noble birth  
And that having come to him from over the open  
Sea you have come bravely and are welcome.

Now go to him as you are, in your armor and helmets,

395

But leave your battle-shields here, and your spears,  
Let them lie waiting for the promises your words  
May make.”

Beowulf arose, with his men

400

Around him, ordering a few to remain  
With their weapons, leading the others quickly

Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's  
Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth,  
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt

405

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

"Hail, Hrothgar!

Higlac is my cousin and my king; the days  
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's

410

Name has echoed in our land: sailors  
Have brought us stories of Herot, the best  
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon  
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,  
Light and life fleeing together.

415

My people have said, the wisest, most knowing  
And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'  
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,  
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,  
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove

420

Five great giants into chains, chased  
All of that race from the earth. I swam  
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters  
Out of the ocean, and killing them one  
By one; death was my errand and the fate

425

They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called  
Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,  
Lord and protector of this noble place,  
A single request! I have come so far,  
O shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,  
That this one favor you should not refuse me—

430

That I, alone and with the help of my men,  
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,  
Too, that the monster's scorn of men  
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.  
Nor will I. My lord Higlac

435

Might think less of me if I let my sword  
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid  
Behind some broad linden shield: my hands

Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life

Against the monster. God must decide

440

Who will be given to death's cold grip.

Grendel's plan, I think, will be

What it has been before, to invade this hall

And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,

If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,

445

There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare

For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody

Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones

And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls

Of his den. No, I expect no Danes

450

Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.

And if death does take me, send the hammered

Mail of my armor to Higlac, return

The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he

From Wayland. Fate will unwind as it must!"

455



## 7

Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:

“Beowulf, you’ve come to us in friendship, and because

Of the reception your father found at our court.

Edgetho had begun a bitter feud,

460

Killing Hathlaf, a Wulfing warrior:

Your father’s countrymen were afraid of war,

If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.

Then he traveled across the curving waves

To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,

465

Then, a young man ruling this wide

Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,

My older brother, a far better man

Than I, had died and dying made me,

Second among Healfdane's sons, first 470

In this nation. I bought the end of Edgetho's  
Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's

Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore

He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,

And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel 475

Has brought us, the damage he's done, here

In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller

Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost

To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty

Could stop his madness, smother his lust! 480

How many times have my men, glowing

With courage drawn from too many cups

Of ale, sworn to stay after dark

And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.

And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering

With new light would be drenched with blood, the benches 485

Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's

Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer  
Still, death taking more and more.

But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:  
Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future.”

490

Then Hrothgar’s men gave places to the Geats,  
Yielded benches to the brave visitors  
And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead  
Came carrying out the carved flasks,  
And poured that bright sweetness. A poet

495

Sang, from time to time, in a clear  
Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats  
Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

## 8

Unferth spoke, Ecglaf's son,

500

Who sat at Hrothgar's feet, spoke harshly

And sharp (vexed by Beowulf's adventure,

By their visitor's courage, and angry that anyone

In Denmark or anywhere on earth had ever

Acquired glory and fame greater

505

Than his own):

“You're Beowulf, are you—the same

Boastful fool who fought a swimming

Match with Brecca, both of you daring

And young and proud, exploring the deepest

510

Seas, risking your lives for no reason

But the danger? All older and wiser heads warned you  
Not to, but no one could check such pride.

With Brecca at your side you swam along  
The sea-paths, your swift-moving hands pulling you

515

Over the ocean's face. Then winter  
Churned through the water, the waves ran you  
As they willed, and you struggled seven long nights  
To survive. And at the end victory was his,

Not yours. The sea carried him close

520

To his home, to southern Norway, near  
The land of the Brondings, where he ruled and was loved,  
Where his treasure was piled and his strength protected  
His towns and his people. He'd promised to out-swim you:  
Bonstan's son made that boast ring true.

You've been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I think

525

Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel,  
Staying a whole night through in this hall,  
Waiting where that fiercest of demons can find you."

Beowulf answered, Edgetho's great son:

“Ah! Unferth, my friend, your face

530

Is hot with ale, and your tongue has tried

To tell us about Brecca’s doings. But the truth

Is simple: no man swims in the sea

As I can, no strength is a match for mine.

As boys, Brecca and I had boasted—

535

We were both too young to know better—that we’d risk

Our lives far out at sea, and so

We did. Each of us carried a naked

Sword, prepared for whales or the swift

Sharp teeth and beaks of needlefish.

540

He could never leave me behind, swim faster

Across the waves than I could, and I

Had chosen to remain close to his side.

I remained near him for five long nights,

Until a flood swept us apart;

545

The frozen sea surged around me,

It grew dark, the wind turned bitter, blowing

From the north, and the waves were savage. Creatures  
Who sleep deep in the sea were stirred  
Into life—and the iron hammered links

550

Of my mail shirt, these shining bits of metal  
Woven across my breast, saved me  
From death. A monster seized me, drew me  
Swiftly toward the bottom, swimming with its claws

555

Tight in my flesh. But fate let me  
Find its heart with my sword, hack myself  
Free; I fought that beast's last battle,  
Left it floating lifeless in the sea.

## 9

“Other monsters crowded around me,  
Continually attacking. I treated them politely,

560

Offering the edge of my razor-sharp sword.

But the feast, I think, did not please them, filled

Their evil bellies with no banquet-rich food,

Thrashing there at the bottom of the sea;

By morning they’d decided to sleep on the shore,

565

Lying on their backs, their blood spilled out

On the sand. Afterwards, sailors could cross

That sea-road and feel no fear; nothing

Would stop their passing. Then God’s bright beacon

Appeared in the east, the water lay still,

570

And at last I could see the land, wind-swept  
Cliff-walls at the edge of the coast. Fate saves  
The living when they drive away death by themselves!  
Lucky or not, nine was the number  
Of sea-huge monsters I killed. What man,

575

Anywhere under Heaven's high arch, has fought  
In such darkness, endured more misery or been harder  
Pressed? Yet I survived the sea, smashed  
The monsters' hot jaws, swam home from my journey.  
The swift-flowing waters swept me along

580

And I landed on Finnish soil. I've heard  
No tales of you, Unferth, telling  
Of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!  
Brecca's battles were never so bold;

585

Neither he nor you can match me—and I mean  
No boast, have announced no more than I know  
To be true. And there's more: you murdered your brothers,  
Your own close kin. Words and bright wit  
Won't help your soul; you'll suffer hell's fires,

Unferth, forever tormented. Ecglaf's  
Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart  
As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare  
To raid your hall, ruin Herot  
And oppress its prince, as Grendel has done.

595

But he's learned that terror is his alone,  
Discovered he can come for your people with no fear  
Of reprisal; he's found no fighting, here,  
But only food, only delight.

He murders as he likes, with no mercy, gorges

600

And feasts on your flesh, and expects no trouble,  
No quarrel from the quiet Danes. Now  
The Geats will show him courage, soon  
He can test his strength in battle. And when the sun  
Comes up again, opening another

605

Bright day from the south, anyone in Denmark  
May enter this hall: that evil will be gone!"  
Hrothgar, gray-haired and brave, sat happily

Listening, the famous ring-giver sure,  
At last, that Grendel could be killed; he believed  
In Beowulf's bold strength and the firmness of his spirit. 610

There was the sound of laughter, and the cheerful clanking  
Of cups, and pleasant words. Then Welthow,  
Hrothgar's gold-ringed queen, greeted  
The warriors; a noble woman who knew 615

What was right, she raised a flowing cup  
To Hrothgar first, holding it high  
For the lord of the Danes to drink, wishing him  
Joy in that feast. The famous king  
Drank with pleasure and blessed their banquet.  
Then Welthow went from warrior to warrior, 620

Pouring a portion from the jeweled cup  
For each, till the bracelet-wearing queen  
Had carried the mead-cup among them and it was Beowulf's  
Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats'  
Great prince, thanked God for answering her prayers, 625

For allowing her hands the happy duty  
Of offering mead to a hero who would help  
Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,  
Edgethó's brave son, then assured the Danish  
Queen that his heart was firm and his hands

630

Ready:

“When we crossed the sea, my comrades  
And I, I already knew that all  
My purpose was this: to win the goodwill  
Of your people or die in battle, pressed

635

In Grendel's fierce grip. Let me live in greatness  
And courage, or here in this hall welcome  
My death!”

Welthow was pleased with his words,  
His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back

640

To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.  
The feast went on, laughter and music  
And the brave words of warriors celebrating  
Their delight. Then Hrothgar rose, Healfdane's

Son, heavy with sleep; as soon

645

As the sun had gone, he knew that Grendel

Would come to Herot, would visit that hall

When night had covered the earth with its net

And the shapes of darkness moved black and silent

Through the world. Hrothgar's warriors rose with him.

650

He went to Beowulf, embraced the Geats'

Brave prince, wished him well, and hoped

That Herot would be his to command. And then

He declared:

655

"No one strange to this land

Has ever been granted what I've given you,

No one in all the years of my rule.

Make this best of all mead-halls yours, and then

Keep it free of evil, fight

660

With glory in your heart! Purge Herot

And your ship will sail home with its treasure-holds full."



## 10

Then Hrothgar left that hall, the Danes'  
Great protector, followed by his court; the queen  
Had preceded him and he went to lie at her side,  
Seek sleep near his wife. It was said that God

665

Himself had set a sentinel in Herot,  
Brought Beowulf as a guard against Grendel and a shield  
Behind whom the king could safely rest.

And Beowulf was ready, firm with our Lord's  
High favor and his own bold courage and strength.

670

He stripped off his mail shirt, his helmet, his sword  
Hammered from the hardest iron, and handed  
All his weapons and armor to a servant,  
Ordered his war-gear guarded till morning.

And then, standing beside his bed,

He exclaimed:

675

“Grendel is no braver, no stronger

Than I am! I could kill him with my sword; I shall not,

Easy as it would be. This fiend is a bold

And famous fighter, but his claws and teeth

680

Scratching at my shield, his clumsy fists

Beating at my sword blade, would be helpless. I will meet him

With my hands empty—unless his heart

Fails him, seeing a soldier waiting

685

Weaponless, unafraid. Let God in His wisdom

Extend His hand where He wills, reward

Whom He chooses!”

Then the Geats’ great chief dropped

His head to his pillow, and around him, as ready

As they could be, lay the soldiers who had crossed the sea

690

At his side, each of them sure that he was lost

To the home he loved, to the high-walled towns

And the friends he had left behind where both he  
And they had been raised. Each thought of the Danes

695

Murdered by Grendel in a hall where Geats

And not Danes now slept. But God's dread loom

Was woven with defeat for the monster, good fortune

For the Geats; help against Grendel was with them,

And through the might of a single man

They would win. Who doubts that God in His wisdom

700

And strength holds the earth forever

In His hands? Out in the darkness the monster

Began to walk. The warriors slept

In that gabled hall where they hoped that He

705

Would keep them safe from evil, guard them

From death till the end of their days was determined

And the thread should be broken. But Beowulf lay wakeful,

Watching, waiting, eager to meet

His enemy, and angry at the thought of his coming.

# 11

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty

710

Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,

Grendel came, hoping to kill

Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.

He moved quickly through the cloudy night,

Up from his swampland, sliding silently

715

Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's

Home before, knew the way—

But never, before nor after that night,

Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception

So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,

720

Straight to the door, then snapped it open,

Tore its iron fasteners with a touch  
And rushed angrily over the threshold.

He strode quickly across the inlaid  
Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes

725

Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome  
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall  
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed  
With rows of young soldiers resting together.

And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,

730

Intended to tear the life from those bodies  
By morning; the monster's mind was hot  
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly  
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended

735

Grendel to gnaw the broken bones  
Of his last human supper. Human  
Eyes were watching his evil steps,  
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.

Grendel snatched at the first Geat

740

He came to, ripped him apart, cut  
His body to bits with powerful jaws,  
Drank the blood from his veins and bolted  
Him down, hands and feet; death  
And Grendel's great teeth came together,

745

Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another  
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,  
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper  
—And was instantly seized himself, claws  
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.

750

That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,  
Knew at once that nowhere on earth  
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;  
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing  
Could take his talons and himself from that tight

755

Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run  
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:  
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.  
But Higlac's follower remembered his final

Boast and, standing erect, stopped

760

The monster's flight, fastened those claws

In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel

Closer. The infamous killer fought

For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,

Desiring nothing but escape; his claws

Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot

765

Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!

The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,

And Danes shook with terror. Down

The aisles the battle swept, angry

And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully

770

Built to withstand the blows, the struggling

Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;

Shaped and fastened with iron, inside

And out, artfully worked, the building

Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell

775

To the floor, gold-covered boards grating

As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.

Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot

To stand forever; only fire,

They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put

780

Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor

Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly

The sounds changed, the Danes started

In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible

Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang

785

In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain

And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's

Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms

Of him who of all the men on earth

Was the strongest.

790

## 12

That mighty protector of men

Meant to hold the monster till its life

Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use

To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's

795

Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral

Swords raised and ready, determined

To protect their prince if they could. Their courage

Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel

From every side, trying to open

800

A path for his evil soul, but their points

Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron

Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon

Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells

That blunted every mortal man's blade.

805

And yet his time had come, his days

Were over, his death near; down

To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless

To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.

Now he discovered—once the afflictor

810

Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant

To feud with Almighty God: Grendel

Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws

Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at

His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,

But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,

815

And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder

Snapped, muscle and bone split

And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf

Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,

But wounded as he was could flee to his den,

820

His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,

Only to die, to wait for the end  
Of all his days. And after that bloody  
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.  
He who had come to them from across the sea,  
825  
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction  
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,  
Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes  
Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,  
A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,  
830  
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering  
Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people  
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted  
The victory, for the proof, hanging high  
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's  
835  
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

# 13

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded  
Herot, warriors coming to that hall  
From faraway lands, princes and leaders

840

Of men hurrying to behold the monster's  
Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense  
Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,  
Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten  
And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake

845

Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed  
And already weary of his vanishing life.  
The water was bloody, steaming and boiling  
In horrible pounding waves, heat  
Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling

Surf had covered his death, hidden

Deep in murky darkness his miserable

End, as hell opened to receive him.

Then old and young rejoiced, turned back

From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved

855

Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them

Slowly toward Herot again, retelling

Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.

And over and over they swore that nowhere

On earth or under the spreading sky

860

Or between the seas, neither south nor north,

Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.

(But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle

Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)

And sometimes, when the path ran straight and clear,

They would let their horses race, red

865

And brown and pale yellow backs streaming

Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier

Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes  
And could sing them all through, story after story,  
Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's

870

Victory, tying the knot of his verses  
Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's  
Quick skill, singing his new song aloud  
While he shaped it, and the old songs as well—Siegmund's  
Adventures, familiar battles fought

875

By that glorious son of Vels. And struggles,  
Too, against evil and treachery that no one  
Had ever heard of, that no one knew  
Except Fitla, who had fought at his uncle's side,  
A brave young comrade carefully listening

880

When Siegmund's tongue unwound the wonders  
He had worked, confiding in his closest friend.  
There were tales of giants wiped from the earth  
By Siegmund's might—and forever remembered,  
Fame that would last him beyond life and death,

885

His daring battle with a treasure-rich dragon.

Heaving a hoary gray rock aside

Siegmund had gone down to the dragon alone,

Entered the hole where it hid and swung

His sword so savagely that it slit the creature

890

Through, pierced its flesh and pinned it

To a wall, hung it where his bright blade rested.

His courage and strength had earned him a kinglike

Treasure, brought gold and rich rings to his glorious

Hands. He loaded that precious hoard

895

On his ship and sailed off with a shining cargo.

And the dragon dissolved in its own fierce blood.

No prince, no protector of his warriors, knew power

And fame and glory like Siegmund's; his name

And his treasures grew great. Hermod could have hoped

900

For at least as much; he was once the mightiest

Of men. But pride and defeat and betrayal

Sent him into exile with the Jutes, and he ended

His life on their swords. That life had been misery

After misery, and he spread sorrow as long  
As he lived it, heaped troubles on his unhappy people's  
Heads, ignored all wise men's warnings,  
Ruled only with courage. A king  
Born, entrusted with ancient treasures

910

And cities full of stronghearted soldiers,  
His vanity swelled him so vile and rank  
That he could hear no voices but his own. He deserved  
To suffer and die. But Beowulf was a prince  
Well-loved, followed in friendship, not fear;

915

Hermod's heart had been hollowed by sin.  
The horses ran, when they could, on the gravel  
Path. Morning slid past and was gone.  
The whole brave company came riding to Herot,  
Anxious to celebrate Beowulf's success

920

And stare at that arm. And Hrothgar rose  
From beside his wife and came with his courtiers  
Crowded around him. And Welthow rose

And joined him, his wife and queen with her women,  
All of them walking to that wonderful hall.

# 14

Hrothgar stood at the top of the stairway

925

And stared at Grendel's great claw, swinging

High from that gold-shining roof. Then he cried:

“Let God be thanked! Grendel's terrible

Anger hung over our heads too long,

Dropping down misery; but the Almighty makes miracles

930

When He pleases, wonder after wonder, and this world

Rests in His hands. I had given up hope,

Exhausted prayer, expected nothing

But misfortune forever. Herot was empty,

Bloody; the wisest and best of our people

935

Despaired as deeply, found hope no easier,

Knew nothing, no way to end this unequal  
War of men and devils, warriors  
And monstrous fiends. One man found it,  
Came to Denmark and with the Lord's help

940

Did what none of the Danes could do,  
Our wisdom, our strength, worthless without him.  
The woman who bore him, whoever, wherever,  
Alive now, or dead, knew the grace of the God  
Of our fathers, was granted a son for her glory

945

And His. Beowulf, best of soldiers,  
Let me take you to my heart, make you my son, too,  
And love you: preserve this passionate peace  
Between us. And take, in return, whatever

950

You may want from whatever I own. Warriors  
Deserving far less have been granted as much,  
Given gifts and honored, though they fought  
No enemy like yours. Glory is now yours  
Forever and ever; your courage has earned it,  
And your strength. May God be as good to you forever

As He has been to you here!”

Then Beowulf answered:

“What we did was what our hearts helped

Our hands to perform; we came to fight

960

With Grendel, our strength against his. I wish

I could show you, here in Herot, his corpse

Stretched on this floor! I twisted my fingers

Around his claw, ripped and tore at it

As hard as I could: I meant to kill him

965

Right here, hold him so tightly that his heart

Would stop, would break, his life spill

On this floor. But God’s will was against me.

As hard as I held him he still pulled free

And ran, escaped from this hall with the strength

970

Fear had given him. But he offered me his arm

And his claw, saved his life yet left me

That prize. And paying even so willingly

For his freedom he still fled with nothing

But the end of his evil days, ran

975

With death pressing at his back, pain

Splitting his panicked heart, pulling him

Step by step into hell. Let him burn

In torment, lying and trembling, waiting

For the brightness of God to bring him his reward.”

980

Unferth grew quiet, gave up quarreling over

Beowulf’s old battles, stopped all his boasting

Once everyone saw proof of that prince’s strength,

Grendel’s huge claw swinging high

From Hrothgar’s mead-hall roof, the fingers

Of that loathsome hand ending in nails

985

As hard as bright steel—so hard, they all said,

That not even the sharpest of swords could have cut

It through, broken it off the monster’s

Arm and ended its life, as Beowulf

Had done armed with only his bare hands.

990



# 15

Then the king ordered Herot cleaned  
And hung with decorations: hundreds of hands,  
Men and women, hurried to make  
The great hall ready. Golden tapestries

995

Were lined along the walls, for a host  
Of visitors to see and take pleasure in. But that glorious  
Building was bent and broken, its iron  
Hinges cracked and sprung from their corners  
All around the hall. Only

Its roof was undamaged when the bloodstained demon

1000

Burst out of Herot, desperately breaking  
Beowulf's grip, running wildly  
From what no one escapes, struggle and writhe

As he will. Wanting to stay we go,

1005

All beings here on God's earth, wherever

It is written that we go, taking our bodies

From death's cold bed to the unbroken sleep

That follows life's feast.

Then Hrothgar made his way

1010

To the hall; it was time, and his heart drew him

To the banquet. No victory was celebrated better,

By more or by better men and their king.

A mighty host, and famous, they lined

The benches, rejoicing; the king and Hrothulf,

His nephew, toasted each other, raised mead-cups

1015

High under Herot's great roof, their speech

Courteous and warm. King and people

Were one; none of the Danes was plotting,

Then, no treachery hid in their smiles.

Healfdane's son gave Beowulf a golden

1020

Banner, a fitting flag to signal

His victory, and gave him, as well, a helmet,  
And a coat of mail, and an ancient sword;  
They were brought to him while the warriors watched. Beowulf  
Drank to those presents, not ashamed to be praised,

1025

Richly rewarded in front of them all.

No ring-giver has given four such gifts,  
Passed such treasures through his hands, with the grace  
And warmth that Hrothgar showed. The helmet's

Brim was wound with bands of metal,

1030

Rounded ridges to protect whoever  
Wore it from swords swung in the fiercest  
Battles, shining iron edges  
In hostile hands. And then the protector  
Of warriors, lord of the Danes, ordered

1035

Eight horses led to the hall, and into it,  
Eight steeds with golden bridles. One stood  
With a jeweled saddle on its back, carved  
Like the king's war-seat it was; it had carried  
Hrothgar when that great son of Healfdane rode

To war—and each time carried him wherever  
The fighting was most fierce, and his followers had fallen.  
Then Beowulf had been honored by both the gifts  
Hrothgar could have given him, horses and weapons:  
The king commanded him to use them well.

Thus that guardian of Denmark's treasures  
Had repaid a battle fought for his people  
By giving noble gifts, had earned praise  
For himself from those who try to know truth.

# 16

And more: the lord of Herot ordered

1050

Treasure-gifts for each of the Geats

Who'd sailed with Beowulf and still sat beside him,

Ancient armor and swords—and for the one

Murdered by Grendel gold was carefully

Paid. The monster would have murdered again

1055

And again had not God, and the hero's courage,

Turned fate aside. Then and now

Men must lie in their Maker's holy

Hands, moved only as He wills:

Our hearts must seek out that will. The world,

1060

And its long days full of labor, brings good

And evil; all who remain here meet both.  
Hrothgar's hall resounded with the harp's  
High call, with songs and laughter and the telling  
Of tales, stories sung by the court

1065

Poet as the joyful Danes drank  
And listened, seated along their mead-benches.  
He told them of Finn's people, attacking  
Hnaf with no warning, half wiping out  
That Danish tribe, and killing its king.

1070

Finn's wife, Hnaf's sister, learned what good faith  
Was worth to her husband: his honeyed words  
And treachery cost her two beloved lives,  
Her son and her brother, both falling on spears  
Guided by fate's hand. How she wept!

1075

And when morning came she had reason to mourn,  
To weep for her dead, her slaughtered son  
And the bloody corpse of his uncle—both  
The men she most dearly loved, and whose love  
She could trust to protect her. But Finn's troops, too,

Had fallen to Danish spears: too few  
Were left to drive the Danes to their death,  
To force Hnaf's follower, Hengest, to flee  
The hall where they'd fought and he'd stayed. Finn offered them,  
1085

Instead of more war, words of peace:  
There would be no victory; they'd divide the hall  
And the throne, half to the Danes, half  
To Finn's followers. When gifts were given  
Finn would give Hengest and his soldiers half,

1090

Share shining rings, silver  
And gold, with the Danes, both sides equal,  
All of them richer, all of their purses  
Heavy, every man's heart warm  
With the comfort of gold.

1095

Both sides accepted  
Peace and agreed to keep it. Finn  
Swore it with solemn oaths: what wise men  
Had written was his word as well as theirs.

He and the brave Hengest would live 1100

Like brothers; neither leader nor led would break

The truce, would not talk of evil things,

Remind the Danes that the man they served

Killed Hnaf, their lord. They had no king,

And no choice. And he swore that his sword would silence 1105

Wagging tongues if Frisian warriors

Stirred up hatred, brought back the past.

A funeral pyre was prepared, and gold

Was brought; Hnaf's dead body was dressed

For burning, and the others with him. Bloody 1110

Mail shirts could be seen, and golden helmets,

Some carved with boar-heads, all battle-hard

And as useless, now, as the corpses that still wore them,

Soldier after soldier! Then Hnaf's sister,

Finn's sad wife, gave her son's body

To be burned in that fire; the flames charring 1115

His uncle would consume both kinsmen at once.

Then she wept again, and weeping sang  
The dead's last praise. The Danish king  
Was lifted into place, smoke went curling  
Up, logs roared, open

*1120*

Wounds split and burst, skulls  
Melted, blood came bubbling down,  
And the greedy fire-demons drank flesh and bones  
From the dead of both sides, until nothing was left.

# 17

1125

Finn released a few of his soldiers,  
Allowed them to return to their distant towns  
And estates. Hengest lived the whole stormy  
Winter through, there with Finn,  
Whom he hated. But his heart lived in Denmark—

1130

Which he and the other survivors could not visit,  
Could not sail to, as long as the wind-whipped sea  
Crashed and whirled, or while winter's cold hands  
Froze the water hard, tied it

In icy knots. They would wait for the new year,

1135

For spring to come following the sun, melting  
The old year away and reopening the ocean.

Winter was over, the earth grew lovely,  
And Hengest dreamed of his home—but revenge  
Came first, settling his bitter feud

1140

With Finn, whose bloody sword he could never  
Forget. He planned, he waited, wove plans  
And waited. Then a Danish warrior dropped  
A sword in his lap, a weapon Finn  
And his men remembered and feared, and the time

1145

Had come, and Hengest rose, hearing  
The Danes' murmur, and drove his new sword  
Into Finn's belly, butchering that king  
Under his own roof. And the Danes rose,  
Their hearts full of Finn's treachery,  
And the misery he'd brought them, their sword arms restless

1150

And eager. The hall they'd shared with their enemies  
Ran red with enemy blood and bodies  
Rolled on the floor beside Finn. They took  
The queen, looted everything they could find  
That belonged to her dead husband, loaded

Their ship with rings, necklaces, shining  
Jewels wonderfully worked, and sailed  
Bringing treasure and a willing captive to the land  
She'd left and had longed for, alone no longer.

The singer finished his song; his listeners

1160

Laughed and drank, their pleasure loud  
In that hall. The cup-bearers hurried with their sparkling  
Vessels. And then the queen, Welthow, wearing her bright crown,  
Appeared among them, came to Hrothgar and Hrothulf, his nephew,  
Seated peacefully together, their friendship and Hrothulf's good faith  
still unbroken.

1165

And Unferth sat at Hrothgar's feet; everyone trusted him,  
Believed in his courage, although he'd spilled his relatives' blood.

Then Welthow spoke:

“Accept this cup,

My lord and king! May happiness come

1170

To the Danes' great ring-giver; may the Geats receive  
Mild words from your mouth, words they have earned!

Let gifts flow freely from your open hands,  
Treasures your armies have brought you from all over  
The world. I have heard that the greatest of the Geats  
1175

Now rests in your heart like a son. Herot  
Stands purged, restored by his strength: celebrate  
His courage, rejoice and be generous while a kingdom  
Sits in your palm, a people and power  
1180

That death will steal. But your sons will be safe,  
Sheltered in Hrothulf's gracious protection,  
If fate takes their father while Hrothulf is alive;  
I know your nephew's kindness, I know  
He'll repay in kind the goodness you have shown him,  
1185

Support your two young sons as you  
And I sustained him in his own early days,  
His father dead and he but a boy."  
Then she walked to the bench where Hrethric and Hrothmund,  
Her two sons, sat together; Beowulf,  
1190

Prince of the Geats, was seated between them;

Crossing the hall she sat quietly at their side.

# 18

They brought a foaming cup and offered it  
To Beowulf; it was taken and given in friendship.  
And he was given a mail shirt, and golden armbands,  
And the most beautiful necklace known to men:

1195

Nowhere in any treasure-hoard anywhere  
On earth was there anything like it, not since  
Hama carried the Brosings' necklace  
Home to his glorious city, saved  
Its tight-carved jewels, and his skin, and his soul

1200

From Ermlac's treachery, and then came to God.  
Higlac had it next, Swerting's  
Grandson; defending the golden hoard  
His battle-hard hands had won for him, the Geats'

Proud king lost it, was carried away

1205

By fate when too much pride made him feud

With the Frisians. He had asked for misery; it was granted him.

He'd borne those precious stones on a ship's

Broad back; he fell beneath his shield.

His body, and his shining coat of mail,

1210

And that necklace, all lay for Franks to pluck,

For jackal warriors to find when they walked through

The rows of corpses; Geats, and their king,

Lay slaughtered wherever the robbers looked.

1215

The warriors shouted. And Welthow spoke:

“Wear these bright jewels, beloved Beowulf;

Enjoy them, and the rings, and the gold, O fortunate young

Warrior; grow richer, let your fame and your strength

Go hand in hand; and lend these two boys

1220

Your wise and gentle heart! I'll remember your

Kindness. Your glory is too great to forget:

It will last forever, wherever the earth

Is surrounded by the sea, the winds' home,

And waves lap at its walls. Be happy

1225

For as long as you live! Your good fortune warms

My soul. Spread your blesse`d protection

Across my son, and my king's son!

All men speak softly, here, speak mildly

And trust their neighbors, protect their lord,

1230

Are loyal followers who would fight as joyfully

As they drink. May your heart help you do as I ask!"

She returned to her seat. The soldiers ate

And drank like kings. The savage fate

Decreed for them hung dark and unknown, what would follow

After nightfall, when Hrothgar withdrew from the hall,

1235

Sought his bed and left his soldiers

To theirs. Herot would house a host

Of men, that night, as it had been meant to do.

They stacked away the benches, spread out

Blankets and pillows. But those beer-drinking sleepers

1240

Lay down with death beside their beds.

They slept with their shining shields at the edge  
Of their pillows; the hall was filled with helmets  
Hanging near motionless heads; spears

1245

Stood by their hands, their hammered mail shirts  
Covered their chests. It was the Danes' custom  
To be ready for war, wherever they rested,  
At home or in foreign lands, at their lord's  
Quick call if he needed them, if trouble came  
To their king. They knew how soldiers must live!

1250

# 19

They sank into sleep. The price of that evening's  
Rest was too high for the Dane who bought it  
With his life, paying as others had paid  
When Grendel inhabited Herot, the hall

1255

His till his crimes pulled him into hell.  
And now it was known that a monster had died  
But a monster still lived, and meant revenge.  
She'd brooded on her loss, misery had brewed  
In her heart, that female horror, Grendel's

1260

Mother, living in the murky cold lake  
Assigned her since Cain had killed his only  
Brother, slain his father's son  
With an angry sword. God drove him off,

Outlawed him to the dry and barren desert,  
And branded him with a murderer's mark. And he bore

1265

A race of fiends accursed like their father;  
So Grendel was drawn to Herot, an outcast  
Come to meet the man who awaited him.

He'd snatched at Beowulf's arm, but that prince  
Remembered God's grace and the strength He'd given him

1270

And relied on the Lord for all the help,  
The comfort and support he would need. He killed  
The monster, as God had meant him to do,  
Tore the fiend apart and forced him  
To run as rapidly as he could toward death's

1275

Cold waiting hands. His mother's sad heart,  
And her greed, drove her from her den on the dangerous  
Pathway of revenge.

So she reached Herot,  
Where the Danes slept as though already dead;

1280

Her visit ended their good fortune, reversed

The bright vane of their luck. No female, no matter  
How fierce, could have come with a man's strength,  
Fought with the power and courage men fight with,  
Smashing their shining swords, their bloody,

1285

Hammer-forged blades onto boar-headed helmets,  
Slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of points.

The soldiers raised their shields and drew  
Those gleaming swords, swung them above  
The piled-up benches, leaving their mail shirts

1290

And their helmets where they'd lain when the terror took hold of  
them.

To save her life she moved still faster,  
Took a single victim and fled from the hall,  
Running to the moors, discovered, but her supper  
Assured, sheltered in her dripping claws.

1295

She'd taken Hrothgar's closest friend,  
The man he most loved of all men on earth;  
She'd killed a glorious soldier, cut  
A noble life short. No Geat could have stopped her:

1300

Beowulf and his band had been given better  
Beds; sleep had come to them in a different  
Hall. Then all Herot burst into shouts:  
She had carried off Grendel's claw. Sorrow  
Had returned to Denmark. They'd traded deaths,  
Danes and monsters, and no one had won,

1305

Both had lost!

The wise old king  
Trembled in anger and grief, his dearest  
Friend and adviser dead. Beowulf

1310

Was sent for at once: a messenger went swiftly  
To his rooms and brought him. He came, his band  
About him, as dawn was breaking through,  
The best of all warriors, walking to where Hrothgar  
Sat waiting, the gray-haired king wondering

1315

If God would ever end this misery.

The Geats tramped quickly through the hall; their steps  
Beat and echoed in the silence. Beowulf  
Rehearsed the words he would want with Hrothgar;

He'd ask the Danes' great lord if all

1320

Were at peace, if the night had passed quietly.

## 20

Hrothgar answered him, protector of his people:

“There’s no happiness to ask about! Anguish has descended

On the Danes. Esher is dead, Ermlaf’s

Older brother and my own most trusted

Counselor and friend, my comrade, when we went

1325

Into battle, who’d beaten back enemy swords,

Standing at my side. All my soldiers

Should be as he was, their hearts as brave

And as wise! Another wandering fiend

Has found him in Herot, murdered him, fled

1330

With his corpse: he’ll be eaten, his flesh become

A horrible feast—and who knows where

The beast may be hiding, its belly stuffed full?

She's taking revenge for your victory over Grendel,  
For your strength, your mighty grip, and that monster's

1335

Death. For years he'd been preying on my people;

You came, he was dead in a single day,

And now there's another one, a second hungry

Fiend, determined to avenge the first,

A monster willing and more than able

1340

To bring us more sorrow—or so it must seem

To the many men mourning that noble

Treasure-giver, for all men were treated

Nobly by those hands now forever closed.

1345

“I've heard that my people, peasants working

In the fields, have seen a pair of such fiends

Wandering in the moors and marshes, giant

Monsters living in those desert lands.

And they've said to my wise men that, as well as they could see,

1350

One of the devils was a female creature.

The other, they say, walked through the wilderness

Like a man—but mightier than any man.

They were frightened, and they fled, hoping to find help

In Herot. They named the huge one Grendel:

1355

If he had a father no one knew him,

Or whether there'd been others before these two,

Hidden evil before hidden evil.

They live in secret places, windy

Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours

1360

From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist

Steams like black clouds, and the groves of trees

Growing out over their lake are all covered

With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike

Roots that reach as far as the water

1365

And help keep it dark. At night that lake

Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,

No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,

Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,

A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest

1370

From faraway places, prefers to die  
On those shores, refuses to save its life  
In that water. It isn't far, nor is it  
A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs  
And storms, waves splash toward the sky,

1375

As dark as the air, as black as the rain  
That the heavens weep. Our only help,  
Again, lies with you. Grendel's mother  
Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place  
You've not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,  
Once more, and again twisted gold,

1380

Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you  
For the battle you win!"

# 21

Beowulf spoke:

“Let your sorrow end! It is better for us all

1385

To avenge our friends, not mourn them forever.

Each of us will come to the end of this life

On earth; he who can earn it should fight

For the glory of his name; fame after death

Is the noblest of goals. Arise, guardian

1390

Of this kingdom, let us go, as quickly as we can,

And have a look at this lady monster.

I promise you this: she'll find no shelter,

No hole in the ground, no towering tree,

No deep bottom of a lake, where her sins can hide.

1395

Be patient for one more day of misery;

I ask for no longer.”

The old king leaped

To his feet, gave thanks to God for such words.

Then Hrothgar’s horse was brought, saddled

1400

And bridled. The Danes’ wise ruler rode,

Stately and splendid; shield-bearing soldiers

Marched at his side. The monster’s tracks

Led them through the forest; they followed her heavy

Feet, that had swept straight across

1405

The shadowy wasteland, her burden the lifeless

Body of the best of Hrothgar’s men.

The trail took them up towering, rocky

Hills, and over narrow, winding

Paths they had never seen, down steep

And slippery cliffs where creatures from deep

1410

In the earth hid in their holes. Hrothgar

Rode in front, with a few of his most knowing

Men, to find their way. Then suddenly,

Where clumps of trees bent across  
Cold gray stones, they came to a dismal  
1415

Wood; below them was the lake, its water  
Bloody and bubbling. And the Danes shivered,  
Miserable, mighty men tormented  
By grief, seeing, there on that cliff  
Above the water, Esher's bloody  
1420

Head. They looked down at the lake, felt  
How its heat rose up, watched the waves'  
Bloodstained swirling. Their battle horns sounded,  
Then sounded again. Then they set down their weapons.  
They could see the water crawling with snakes,  
1425

Fantastic serpents swimming in the boiling  
Lake, and sea beasts lying on the rocks  
—The kind that infest the ocean, in the early  
Dawn, often ending some ship's  
Journey with their wild jaws. They rushed  
1430

Angrily out of sight, when the battle horns blew.

Beowulf aimed an arrow at one

Of the beasts, swimming sluggishly away,

And the point pierced its hide, stabbed

To its heart; its life leaked out, death

1435

Swept it off. Quickly, before

The dying monster could escape, they hooked

Its thrashing body with their curved boar-spears,

Fought it to land, drew it up on the bluff,

Then stood and stared at the incredible wave-roamer,

1440

Covered with strange scales and horrible. Then Beowulf

Began to fasten on his armor,

Not afraid for his life but knowing the woven

Mail, with its hammered links, could save

1445

That life when he lowered himself into the lake,

Keep slimy monsters' claws from snatching at

His heart, preserve him for the battle he was sent

To fight. Hrothgar's helmet would defend him;

That ancient, shining treasure, encircled

1450

With hard-rolled metal, set there by some smith's  
Long-dead hand, would block all battle  
Swords, stop all blades from cutting at him  
When he'd swum toward the bottom, gone down in the surging  
Water, deep toward the swirling sands.

1455

And Unferth helped him, Hrothgar's courtier  
Lent him a famous weapon, a fine,  
Hilted old sword named Hrunting; it had  
An iron blade, etched and shining  
And hardened in blood. No one who'd worn it

1460

Into battle, swung it in dangerous places,  
Daring and brave, had ever been deserted—  
Nor was Beowulf's journey the first time it was taken  
To an enemy's camp, or asked to support  
Some hero's courage and win him glory.

1465

Unferth had tried to forget his greeting  
To Beowulf, his drunken speech of welcome;  
A mighty warrior, he lent his weapon  
To a better one. Only Beowulf would risk

His life in that lake; Unferth was afraid,

1470

Gave up that chance to work wonders, win glory

And a hero's fame. But Beowulf and fear

Were strangers; he stood ready to dive into battle.

## 22

Then Edgetho's brave son spoke:

“Remember,

Hrothgar, O knowing king, now

1475

When my danger is near, the warm words we uttered,

And if your enemy should end my life

Then be, O generous prince, forever

The father and protector of all whom I leave

Behind me, here in your hands, my beloved

1480

Comrades left with no leader, their leader

Dead. And the precious gifts you gave me,

My friend, send them to Higlac. May he see

In their golden brightness, the Geats' great lord

Gazing at your treasure, that here in Denmark

I found a noble protector, a giver  
Of rings whose rewards I won and briefly  
Relished. And you, Unferth, let  
My famous old sword stay in your hands:  
I shall shape glory with Hrunting, or death

1490

Will hurry me from this earth!”  
As his words ended  
He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone’s  
Answer; the heaving water covered him  
Over. For hours he sank through the waves;

1495

At last he saw the mud of the bottom.  
And all at once the greedy she-wolf  
Who’d ruled those waters for half a hundred  
Years discovered him, saw that a creature

1500

From above had come to explore the bottom  
Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,  
Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,  
Tried to work her fingers through the tight

Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore 1505

And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor

And sword and all, to her home; he struggled

To free his weapon, and failed. The fight

Brought other monsters swimming to see

Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at 1510

His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth

As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,

That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,

And there the water's heat could not hurt him,

Nor anything in the lake attack him through 1515

The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant

Light burned all around him, the lake

Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw

The mighty water witch, and swung his sword, 1520

His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;

The iron sang its fierce song,

Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest  
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil  
Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless

1525

Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped  
And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,  
And that, too, failed him; for the first time in years  
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;  
It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf

1530

Longed only for fame, leaped back  
Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,  
Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where  
He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use  
His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame  
Comes to the men who mean to win it

1535

And care about nothing else! He raised  
His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger  
Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.  
She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'  
Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose

1540

At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,  
Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best  
And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled  
And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.  
Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew

1545

A dagger, brown with dried blood, and prepared  
To avenge her only son. But he was stretched  
On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted  
By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.

The hammered links held; the point

1550

Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth,  
Edgethó's son, and died there, if that shining  
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy  
God, who sent him victory, gave judgment  
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,

1555

Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

## 23

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy  
Sword, hammered by giants, strong  
And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons

1560

But so massive that no ordinary man could lift  
Its carved and decorated length. He drew it  
From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,  
And then, savage, now, angry  
And desperate, lifted it high over his head

1565

And struck with all the strength he had left,  
Caught her in the neck and cut it through,  
Broke bones and all. Her body fell  
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet  
With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.

1570

The brilliant light shone, suddenly,  
As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's  
Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked  
At her home, then following along the wall  
Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,

1575

His heart still angry. He was hunting another  
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him  
For final revenge against Grendel's vicious  
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over  
And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's

1580

Men slept, killing them in their beds,  
Eating some on the spot, fifteen  
Or more, and running to his loathsome moor  
With another such sickening meal waiting  
In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,  
Found him lying dead in his corner,

1585

Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter  
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off

His head with a single swift blow. The body  
Jerked for the last time, then lay still.

The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,

1590

Like him staring into the monsters' lake,

Saw the waves surging and blood

Spurting through. They spoke about Beowulf,

All the graybeards, whispered together

And said that hope was gone, that the hero

1595

Had lost fame and his life at once, and would never

Return to the living, come back as triumphant

As he had left; almost all agreed that Grendel's

Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.

The sun slid over past noon, went further

1600

Down. The Danes gave up, left

The lake and went home, Hrothgar with them.

The Geats stayed, sat sadly, watching,

Imagining they saw their lord but not believing

They would ever see him again.

—Then the sword

1605

Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down  
Like water, disappearing like ice when the world's  
Eternal Lord loosens invisible  
Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost  
As only He can, He who rules

1610

Time and seasons, He who is truly  
God. The monsters' hall was full of  
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took  
Was Grendel's head and the hilt of the giants'  
Jeweled sword; the rest of that ring-marked

1615

Blade had dissolved in Grendel's steaming  
Blood, boiling even after his death.  
And then the battle's only survivor  
Swam up and away from those silent corpses;

1620

The water was calm and clean, the whole  
Huge lake peaceful once the demons who'd lived in it  
Were dead.  
Then that noble protector of all seamen

Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy  
1625

Burdens he was bringing with him. He

And all his glorious band of Geats

Thanked God that their leader had come back unharmed;

They left the lake together. The Geats

Carried Beowulf's helmet, and his mail shirt.

1630

Behind them the water slowly thickened

As the monsters' blood came seeping up.

They walked quickly, happily, across

Roads all of them remembered, left

The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men

1635

Staggering under the weight of Grendel's skull,

Too heavy for fewer than four of them to handle—

Two on each side of the spear jammed through it—

Yet proud of their ugly load and determined

That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.

1640

Soon, fourteen Geats arrived

At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf,

Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall  
Green. Then the Geats' brave prince entered  
Herot, covered with glory for the daring

1645

Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar  
To salute him and show Grendel's head.

He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,  
Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,  
Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird

1650

And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

## 24

Beowulf spoke:

“Hrothgar! Behold,

Great Healfdane’s son, this glorious sign

Of victory, brought you by joyful Geats.

My life was almost lost, fighting for it,

1655

Struggling under water: I’d have been dead at once,

And the fight finished, the she-devil victorious,

If our Father in Heaven had not helped me. Hrunting,

Unferth’s noble weapon, could do nothing,

Nor could I, until the Ruler of the world

1660

Showed me, hanging shining and beautiful

On a wall, a mighty old sword—so God

Gives guidance to those who can find it from no one

Else. I used the weapon He had offered me,  
Drew it and, when I could, swung it, killed

1665

The monstrous hag in her own home.

Then the ring-marked blade burned away,

As that boiling blood spilled out. I carried

Off all that was left, this hilt.

I've avenged their crimes, and the Danes they've killed.

1670

And I promise you that whoever sleeps in Herot

—You, your brave soldiers, anyone

Of all the people in Denmark, old

Or young—they, and you, may now sleep

1675

Without fear of either monster, mother

Or son.”

Then he gave the golden sword hilt

To Hrothgar, who held it in his wrinkled hands

And stared at what giants had made, and monsters

1680

Owned; it was his, an ancient weapon

Shaped by wonderful smiths, now that Grendel

And his evil mother had been driven from the earth,  
God's enemies scattered and dead. That best  
Of swords belonged to the best of Denmark's

1685

Rulers, the wisest ring-giver Danish  
Warriors had ever known. The old king  
Bent close to the handle of the ancient relic,  
And saw written there the story of ancient wars  
Between good and evil, the opening of the waters,

1690

The Flood sweeping giants away, how they suffered  
And died, that race who hated the Ruler  
Of us all and received judgment from His hands,  
Surging waves that found them wherever  
They fled. And Hrothgar saw runic letters

1695

Clearly carved in that shining hilt,  
Spelling its original owner's name,  
He for whom it was made, with its twisted  
Handle and snakelike carvings. Then he spoke,  
Healfdane's son, and everyone was silent.

1700

“What I say, speaking from a full memory  
And after a life spent in seeking  
What was right for my people, is this: this prince  
Of the Geats, Beowulf, was born a better  
Man! Your fame is everywhere, my friend,  
Reaches to the ends of the earth, and you hold it in your heart wisely,  
*1705*

Patient with your strength and our weakness. What I said I will do, I  
will do,

In the name of the friendship we’ve sworn. Your strength must solace  
your people,

Now, and mine no longer.

“Be not

As Hermod once was to my people, too proud

*1710*

To care what their hearts hid, bringing them

Only destruction and slaughter. In his mad

Rages he killed them himself, comrades

And followers who ate at his table. At the end

He was alone, knew none of the joys of life

*1715*

With other men, a famous ruler

Granted greater strength than anyone

Alive in his day but dark and bloodthirsty  
In spirit. He shared out no treasure, showed  
His soldiers no road to riches and fame.

1720

And then that affliction on his people's face  
Suffered horribly for his sins. Be taught  
By his lesson, learn what a king must be:  
I tell his tale, old as I am,  
Only for you.

1725

“Our eternal Lord  
Grants some men wisdom, some wealth, makes others  
Great. The world is God's, He allows  
A man to grow famous, and his family rich,  
Gives him land and towns to rule

1730

And delight in, lets his kingdom reach  
As far as the world runs—and who  
In human unwisdom, in the middle of such power,  
Remembers that it all will end, and too soon?  
Prosperity, prosperity, prosperity: nothing

1735

Troubles him, no sickness, not passing time,

No sorrows, no sudden war breaking

Out of nowhere, but all the world turns

When he spins it. How can he know when he sins?

## 25

1740

“And then pride grows in his heart, planted  
Quietly but flourishing. And while the keeper of his soul  
Sleeps on, while conscience rests and the world  
Turns faster a murderer creeps closer, comes carrying  
A tight-strung bow with terrible arrows.

1745

And those sharp points strike home, are shot  
In his breast, under his helmet. He’s helpless.  
And so the Devil’s dark urgings wound him, for he can’t  
Remember how he clung to the rotting wealth  
Of this world, how he clawed to keep it, how he earned  
No honor, no glory, in giving golden  
Rings, how he forgot the future glory

1750

God gave him at his birth, and forgetting did not care.

And finally his body fails him, these bones

And flesh quickened by God fall

1755

And die—and some other soul inherits

His place in Heaven, some open-handed

Giver of old treasures, who takes no delight

In mere gold. Guard against such wickedness,

Belove`d Beowulf, best of warriors,

1760

And choose, instead, eternal happiness;

Push away pride! Your strength, your power,

Are yours for how many years? Soon

You'll return them where they came from, sickness or a sword's edge

Will end them, or a grasping fire, or the flight

Of a spear, or surging waves, or a knife's

1765

Bite, or the terror of old age, or your eyes

Darkening over. It will come, death

Comes faster than you think, no one can flee it.

“So I have led the Danes for half

A hundred years, protected them from all peoples

1770

On this earth, my sword and my spear so ready  
That no one anywhere under God's high sun  
Was eager to wage war here in Denmark.  
And here, here, too, the change has come,  
And we wept for our dead when Grendel invaded

1775

Herot, my enemy raided this hall;  
My sorrow, my grief, was as great and lasting  
As it was helpless. Then thanks be given to God,  
Eternal Lord of us all: you came  
And that endless misery was over and I lived,

1780

Now, to behold this bloody head!  
Go in, go in: feast, be as happy  
As your fame deserves. When morning shines  
We shall each have owned more of my treasures.”

Beowulf obeyed him, entered Herot

1785

Cheerfully and took his place at the table.  
And once again Danes and Geats  
Feasted together, a host of famous

Warriors in a single hall.—Then the web  
Of darkness fell and it was night. They rose;

1790

Hrothgar, the gray-haired old Dane, was heavy  
With sleep. And Beowulf was glad that a bed  
Was waiting, the bravest of warriors exhausted  
With the work he'd done. A Danish servant  
Showed him the road to that far-off, quiet

1795

Country where sleep would come and take him  
And his followers; Hrothgar's visitors were well  
Cared for, whatever they needed was theirs.

Then Beowulf rested; Herot rose high

1800

Above him, gleaming in the darkness; the Geats  
Slept till a black-feathered raven sang

His cheerful song and the shining sun

Burned away shadows. And those seafarers hurried

From their beds, anxious to begin the voyage

1805

Home, ready to start, their hearts

Already sailing on a ship's swift back.

Then Unferth came, with Hrunting, his famous  
Sword, and offered it to Beowulf, asked him  
To accept a precious gift. The prince

*1810*

Took it, thanked him, and declared the weapon  
One he was proud to own; his words  
Blamed it for nothing, were spoken like the hero  
He was! The war-gear was ready, the Geats  
Were armored and eager to be gone. Quickly,

*1815*

Beowulf sought Hrothgar's throne, where the king  
Sat waiting for his famous visitor's farewell.

## 26

Beowulf spoke:

“We crossed the sea

To come here; it is time to return, to go back

To our beloved lord, Higlac. Denmark

1820

Was a gracious host; you welcomed us warmly.

Anything I can do, here on this earth,

To earn your love, O great king, anything

More than I have done, battles I can fight

In your honor, summon me, I will come as I came

1825

Once before. If I hear, from across the ocean,

That your neighbors have threatened you with war, or oppressed you

As enemies once oppressed you, here, I will bring

A thousand warriors, a thousand armed Geats

To protect your throne. I trust Higlac:

1830

Our king is young, but if I need his help

To better help you, to lend you our strength,

Our battle-sharp spears, to shield you and honor you

As you deserve, I know his words and his deeds

Will support me. And someday, if your oldest son,

1835

Hrethric, comes visiting our court, he will find

A host of good friends among the Geats:

No one who goes visiting far-off lands

Is more welcome than a strong and noble warrior.”

1840

Hrothgar replied:

“All-knowing God

Must have sent you such words; nothing so wise

From a warrior so young has ever reached

These ancient ears. Your hands are strong,

1845

Your heart and your lips are knowing! If your lord,

Hrethel’s son, is slain by a spear,

Or falls sick and dies, or is killed by a sword,

And you have survived whatever battle

Sweeps him off, I say that the Geats

1850

Could do no better, find no man better

Suited to be king, keeper of warriors

And their treasure, than you—if you take the throne

They will surely offer you. Belove`d Beowulf,

You please me more the longer I can keep you

1855

Here in Denmark. You've turned Danes

And Geats into brothers, brought peace where once

There was war, and sealed friendship with affection.

This will last as long as I live, and am king here:

We will share our treasures, greeting travelers

1860

From across the sea with outstretched hands;

Ring-prowed ships will carry our gifts

And the tokens of our love. Your people live

By the old ways, their hearts, like ours, are forever

Open to their friends, but firmly closed

1865

Against their enemies.”

Then he gave the Geats'  
Prince a dozen new gifts, prayed  
For his safety, commanded him to seek his people,  
Yet not to delay too long in visiting

1870

Hrothgar once more. The old king kissed him,  
Held that best of all warriors by the shoulder  
And wept, unable to hold back his tears.

Gray and wise, he knew how slim  
Were his chances of ever greeting Beowulf

1875

Again, but seeing his face he was forced  
To hope. His love was too warm to be hidden,  
His tears came running too quickly to be checked;  
His very blood burned with longing.

And then Beowulf left him, left Herot, walked  
Across the green in his golden armor,

1880

Exulting in the treasures heaped high in his arms.  
His ship was at anchor; he had it ready to sail.  
And so Hrothgar's rich treasures would leave him, travel  
Far from that perfect king, without fault

Or blame until winter had followed winter

1885

And age had stolen his strength, spirited it

Off, as it steals from many men.

## 27

Then the band of Geats, young and brave,  
Marching in their ring-locked armor, reached

1890

The shore. The coast-guard saw them coming  
And about to go, as he'd seen them before;

He hurried down the hillside, whipping  
His horse, but this time shouted no challenge,

Told them only how the Geats would be watching,

1895

Too, and would welcome such warriors in shining  
Mail. Their broad-beamed ship lay bobbing

At the edge of the sand: they loaded it high

With armor and horses and all the rich treasure

It could hold. The mast stood high and straight

1900

Over heaped-up wealth—Hrothgar’s, and now theirs.

Beowulf rewarded the boat’s watchman,

Who had stayed behind, with a sword that had hammered

Gold wound on its handle: the weapon

Brought him honor. Then the ship left shore, left Denmark,

*1905*

Traveled through deep water. Deck timbers creaked,

And the wind billowing through the sail stretched

From the mast, tied tight with ropes, did not hold them

Back, did not keep the ring-prowed ship

From foaming swiftly through the waves, the sea

*1910*

Currents, across the wide ocean until

They could see familiar headlands, cliffs

That sprang out of Geatish soil. Driven

By the wind the ship rammed high on the shore.

Harbor guards came running to greet them,

Men who for days had waited and watched

*1915*

For their beloved comrades to come crossing the waves;

They anchored the high-bowed ship, moored it

Close to the shore, where the booming sea

Could not pull it loose and lead it away.

Then they carried up the golden armor,

1920

The ancient swords, the jewels, brought them

To Higlac's home, their ring-giver's hall

Near the sea, where he lived surrounded

By his followers.

He was a famous king, with a fitting

1925

High hall and a wife, Higd, young

But wise and knowing beyond her years.

She was Hareth's daughter, a noble queen

With none of the niggardly ways of women

Like Thrith. Higd gave the Geats gifts

1930

With open hands. But Thrith was too proud,

An imperious princess with a vicious tongue

And so fierce and wild that her father's followers

Averted their eyes as she passed, knowing

That if anyone but their king watched where she walked

1935

Her hands would shape a noose to fit

Their necks. She would lie, her father's lieutenants  
Would write out her warrants, and he who had stared  
Would end his life on the edge of an ancient  
Sword. And how great a sin for a woman,

1940

Whether fair or black, to create fear  
And destruction, for a woman, who should walk in the ways  
Of peace, to kill with pretended insults.

But Hemming's kinsman tamed her: his hall-guests

1945

Told a different story, spread the news  
That Thrith had forgotten her gory tricks  
Once her wise father had sent her to a wedding  
With Offa, married her to that brave young soldier,  
Sent her across the yellow-green sea

1950

To that gold-adorned champion, a fierce fighter  
In war or peace. They praised her, now,  
For her generous heart, and her goodness, and the high  
And most noble paths she walked, filled  
With adoring love for that leader of warriors,

1955

Her husband; he was a man as brave and strong  
And good, it is said, as anyone on this earth,  
A spear-bold soldier who knew no fear,  
Exalted with gifts, victorious in war,  
A king who ruled his native land

*1960*

Wisely and well. Emer was his son,  
Hemming's kinsman, Garmund's grandson,  
A powerful swordsman and his warriors' shield.

## 28

Then Beowulf and his men went walking along  
The shore, down the broad strip of sand.

The world's bright candle shone, hurrying

*1965*

Up from the south. It was a short journey

From their ship to Higlac's home, to the hall

Where their king, Ongentho's killer, lived

With his warriors and gave treasures away. They walked

Quickly. The young king knew

*1970*

They were back, Beowulf and his handful of brave

Men, come safely home; he sat,

Now, waiting to see them, to greet

His battle-comrades when they arrived at his court.

They came. And when Beowulf had bowed to his lord,

1975

And standing in front of the throne had solemnly  
Spoken loyal words, Higlac  
Ordered him to sit at his side—he  
Who had survived, sailed home victorious, next to  
His kinsman and king. Mead cups were filled

1980

And Hareth's daughter took them through the hall,  
Carried ale to her husband's comrades.

Higlac, unable to stay silent, anxious  
To know how Beowulf's adventure had gone,  
Began to question him, courteous but eager

1985

To be told everything.

“Belove`d Beowulf,

Tell us what your trip to far-off places  
Brought you, your sudden expedition on the salty

1990

Waves, your search for war in Herot?  
Did you end Hrothgar's hopeless misery,  
Could you help that glorious king? Grendel's  
Savagery lay heavy on my heart but I was afraid

To let you go to him; for a long time

1995

I held you here, kept you safe,

Forced you to make the Danes fight

Their own battles. God be praised

That my eyes have beheld you once more, unharmed!”

Beowulf spoke, Edgethó’s brave son:

2000

“My lord Higlac, my meeting with Grendel

And the nighttime battle we fought are known

To everyone in Denmark, where the monster was once

The uncrowned ruler, murdering and eating

Hrothgar’s people, forever bringing them

2005

Misery. I ended his reign, avenged

His crimes so completely in the crashing darkness

That not even the oldest of his evil kind

Will ever boast, lying in sin

And deceit, that the monster beat me. I sought out

2010

Hrothgar, first, came to him in his hall;

When Healfdane’s famous son heard

That I'd come to challenge Grendel, he gave me  
A seat of honor alongside his son.

His followers were drinking; I joined their feast,

2015

Sat with that band, as bright and loud-tongued

As any I've ever seen. His famous

Queen went back and forth, hurrying

The cup-bearing boys, giving bracelets

And rings to her husband's warriors. I heard

2020

The oldest soldiers of all calling

For ale from Hrothgar's daughter's hands,

And Freaw was the way they greeted her when she gave them

The golden cups. And Hrothgar will give her

To Ingeld, gracious Froda's son;

She and that ripening soldier will be married,

2025

The Danes' great lord and protector has declared,

Hoping that his quarrel with the Hathobards can be settled

By a woman. He's wrong: how many wars

Have been put to rest in a prince's bed?

Few. A bride can bring a little

Peace, make spears silent for a time,  
But not long. Ingeld and all his men  
Will be drinking in the hall, when the wedding is done  
And Freaw is his wife; the Danes will be wearing  
Gleaming armor and ring-marked old swords;

And the prince and his people will remember those treasures,  
Will remember that their fathers once wore them, fell  
With those helmets on their heads, those swords in their hands.

## 29

“And seeing their ancestral armor and weapons

2040

Ingeld and his followers will be angry. And one

Of his soldiers, sitting with ale in his cup

And bitterness heavy in his heart, will remember

War and death, and while he sits and drinks

His sharp old tongue will begin to tempt

2045

Some younger warrior, pushing and probing

For a new war:

““That sword, that precious old blade

Over there, I think you know it, friend.

Your father carried it, fought with it the last time

2050

He could swing a sword; the Danes killed him

—And many more of our men—and stripped

The dead bodies: the brave, bold Danes!

One of the princess' people, here,

Now, might be the murderer's son,

2055

Boasting about his treasures, his ancient

Armor—which ought to be yours, by right.'

“Bitter words will work in a hot-tempered

Brain, pushing up thoughts of the past,

And then, when he can, calling his father's

2060

Name, the youngster will kill some innocent

Dane, a servant—and bloody sword

In hand will run from the hall, knowing

His way through the woods. But war will begin

As he runs, to the sound of broken oaths,

And its heat will dry up Ingeld's heart,

2065

Leave him indifferent to his Danish bride.

Hrothgar may think the Hathobards love him,

Loving Freaw, but the friendship can't last,

The vows are worthless.

“But of Grendel: you need to

2070

Know more to know everything; I ought to

Go on. It was early in the evening, Heaven’s

Jewel had slid to its rest, and the jealous

Monster, planning murder, came seeking us

Out, stalking us as we guarded Hrothgar’s

2075

Hall. Hondsnew, sleeping in his armor,

Was the first Geat he reached: Grendel

Seized him, tore him apart, swallowed him

Down, feet and all, as fate

Had decreed—a glorious young soldier, killed

2080

In his prime. Yet Grendel had only begun

His bloody work, meant to leave us

With his belly and his pouch both full, and Herot

Half-empty. Then he tested his strength against mine,

Hand to hand. His pouch hung

2085

At his side, a huge bag sewn

From a dragon’s skin, worked with a devil’s

Skill; it was closed by a marvelous clasp.

The monster intended to take me, put me

Inside, save me for another meal.

2090

He was bold and strong, but once I stood

On my feet his strength was useless, and it failed him.

## 30

“The whole tale of how I killed him,  
Repaid him in kind for all the evil

2095

He’d done, would take too long: your people,  
My prince, were honored in the doing. He escaped,  
Found a few minutes of life, but his hand,  
His whole right arm, stayed in Herot;  
The miserable creature crept away,

2100

Dropped to the bottom of his lake, half dead  
As he fell. When the sun had returned, the Danes’  
Great king poured out treasure, repaid me  
In hammered gold for the bloody battle  
I’d fought in his name. He ordered a feast;  
There were songs, and the telling of tales. One ancient

2105

Dane told of long-dead times,  
And sometimes Hrothgar himself, with the harp  
In his lap, stroked its silvery strings  
And told wonderful stories, a brave king

2110

Reciting unhappy truths about good  
And evil—and sometimes he wove his stories  
On the mournful thread of old age, remembering  
Buried strength and the battles it had won.  
He would weep, the old king, wise with many

2115

Winters, remembering what he'd done, once,  
What he'd seen, what he knew. And so we sat  
The day away, feasting. Then darkness  
Fell again, and Grendel's mother  
Was waiting, ready for revenge, hating  
The Danes for her son's death. The monstrous

2120

Hag succeeded, burst boldly into Herot  
And killed Esher, one of the king's oldest  
And wisest soldiers. But when the sun shone

Once more the death-weary Danes could not build

A pyre and burn his belove`d body,

2125

Lay him on flaming logs, return ashes

To dust: she`d carried away his corpse,

Brought it to her den deep in the water.

Hrothgar had wept for many of his men,

But this time his heart melted, this

2130

Was the worst. He begged me, in your name, half-weeping

As he spoke, to seek still greater glory

Deep in the swirling waves, to win

Still higher fame, and the gifts he would give me.

Down in that surging lake I sought

2135

And found her, the horrible hag, fierce

And wild; we fought, clutching and grasping;

The water ran red with blood and at last,

With a mighty sword that had hung on the wall,

I cut off her head. I had barely escaped

2140

With my life, my death was not written. And the Danes`

Protector, Healfdane's great son, heaped up  
Treasures and precious jewels to reward me.

# 31

“He lived his life as a good king must:

2145

I lost nothing, none of the gifts

My strength could have earned me. He opened his store

Of gems and armor, let me choose as I liked,

So I could bring his riches to you, my ruler,

And prove his friendship, and my love. Your favor

2150

Still governs my life: I have almost no family,

Higlac, almost no one, now, but you.”

Then Beowulf ordered them to bring in the boar-head

Banner, the towering helmet, the ancient,

Silvery armor, and the gold-carved sword:

2155

“This war-gear was Hrothgar’s reward, my gift

From his wise old hands. He wanted me to tell you,  
First, whose treasures these were. Hergar  
Had owned them, his older brother, who was king  
Of Denmark until death gave Hrothgar the throne:  
But Hergar kept them, would not give them to Herward,

2160

His brave young son, though the boy had proved  
His loyalty. These are yours: may they serve you well!”  
And after the gleaming armor four horses  
Were led in, four bays, swift and all

2165

Alike. Beowulf had brought his king  
Horses and treasure—as a man must,  
Not weaving nets of malice for his comrades,  
Preparing their death in the dark, with secret,  
Cunning tricks. Higlac trusted  
His nephew, leaned on his strength, in war,

2170

Each of them intent on the other’s joy.  
And Beowulf gave Welthow’s gift, her wonderful  
Necklace, to Higd, Higlac’s queen,  
And gave her, also, three supple, graceful,

Saddle-bright horses; she received his presents, 2175

Then wore that wonderful jewel on her breast.

So Edgethó's son proved himself,

Did as a famous soldier must do

If glory is what he seeks: not killing his comrades

In drunken rages, his heart not savage, 2180

But guarding God's gracious gift, his strength,

Using it only in war, and then using it

Bravely. And yet as a boy he was scorned;

The Geats considered him worthless. When he sat

In their mead-hall, and their lord was making men rich, 2185

He held no claim on the king's good will.

They were sure he was lazy, noble but slow.

The world spun round, he was a warrior more  
famous

Than any, and all the insults were wiped out.

Then Higlac, protector of his people, brought in 2190

His father's—Beowulf's grandfather's—great sword,

Worked in gold; none of the Geats  
Could boast of a better weapon. He laid it  
In Beowulf's lap, then gave him seven  
Thousand hides of land, houses

2195

And ground and all. Geatland was home  
For both king and prince; their fathers had left them  
Buildings and fields—but Higlac's inheritance  
Stretched further, it was he who was king, and was followed.

2200

Afterwards, in the time when Higlac was dead  
And Herdred, his son, who'd ruled the Geats  
After his father, had followed him into darkness—  
Killed in battle with the Swedes, who smashed  
His shield, cut through the soldiers surrounding

2205

Their king—then, when Higd's one son  
Was gone, Beowulf ruled in Geatland,  
Took the throne he'd refused, once,  
And held it long and well. He was old  
With years and wisdom, fifty winters

2210

A king, when a dragon awoke from its darkness  
And dreams and brought terror to his people. The beast  
Had slept in a huge stone tower, with a hidden  
Path beneath; a man stumbled on  
The entrance, went in, discovered the ancient

2215

Treasure, the pagan jewels and gold  
The dragon had been guarding, and dazzled and greedy  
Stole a gem-studded cup, and fled.  
But now the dragon hid nothing, neither  
The theft nor itself; it swept through the darkness,  
And all Geatland knew its anger.

2220

## 32

But the thief had not come to steal; he stole,  
And roused the dragon, not from desire  
But need. He was someone's slave, had been beaten  
By his masters, had run from all men's sight,  
But with no place to hide; then he found the hidden

2225

Path, and used it. And once inside,  
Seeing the sleeping beast, staring as it  
Yawned and stretched, not wanting to wake it,  
Terror-struck, he turned and ran for his life,  
Taking the jeweled cup.

2230

That tower  
Was heaped high with hidden treasure, stored there  
Years before by the last survivor

Of a noble race, ancient riches

Left in the darkness as the end of a dynasty

2235

Came. Death had taken them, one

By one, and the warrior who watched over all

That remained mourned their fate, expecting,

Soon, the same for himself, knowing

The gold and jewels he had guarded so long

2240

Could not bring him pleasure much longer. He brought

The precious cups, the armor and the ancient

Swords, to a stone tower built

Near the sea, below a cliff, a sealed

Fortress with no windows, no doors, waves

2245

In front of it, rocks behind. Then he spoke:

“Take these treasures, earth, now that no one

Living can enjoy them. They were yours, in the beginning;

Allow them to return. War and terror

2250

Have swept away my people, shut

Their eyes to delight and to living, closed

The door to all gladness. No one is left  
To lift these swords, polish these jeweled  
Cups: no one leads, no one follows. These hammered

2255

Helmets, worked with gold, will tarnish  
And crack; the hands that should clean and polish them  
Are still forever. And these mail shirts, worn  
In battle, once, while swords crashed  
And blades bit into shields and men,

2260

Will rust away like the warriors who owned them.  
None of these treasures will travel to distant  
Lands, following their lords. The harp's  
Bright song, the hawk crossing through the hall  
On its swift wings, the stallion tramping

2265

In the courtyard—all gone, creatures of every  
Kind, and their masters, hurled to the grave!"  
And so he spoke, sadly, of those  
Long dead, and lived from day to day,  
Joyless, until, at last, death touched

2270

His heart and took him, too. And a stalker  
In the night, a flaming dragon, found  
The treasure unguarded; he whom men fear  
Came flying through the darkness, wrapped in fire,  
Seeking caves and stone-split ruins

2275

But finding gold. Then it stayed, buried  
Itself with heathen silver and jewels  
It could neither use nor ever abandon.  
So mankind's enemy, the mighty beast,  
Slept in those stone walls for hundreds

2280

Of years; a runaway slave roused it,  
Stole a jeweled cup and bought  
His master's forgiveness, begged for mercy  
And was pardoned when his delighted lord took the present  
He bore, turned it in his hands and stared  
At the ancient carvings. The cup brought peace

2285

To a slave, pleased his master, but stirred  
A dragon's anger. It turned, hunting  
The thief's tracks, and found them, saw

Where its visitor had come and gone. He'd survived,

Had come close enough to touch its scaly

2290

Head and yet lived, as it lifted its cavernous

Jaws, through the grace of almighty God

And a pair of quiet, quick-moving feet.

The dragon followed his steps, anxious

To find the man who had robbed it of silver

2295

And sleep; it circled around and around

The tower, determined to catch him, but could not,

He had run too fast, the wilderness was empty.

The beast went back to its treasure, planning

A bloody revenge, and found what was missing,

2300

Saw what thieving hands had stolen.

Then it crouched on the stones, counting off

The hours till the Almighty's candle went out,

And evening came, and wild with anger

It could fly burning across the land, killing

2305

And destroying with its breath. Then the sun was gone,

And its heart was glad: glowing with rage

It left the tower, impatient to repay

Its enemies. The people suffered, everyone

Lived in terror, but when Beowulf had learned

2310

Of their trouble his fate was worse, and came quickly.

## 33

Vomiting fire and smoke, the dragon

Burned down their homes. They watched in horror

As the flames rose up: the angry monster

2315

Meant to leave nothing alive. And the signs

Of its anger flickered and glowed in the darkness,

Visible for miles, tokens of its hate

And its cruelty, spread like a warning to the Geats

Who had broken its rest. Then it hurried back

2320

To its tower, to its hidden treasure, before dawn

Could come. It had wrapped its flames around

The Geats; now it trusted in stone

Walls, and its strength, to protect it. But they would not.

Then they came to Beowulf, their king, and announced

2325

That his hall, his throne, the best of buildings,  
Had melted away in the dragon's burning  
Breath. Their words brought misery, Beowulf's  
Sorrow beat at his heart: he accused  
Himself of breaking God's law, of bringing

2330

The Almighty's anger down on his people.  
Reproach pounded in his breast, gloomy  
And dark, and the world seemed a different place.  
But the hall was gone, the dragon's molten  
Breath had licked across it, burned it

2335

To ashes, near the shore it had guarded. The Geats  
Deserved revenge; Beowulf, their leader  
And lord, began to plan it, ordered  
A battle-shield shaped of iron, knowing that  
Wood would be useless, that no linden shield  
Could help him, protect him, in the flaming heat

2340

Of the beast's breath. That noble prince  
Would end his days on earth, soon,

Would leave this brief life, but would take the dragon  
With him, tear it from the heaped-up treasure  
It had guarded so long. And he'd go to it alone,

2345

Scorning to lead soldiers against such  
An enemy: he saw nothing to fear, thought nothing  
Of the beast's claws, or wings, or flaming  
Jaws—he had fought, before, against worse  
Odds, had survived, been victorious, in harsher

2350

Battles, beginning in Herot, Hrothgar's  
Unlucky hall. He'd killed Grendel  
And his mother, swept that murdering tribe  
Away. And he'd fought in Higlac's war  
With the Frisians, fought at his lord's side

2355

Till a sword reached out and drank Higlac's  
Blood, till a blade swung in the rush  
Of battle killed the Geats' great king.  
Then Beowulf escaped, broke through Frisian  
Shields and swam to freedom, saving

2360

Thirty sets of armor from the scavenging  
Franks, river people who robbed  
The dead as they floated by. Beowulf  
Offered them only his sword, ended  
So many jackal lives that the few

2365

Who were able skulked silently home, glad  
To leave him. So Beowulf swam sadly back  
To Geatland, almost the only survivor  
Of a foolish war. Higlac's widow  
Brought him the crown, offered him the kingdom,

2370

Not trusting Herdred, her son and Higlac's,  
To beat off foreign invaders. But Beowulf  
Refused to rule when his lord's own son  
Was alive, and the leaderless Geats could choose

2375

A rightful king. He gave Herdred  
All his support, offering an open  
Heart where Higlac's young son could see  
Wisdom he still lacked himself: warmth  
And good will were what Beowulf brought his new king.

2380

But Swedish exiles came, seeking  
Protection; they were rebels against Onela,  
Healfdane's son-in-law and the best ring-giver  
His people had ever known. And Onela  
Came, too, a mighty king, marched

2385

On Geatland with a huge army; Herdred  
Had given his word and now he gave  
His life, shielding the Swedish strangers.

Onela wanted nothing more:

When Herdred had fallen that famous warrior

2390

Went back to Sweden, let Beowulf rule!

## 34

But Beowulf remembered how his king had been killed.

As soon as he could he lent the last

Of the Swedish rebels soldiers and gold,

Helped him to a bitter battle across

The wide sea, where victory, and revenge, and the Swedish

2395

Throne were won, and Onela was slain.

So Edgetho's son survived, no matter

What dangers he met, what battles he fought,

Brave and forever triumphant, till the day

Fate sent him to the dragon and sent him death.

2400

A dozen warriors walked with their angry

King, when he was brought to the beast; Beowulf

Knew, by then, what had woken the monster,

And enraged it. The cup had come to him, traveled  
From dragon to slave, to master, to king,

2405

And the slave was their guide, had begun the Geats'  
Affliction, and now, afraid of both beast

And men, was forced to lead them to the monster's  
Hidden home. He showed them the huge

Stones, set deep in the ground, with the sea

2410

Beating on the rocks close by. Beowulf

Stared, listening to stories of the gold

And riches heaped inside. Hidden,

But wakeful, now, the dragon waited,

2415

Ready to greet him. Gold and hammered

Armor have been buried in pleasanter places!

The battle-brave king rested on the shore,

While his soldiers wished him well, urged him

On. But Beowulf's heart was heavy:

2420

His soul sensed how close fate

Had come, felt something, not fear but knowledge

Of old age. His armor was strong, but his arm

Hung like his heart. Body and soul

Might part, here; his blood might be spilled,

2425

His spirit torn from his flesh. Then he spoke.

“My early days were full of war,

And I survived it all; I can remember everything.

was seven years old when Hrethel opened

His home and his heart for me, when my king and lord

2430

Took me from my father and kept me, taught me,

Gave me gold and pleasure, glad that I sat

At his knee. And he never loved me less

Than any of his sons—Herbald, the oldest

Of all, or Hathcyn, or Higlac, my lord.

2435

Herbald died a horrible death,

Killed while hunting: Hathcyn, his brother,

Stretched his horn-tipped bow, sent

An arrow flying, but missed his mark

And hit Herbald instead, found him

2440

With a bloody point and pierced him through.

The crime was great, the guilt was plain,

But nothing could be done, no vengeance, no death

To repay that death, no punishment, nothing.

“So with the graybeard whose son sins

2445

Against the king, and is hanged: he stands

Watching his child swing on the gallows,

Lamenting, helpless, while his flesh and blood

Hangs for the raven to pluck. He can raise

His voice in sorrow, but revenge is impossible.

2450

And every morning he remembers how his son

Died, and despairs; no son to come

Matters, no future heir, to a father

Forced to live through such misery. The place

Where his son once dwelled, before death compelled him

To journey away, is a windy wasteland,

2455

Empty, cheerless; the childless father

Shudders, seeing it. So riders and ridden

Sleep in the ground; pleasure is gone,

The harp is silent, and hope is forgotten.

## 35

2460

“And then, crying his sorrow, he crawls  
To his bed: the world, and his home, hurt him  
With their emptiness. And so it seemed to Hrethel,  
When Herbald was dead, and his heart swelled  
With grief. The murderer lived; he felt

2465

No love for him, now, but nothing could help,  
Word nor hand nor sharp-honed blade,  
War nor hate, battle or blood  
Or law. The pain could find no relief.  
He could only live with it, or leave grief and life  
Together. When he'd gone to his grave Hathcyn  
And Higlac, his sons, inherited everything.

2470

“And then there was war between Geats and Swedes,

Bitter battles carried across

The broad sea, when the mighty Hrethel slept

2475

And Ongentho’s sons thought Sweden could safely

Attack, saw no use to pretending friendship

But raided and burned, and near old Rennsburg

Slaughtered Geats with their thieving swords.

My people repaid them, death for death,

2480

Battle for battle, though one of the brothers

Bought that revenge with his life—Hathcyn,

King of the Geats, killed by a Swedish

Sword. But when dawn came the slayer

Was slain, and Higlac’s soldiers avenged

Everything with the edge of their blades. Efor

2485

Caught the Swedish king, cracked

His helmet, split his skull, dropped him,

Pale and bleeding, to the ground, then put him

To death with a swift stroke, shouting

His joy.

2490

“The gifts that Higlac gave me,  
And the land, I earned with my sword, as fate  
Allowed: he never needed Danes  
Or Goths or Swedes, soldiers and allies  
Bought with gold, bribed to his side.

2495

My sword was better, and always his.  
In every battle my place was in front,  
Alone, and so it shall be forever,  
As long as this sword lasts, serves me  
In the future as it has served me before. So

2500

I killed Dagref, the Frank, who brought death  
To Higlac, and who looted his corpse: Higd’s  
Necklace, Welthow’s treasure, never  
Came to Dagref’s king. The thief  
Fell in battle, but not on my blade.

2505

He was brave and strong, but I swept him in my arms,  
Ground him against me till his bones broke,  
Till his blood burst out. And now I shall fight

For this treasure, fight with both hand and sword.”

And Beowulf uttered his final boast:

2510

“I’ve never known fear; as a youth I fought

In endless battles. I am old, now,

But I will fight again, seek fame still,

If the dragon hiding in his tower dares

To face me.”

2515

Then he said farewell to his followers,

Each in his turn, for the last time:

“I’d use no sword, no weapon, if this beast

Could be killed without it, crushed to death

Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn

2520

Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning

Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.

I feel no shame, with shield and sword

And armor, against this monster: when he comes to me

2525

I mean to stand, not run from his shooting

Flames, stand till fate decides

Which of us wins. My heart is firm,  
My hands calm: I need no hot  
Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.

2530

We shall see, soon, who will survive  
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting  
Is done. No one else could do  
What I mean to, here, no man but me  
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one

2535

Could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold  
And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine  
Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"

Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,  
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast,

2540

Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under  
The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked there!  
And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate  
Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields  
Clashed, the best of kings, saw  
Huge stone arches and felt the heat

2545

Of the dragon's breath, flooding down  
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone  
To stand, a streaming current of fire  
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'

2550

Lord and leader, angry, lowered  
His sword and roared out a battle cry,  
A call so loud and clear that it reached through  
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's  
Ear. The beast rose, angry,  
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing

2555

But war could have followed. Its breath came first,  
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone.

Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf  
Swung his shield into place, held it  
In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon

2560

Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it  
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword  
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming

Blade. The beast came closer; both of them  
Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'

2565

Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared  
Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining  
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,  
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying  
To its fate. Flames beat at the iron

2570

Shield, and for a time it held, protected  
Beowulf as he'd planned; then it began to melt,  
And for the first time in his life that famous prince  
Fought with fate against him, with glory  
Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword

2575

And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.  
The ancient blade broke, bit into  
The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked  
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him  
Less than he needed. The dragon leaped

2580

With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting

Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.

And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious

Victories in other wars: his weapon

Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it

2585

Most, that excellent sword. Edgethó's

Famous son stared at death,

Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it

For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey

Into darkness that all men must make, as death

2590

Ends their few brief hours on earth.

Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged

As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,

And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling

2595

Flames—a king, before, but now

A beaten warrior. None of his comrades

Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble

Followers; they ran for their lives, fled

Deep in a wood. And only one of them

2600

Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,

As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

## 36

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son  
And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,  
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see  
How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering

2605

Everything his lord and cousin had given him,  
Armor and gold and the great estates  
Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's  
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow  
Shield and drew his sword—an ancient

2610

Weapon that had once belonged to Onela's  
Nephew, and that Wexstan had won, killing  
The prince when he fled from Sweden, sought safety  
With Herdred, and found death. And Wiglaf's father

Had carried the dead man's armor, and his sword,

2615

To Onela, and the king had said nothing, only

Given him armor and sword and all,

Everything his rebel nephew had owned

And lost when he left this life. And Wexstan

Had kept those shining gifts, held them

2620

For years, waiting for his son to use them,

Wear them as honorably and well as once

His father had done; then Wexstan died

And Wiglaf was his heir, inherited treasures

And weapons and land. He'd never worn

2625

That armor, fought with that sword, until Beowulf

Called him to his side, led him into war.

But his soul did not melt, his sword was strong;

The dragon discovered his courage, and his weapon,

2630

When the rush of battle brought them together.

And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered

The kind of words his comrades deserved:

“I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking  
And boasting of how brave we’d be when Beowulf

2635

Needed us, he who gave us these swords  
And armor: all of us swore to repay him,  
When the time came, kindness for kindness  
—With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to join him,  
Chose us from all his great army, thinking

2640

Our boasting words had some weight, believing  
Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us  
For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill  
This monster himself, our mighty king,  
Fight this battle alone and unaided,

2645

As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled  
Men’s eyes. But those days are over and gone  
And now our lord must lean on younger  
Arms. And we must go to him, while angry  
Flames burn at his flesh, help

2650

Our glorious king! By almighty God,

I'd rather burn myself than see  
Flames swirling around my lord.  
And who are we to carry home  
Our shields before we've slain his enemy

2655

And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf  
So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing  
He ever did deserved an end  
Like this, dying miserably and alone,  
Butchered by this savage beast: we swore

2660

That these swords and armor were each for us all!"  
Then he ran to his king, crying encouragement  
As he dove through the dragon's deadly fumes:  
"Belove'd Beowulf, remember how you boasted,  
Once, that nothing in the world would ever  
Destroy your fame: fight to keep it,

2665

Now, be strong and brave, my noble  
King, protecting life and fame  
Together. My sword will fight at your side!"  
The dragon heard him, the man-hating monster,

And was angry; shining with surging flames

2670

It came for him, anxious to return his visit.

Waves of fire swept at his shield

And the edge began to burn. His mail shirt

Could not help him, but before his hands dropped

The blazing wood Wiglaf jumped

2675

Behind Beowulf's shield; his own was burned

To ashes. Then the famous old hero, remembering

Days of glory, lifted what was left

Of Nagling, his ancient sword, and swung it

With all his strength, smashed the gray

2680

Blade into the beast's head. But then Nagling

Broke to pieces, as iron always

Had in Beowulf's hands. His arms

Were too strong, the hardest blade could not help him,

The most wonderfully worked. He carried them to war

2685

But fate had decreed that the Geats' great king

Would be no better for any weapon.

Then the monster charged again, vomiting  
Fire, wild with pain, rushed out  
Fierce and dreadful, its fear forgotten.

2690

Watching for its chance it drove its tusks  
Into Beowulf's neck; he staggered, the blood  
Came flooding forth, fell like rain.

## 37

And then when Beowulf needed him most

2695

Wiglaf showed his courage, his strength

And skill, and the boldness he was born with. Ignoring

The dragon's head, he helped his lord

By striking lower down. The sword

Sank in; his hand was burned, but the shining

2700

Blade had done its work, the dragon's

Belching flames began to flicker

And die away. And Beowulf drew

His battle-sharp dagger: the bloodstained old king

Still knew what he was doing. Quickly, he cut

2705

The beast in half, slit it apart.

It fell, their courage had killed it, two noble  
Cousins had joined in the dragon's death.

Yet what they did all men must do

When the time comes! But the triumph was the last

2710

Beowulf would ever earn, the end

Of greatness and life together. The wound

In his neck began to swell and grow;

He could feel something stirring, burning

In his veins, a stinging venom, and knew

2715

The beast's fangs had left it. He fumbled

Along the wall, found a slab

Of stone, and dropped down; above him he saw

Huge stone arches and heavy posts,

Holding up the roof of that giant hall.

Then Wiglaf's gentle hands bathed

2720

The bloodstained prince, his glorious lord,

Weary of war, and loosened his helmet.

Beowulf spoke, in spite of the swollen,

Livid wound, knowing he'd unwound

His string of days on earth, seen

2725

As much as God would grant him; all worldly

Pleasure was gone, as life would go,

Soon:

“I’d leave my armor to my son,

Now, if God had given me an heir,

2730

A child born of my body, his life

Created from mine. I’ve worn this crown

For fifty winters: no neighboring people

Have tried to threaten the Geats, sent soldiers

Against us or talked of terror. My days

2735

Have gone by as fate willed, waiting

For its word to be spoken, ruling as well

As I knew how, swearing no unholy oaths,

Seeking no lying wars. I can leave

This life happy; I can die, here,

2740

Knowing the Lord of all life has never

Watched me wash my sword in blood

Born of my own family. Belove`d

Wiglaf, go, quickly, find

The dragon's treasure: we've taken its life,

2745

But its gold is ours, too. Hurry,

Bring me ancient silver, precious

Jewels, shining armor and gems,

Before I die. Death will be softer,

Leaving life and this people I've ruled

2750

So long, if I look at this last of all prizes.”

## 38

Then Wexstan's son went in, as quickly  
As he could, did as the dying Beowulf  
Asked, entered the inner darkness  
Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his sword.

2755

Flushed with victory he groped his way,  
A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw  
Piles of gleaming gold, precious  
Gems, scattered on the floor, cups

2760

And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully  
Made but rotting with no hands to rub  
And polish them. They lay where the dragon left them;  
It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting  
Its final battle. (So gold can easily

2765

Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,  
No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,  
Hanging high above, a golden  
Banner, woven by the best of weavers  
And beautiful. And over everything he saw

2770

A strange light, shining everywhere,  
On walls and floor and treasure. Nothing  
Moved, no other monsters appeared;  
He took what he wanted, all the treasures  
That pleased his eye, heavy plates

2775

And golden cups and the glorious banner,  
Loaded his arms with all they could hold.  
Beowulf's dagger, his iron blade,  
Had finished the fire-spitting terror  
That once protected tower and treasures  
Alike; the gray-bearded lord of the Geats

2780

Had ended those flying, burning raids  
Forever.

Then Wiglaf went back, anxious  
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him  
Treasure they'd won together. He ran,

2785

Hoping his wounded king, weak  
And dying, had not left the world too soon.

Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found  
His famous king bloody, gasping  
For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water

2790

Over his lord, until the words  
Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.

Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:

“For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank  
Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—

2795

For all of this, that His grace has given me,  
Allowed me to bring to my people while breath

Still came to my lips. I sold my life

For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take

What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,

2800

Help them; my time is gone. Have  
The brave Geats build me a tomb,  
When the funeral flames have burned me, and build it  
Here, at the water's edge, high  
On this spit of land, so sailors can see

2805

This tower, and remember my name, and call it  
Beowulf's tower, and boats in the darkness  
And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."

Then that brave king gave the golden  
Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,

2810

Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,  
And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:  
"You're the last of all our far-flung family.

Fate has swept our race away,

2815

Taken warriors in their strength and led them  
To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them."  
The old man's mouth was silent, spoke  
No more, had said as much as it could;  
He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul

Left his flesh, flew to glory.

## 39

And then Wiglaf was left, a young warrior  
Sadly watching his beloved king,  
Seeing him stretched on the ground, left guarding  
A torn and bloody corpse. But Beowulf's  
Killer was dead, too, the coiled

2825

Dragon, cut in half, cold  
And motionless: men, and their swords, had swept it  
From the earth, left it lying in front of  
Its tower, won its treasure when it fell  
Crashing to the ground, cut it apart

2830

With their hammered blades, driven them deep in  
Its belly. It would never fly through the night,  
Glowing in the dark sky, glorying

In its riches, burning and raiding: two warriors  
Had shown it their strength, slain it with their swords.

2835

Not many men, no matter how strong,  
No matter how daring, how bold, had done  
As well, rushing at its venomous fangs,  
Or even quietly entering its tower,  
Intending to steal but finding the treasure's

2840

Guardian awake, watching and ready  
To greet them. Beowulf had gotten its gold,  
Bought it with blood; dragon and king  
Had ended each other's days on earth.

And when the battle was over Beowulf's followers

2845

Came out of the wood, cowards and traitors,  
Knowing the dragon was dead. Afraid,  
While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord's  
Defense, to throw their javelins and spears,

2850

They came like shamefaced jackals, their shields  
In their hands, to the place where the prince lay dead,

And waited for Wiglaf to speak. He was sitting  
Near Beowulf's body, wearily sprinkling  
Water in the dead man's face, trying

2855

To stir him. He could not. No one could have kept  
Life in their lord's body, or turned  
Aside the Lord's will: world  
And men and all move as He orders,  
And always have, and always will.

2860

Then Wiglaf turned and angrily told them  
What men without courage must hear.  
Wexstan's brave son stared at the traitors,  
His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:

"I say what anyone who speaks the truth

2865

Must say. Your lord gave you gifts,  
Swords and the armor you stand in now;  
You sat on the mead-hall benches, prince  
And followers, and he gave you, with open hands,  
Helmets and mail shirts, hunted across

2870

The world for the best of weapons. War  
Came and you ran like cowards, dropped  
Your swords as soon as the danger was real.  
Should Beowulf have boasted of your help, rejoiced  
In your loyal strength? With God's good grace

2875

He helped himself, swung his sword  
Alone, won his own revenge.  
The help I gave him was nothing, but all  
I was able to give; I went to him, knowing  
That nothing but Beowulf's strength could save us,  
And my sword was lucky, found some vital

2880

Place and bled the burning flames  
Away. Too few of his warriors remembered  
To come, when our lord faced death, alone.  
And now the giving of swords, of golden  
Rings and rich estates, is over,

2885

Ended for you and everyone who shares  
Your blood: when the brave Geats hear  
How you bolted and ran none of your race

Will have anything left but their lives. And death  
Would be better for them all, and for you, than the kind  
Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!”

2890

## 40

Then Wiglaf ordered a messenger to ride  
Across the cliff, to the Geats who'd waited  
The morning away, sadly wondering

2895

If their beloved king would return, or be killed,  
A troop of soldiers sitting in silence  
And hoping for the best. Whipping his horse  
The herald came to them; they crowded around,  
And he told them everything, present and past:

2900

“Our lord is dead, leader of this people.  
The dragon killed him, but the beast is dead,  
Too, cut in half by a dagger;  
Beowulf's enemy sleeps in its blood.  
No sword could pierce its skin, wound

2905

That monster. Wiglaf is sitting in mourning,  
Close to Beowulf's body, Wexstan's  
Weary son, silent and sad,  
Keeping watch for our king, there  
Where Beowulf and the beast that killed him lie dead.

2910

“And this people can expect fighting, once  
The Franks, and the Frisians, have heard that our king  
Lies dead. The news will spread quickly.

Higlac began our bitter quarrel  
With the Franks, raiding along their river

2915

Rhine with ships and soldiers, until  
They attacked him with a huge army, and Higlac  
Was killed, the king and many of our men,  
Mailed warriors defeated in war,  
Beaten by numbers. He brought no treasure  
To the mead-hall, after that battle. And ever

2920

After we knew no friendship with the Franks.  
“Nor can we expect peace from the Swedes.

Everyone knows how their old king,  
Ongentho, killed Hathcyn, caught him  
Near a wood when our young lord went

2925

To war too soon, dared too much.

The wise old Swede, always terrible

In war, allowed the Geats to land

And begin to loot, then broke them with a lightning

Attack, taking back treasure and his kidnaped

2930

Queen, and taking our king's life.

And then he followed his beaten enemies,

Drove them in front of Swedish swords

Until darkness dropped, and weary, lordless,

They could hide in the wood. But he waited, Ongentho

2935

With his mass of soldiers, circled around

The Geats who'd survived, who'd escaped him, calling

Threats and boasts at that wretched band

The whole night through. In the morning he'd hang

A few, he promised, to amuse the birds,

2940

Then slaughter the rest. But the sun rose  
To the sound of Higlac's horns and trumpets,  
Light and that battle cry coming together  
And turning sadhearted Geats into soldiers.  
Higlac had followed his people, and found them.

# 41

“Then blood was everywhere, two bands of Geats  
Falling on the Swedes, men fighting  
On all sides, butchering each other.

Sadly, Ongentho ordered his soldiers

2950

Back, to the high ground where he'd built

A fortress; he'd heard of Higlac, knew

His boldness and strength. Out in the open

He could never resist such a soldier, defend

Hard-won treasure, Swedish wives

And children, against the Geats' new king.

2955

Brave but wise, he fled, sought safety

Behind earthen walls. Eagerly, the Geats

Followed, sweeping across the field,

Smashing through the walls, waving Higlac's  
Banners as they came. Then the gray-haired old king  
2960

Was brought to bay, bright sword-blades  
Forcing the lord of the Swedes to take  
Judgment at Efor's hands. Efor's  
Brother, Wulf, raised his weapon  
2695

First, swung it angrily at the fierce  
Old king, cracked his helmet; blood  
Seeped through his hair. But the brave old Swede  
Felt no fear: he quickly returned  
A better blow than he'd gotten, faced  
Toward Wulf and struck him savagely. And Efor's  
2970

Bold brother was staggered, half raised his sword  
But only dropped it to the ground. Ongentho's  
Blade had cut through his helmet, his head  
Spouted blood, and slowly he fell.  
The wound was deep, but death was not due  
2975

So soon; fate let him recover, live

On. But Efor, his brave brother,  
Seeing Wulf fall, came forward with his broad-bladed  
Sword, hammered by giants, and swung it  
So hard that Ongentho's shield shattered

2980

And he sank to the earth, his life ended.  
Then, with the battlefield theirs, the Geats  
Rushed to Wulf's side, raised him up  
And bound his wound. Wulf's brother  
Stripped the old Swede, took

2985

His iron mail shirt, his hilted sword  
And his helmet, and all his ancient war-gear,  
And brought them to Higlac, his new lord.  
The king welcomed him, warmly thanked him  
For his gifts and promised, there where everyone

2990

Could hear, that as soon as he sat in his mead-hall  
Again Efor and Wulf would have treasure  
Heaped in their battle-hard hands; he'd repay them  
Their bravery with wealth, give them gold  
And lands and silver rings, rich rewards for the glorious

Deeds they'd done with their swords. The Geats agreed. And to prove  
Efor's grace in his eyes, Higlac  
Swore he'd give him his only daughter.

“These are the quarrels, the hatreds, the feuds,  
That will bring us battles, force us into war

3000

With the Swedes, as soon as they've learned how our lord  
Is dead, know that the Geats are leaderless,  
Have lost the best of kings, Beowulf—

He who held our enemies away,

3005

Kept land and treasure intact, who saved  
Hrothgar and the Danes—he who lived  
All his long life bravely. Then let us

Go to him, hurry to our glorious lord,

Behold him lifeless, and quickly carry him

3010

To the flames. The fire must melt more

Than his bones, more than his share of treasure:

Give it all of this golden pile,

This terrible, uncounted heap of cups

And rings, bought with his blood. Burn it

3015

To ashes, to nothingness. No one living

Should enjoy these jewels; no beautiful women

Wear them, gleaming and golden, from their necks,

But walk, instead, sad and alone

In a hundred foreign lands, their laughter

3020

Gone forever, as Beowulf's has gone,

His pleasure and his joy. Spears shall be lifted,

Many cold mornings, lifted and thrown,

And warriors shall waken to no harp's bright call

But the croak of the dark-black raven, ready

3025

To welcome the dead, anxious to tell

The eagle how he stuffed his craw with corpses,

Filled his belly even faster than the wolves.”

And so the messenger spoke, a brave

Man on an ugly errand, telling

3030

Only the truth. Then the warriors rose,

Walked slowly down from the cliff, stared

At those wonderful sights, stood weeping as they saw  
Beowulf dead on the sand, their bold  
Ring-giver resting in his last bed;

3035

He'd reached the end of his days, their mighty  
War-king, the great lord of the Geats,  
Gone to a glorious death. But they saw  
The dragon first, stretched in front  
Of its tower, a strange, scaly beast

3040

Gleaming a dozen colors dulled and  
Scorched in its own heat. From end  
To end fifty feet, it had flown  
In the silent darkness, a swift traveler  
Tasting the air, then gliding down  
To its den. Death held it in his hands;

3045

It would guard no caves, no towers, keep  
No treasures like the cups, the precious plates  
Spread where it lay, silver and brass  
Encrusted and rotting, eaten away  
As though buried in the earth for a thousand winters.

And all this ancient hoard, huge  
And golden, was wound around with a spell:  
No man could enter the tower, open  
Hidden doors, unless the Lord  
Of Victories, He who watches over men,

Almighty God Himself, was moved  
To let him enter, and him alone.

## 42

Hiding that treasure deep in its tower,

As the dragon had done, broke God's law

3060

And brought it no good. Guarding its stolen

Wealth it killed Wiglaf's king,

But was punished with death. Who knows when princes

And their soldiers, the bravest and strongest of men,

Are destined to die, their time ended,

3065

Their homes, their halls empty and still?

So Beowulf sought out the dragon, dared it

Into battle, but could never know what God

Had decreed, or that death would come to him, or why.

So the spell was solemnly laid, by men

3070

Long dead; it was meant to last till the day  
Of judgment. Whoever stole their jewels,  
Their gold, would be cursed with the flames of hell,  
Heaped high with sin and guilt, if greed  
Was what brought him: God alone could break

3075

Their magic, open His grace to man.  
Then Wiglaf spoke, Wexstan's son:  
"How often an entire country suffers  
On one man's account! That time has come to us.  
We tried to counsel our beloved king,

3080

Our shield and protection, show him danger,  
Urge him to leave the dragon in the dark  
Tower it had lain in so long, live there  
Till the end of the world. Fate, and his will,  
Were too strong. Everyone knows the treasure  
His life bought: but Beowulf was worth

3085

More than this gold, and the gift is a harsh one.  
I've seen it all, been in the tower  
Where the jewels and armor were hidden, allowed

To behold them once war and its terror were done.

I gathered them up, gold and silver,

3090

Filled my arms as full as I could

And quickly carried them back to my king.

He lay right here, still alive,

Still sure in mind and tongue. He spoke

Sadly, said I should greet you, asked

3095

That after you'd burned his body you bring

His ashes here, make this the tallest

Of towers and his tomb—as great and lasting

As his fame, when Beowulf himself walked

The earth and no man living could match him.

3100

Come, let us enter the tower, see

The dragon's marvelous treasure one

Last time: I'll lead the way, take you

Close to that heap of curious jewels,

And rings, and gold. Let the pyre be ready

3105

And high: as soon as we've seen the dragon's

Hoard we will carry our belove`d king,  
Our leader and lord, where he'll lie forever  
In God's keeping."

Then Wiglaf commanded

3110

The wealthiest Geats, brave warriors  
And owners of land, leaders of his people,  
To bring wood for Beowulf's funeral:  
"Now the fire must feed on his body,  
Flames grow heavy and black with him

3115

Who endured arrows falling in iron  
Showers, feathered shafts, barbed  
And sharp, shot through linden shields,  
Storms of eager arrowheads dropping."

3120

And Wexstan's wise son took seven  
Of the noblest Geats, led them together  
Down the tunnel, deep into the dragon's  
Tower; the one in front had a torch,  
Held it high in his hands. The best

3125

Of Beowulf's followers entered behind  
That gleaming flame: seeing gold  
And silver rotting on the ground, with no one  
To guard it, the Geats were not troubled with scruples  
Or fears, but quickly gathered up

3130

Treasure and carried it out of the tower.  
And they rolled the dragon down to the cliff  
And dropped it over, let the ocean take it,  
The tide sweep it away. Then silver  
And gold and precious jewels were put

3135

On a wagon, with Beowulf's body, and brought  
Down the jutting sand, where the pyre waited.

## 43

A huge heap of wood was ready,  
Hung around with helmets, and battle  
Shields, and shining mail shirts, all  
As Beowulf had asked. The bearers brought

3140

Their beloved lord, their glorious king,  
And weeping laid him high on the wood.  
Then the warriors began to kindle that greatest  
Of funeral fires; smoke rose  
Above the flames, black and thick,

3145

And while the wind blew and the fire  
Roared they wept, and Beowulf's body  
Crumbled and was gone. The Geats stayed,  
Moaning their sorrow, lamenting their lord;

A gnarled old woman, hair wound 3150

Tight and gray on her head, groaned

A song of misery, of infinite sadness

And days of mourning, of fear and sorrow

To come, slaughter and terror and captivity.

And Heaven swallowed the billowing smoke. 3155

Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf

Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors

Could find it from far and wide; working

For ten long days they made his monument,

Sealed his ashes in walls as straight 3160

And high as wise and willing hands

Could raise them. And the riches he and Wiglaf

Had won from the dragon, rings, necklaces,

Ancient, hammered armor—all 3165

The treasures they'd taken were left there, too,

Silver and jewels buried in the sandy

Ground, back in the earth, again

And forever hidden and useless to men.

And then twelve of the bravest Geats

3170

Rode their horses around the tower,

Telling their sorrow, telling stories

Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,

Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life

As noble as his name. So should all men

3175

Raise up words for their lords, warm

With love, when their shield and protector leaves

His body behind, sends his soul

On high. And so Beowulf's followers

Rode, mourning their beloved leader,

3180

Crying that no better king had ever

Lived, no prince so mild, no man

So open to his people, so deserving of praise.

THE END

## *Glossary of Names*

Persons, peoples, and places are here alphabetically arranged according to the form used in this translation. For those familiar with the original, the Old English spelling is also given, in parentheses and italics.

Not all the names mentioned by the poet are here listed. For a variety of esthetic considerations this translation contains a few alternative identifications; there are a few deletions; and for the most part Danes are Danes and Swedes are Swedes, though (for esthetic reasons valid in his language) the poet may describe them as Spear-Danes, Ring-Danes, East-Danes, North-Danes, or West-Danes. No major omissions occur, however, even under the considerable pressure exerted by such as *Ongenþeow*, *Hygelac*, and *Wealhþeow*.

**BEO (*Beowulf*):** a Danish king, Shild's son, Healfdane's father. According to Klaeber, "this form of the name is an error for *Bēow*." To minimize confusion, I have quietly corrected the poet.

**BEOWULF (*Beowulf*, *Biowulf*):** possibly mythical son of Edgetho, Higlac's nephew and follower, and later king of the Geats. Following the chronology implicit in the poem, Beowulf was born in A.D. 495, went to Denmark and to Hrothgar's help in 515, accompanied Higlac on his expedition against the Franks and Frisians in 521, became king of the Geats in 533, and died at some indefinite later date. The "fifty years" of his reign are, as Klaeber notes, only "a sort of poetic formula."

**BONSTAN (*Beanstan*, *Banstan*, *Beahstan*):** father of Brecca.

**BRECCA (*Breca*):** chief of a tribe known as the Brondings; a contemporary and young companion of Beowulf. His father is Bonstan.

**BRONDINGS (*Brondingas*):** a (Scandinavian?) tribe about whom nothing, including their location, seems to be known.

**BROSING (*Brosinga*):** possibly a reference to Breisach, on the Rhone near Freiburg; possibly a reference to the Brisings, who made a marvelous necklace for the goddess Freyja (see the Norse Elder Edda).

**DAGREF (*Dæghrefn*):** a Frank warrior, Higlac's killer, who is killed by Beowulf.

**ECLAF (*Ecglaf*):** Unferth's father.

**EDGETHO (*Ecgþeow*):** Beowulf's father, a notable warrior married to Hrethel's one daughter (Beowulf's mother is never named).

**EFOR (*Eofor*):** a Geat warrior, who kills Ongentho, the Swedish king, and is given Higlac's daughter as a reward.

**EMER (*Eomer*):** son of Offa.

**ERMLAF (*Yrmenlaf*):** a Danish nobleman, younger brother of Esher.

**ERMERIC (*Eormenic*):** a king of the East Goths, historical but converted into the very model of a medieval tyrant; he is so portrayed in the Old English poems "Deor" and "Widsith."

**ESHER (*Æschere*):** a Danish nobleman, high in the councils of King Hrothgar, and long his close and trusted friend. Esher is killed by Grendel's mother.

**FINN (*Finn*):** a Frisian king, married to Hnaf's sister.

**FITLA (*Fitela*):** son (and nephew) of Siegmund. His role, in this and other similar stories, is quite dissimilar to that of Siegfried, who is Siegmund's son (and nephew) in the *Nibelungenlied* and in the Wagner operas.

**FRANKS (*Francon*):** a West German people, resident near the Rhine and the Meuse rivers. A Frankish tribe conquered Gaul, about A.D. 500, and gave its name to modern France.

**FREAW (*Freawaru*):** a Danish princess, Hrothgar's daughter. She is given in marriage to Ingeld, a Hathobard prince, in the vain hope of settling the feud between the two peoples.

**FRISIANS (*Fresan, Frysan*):** a West German people, resident in what is now northwestern Holland.

**FRODA (*Froda*):** chief of the Hathobards, Ingeld's father.

**GARMUND (*Garmund*):** Offa's father.

**GEATS (*Geatas, Geotena*):** a people of southern Sweden, the Götar, conquered by the Swedish kingdom in about the sixth century A.D. Infinite ink has been spilled about the precise identification of this people, and their homeland; any and all Old English editions of *Beowulf* (or a fine compendium like R. W. Chambers' *Beowulf*) can lead the interested reader as

far as—and probably further than—he cares to go.

**GOTHS (*Gifðas*):** I have here substituted the well-known Goths for their virtually unknown cousins, the *Gifðas*. The latter tribe emigrated from lands near the mouth of the Vistula (a river in Poland) about the third century A.D., settled near the lower Danube, and were wiped out as an independent political entity by the Lombards, toward the end of the sixth century A.D.

**GRENDDEL (*Grendel*):** a man-eating monster who terrorizes the Danes until killed by Beowulf. Grendel lives, with his equally monstrous mother, at the bottom of a foul lake inhabited by assorted other monsters; he is descended from Cain (the progenitor of all evil spirits), though his precise genealogy is not given. The etymology of his name is conjectural: it is perhaps related to Old Norse *grindill*, “storm,” and *grenja*, “to bellow,” and to other words meaning “sand,” “ground (bottom) of a body of water,” and “grinder (destroyer).”

**HALGA (*Halga*):** a Danish prince, third son of Healfdane, younger brother of King Hrothgar, and father of Hrothulf. Halga predeceased King Hrothgar by some twenty years. The epithet “good” may have been given him for strictly metrical reasons; nothing in the poem explains it.

**HAMA (*Hama*):** a character in the cycle of stories about Ermlric (and Theodoric, not mentioned in *Beowulf*). Precisely what role Hama is supposed to have played, in the poem’s oblique reference to him, is not understood.

**HARETH (*Hæreð*):** Higð’s father, apparently a prosperous man of standing.

**HATHCYN (*Hæðcyn*):** a king of the Geats, Hrethel’s second son, who ascends the throne after he accidentally kills his older brother, Herbald, and their father has died of grief. Hathcyn is killed by Ongentho, king of the Swedes, in a war which then sees Ongentho killed by a second band of Geats,

led by Higlac.

**HATHLAF (*Heapolaf*):** a Wulfing warrior, slain by Edgetho; his death causes a feud which is settled, after Edgetho has been exiled, by the intercession (and gold) of Hrothgar.

**HATHOBARDS (*Heaðobeardan*):** a seafaring German tribe, sometimes identified with the Lombards (who had not yet migrated down toward Italy), sometimes with the Erulians, but not definitely placed either historically or geographically. They may have lived, at least for a time, on the south Baltic coast.

**HEALFDANE (*Healfdene*):** a Danish king, Beo's son, and father of Hergar, Hrothgar, Halga, and Urs. Whether or not the name means Half-Dane is uncertain.

**HEMMING (*Hemming*):** a kinsman of Offa, though in what precise relationship is not known.

**HENGEST (*Hengest*):** a Danish warrior, Hnaf's chief lieutenant and, de facto, his successor.

**HERBALD (*Herebeald*):** a prince of the Geats, Hrethel's oldest son. He is killed, in a hunting accident, by his brother, Hathcyn, and his necessarily unavenged death causes his father to die of grief. The parallel with the Balder (Baldr) myth has often been noted.

**HERDRED (*Heardred*):** a king of the Geats, Higlac's son, killed by the powerful Swedish king, Onela.

**HERGAR (*Heorogar*):** a Danish king, oldest son of Healfdane, older brother and predecessor of Hrothgar, and father of Herward. His reign was apparently a brief one.

**HERMOD (*Heremod*):** an archetypal but partly historical Danish king, of great military prowess combined with the lowest possible character. Like Wayland, the famous smith, Hermod is mentioned frequently in the poetry of other Germanic languages.

**HEROT (*Heorot*):** the lofty battle hall built by King Hrothgar, to celebrate his victories, house his growing band of followers, and perhaps to perpetuate his fame. As the poet hints, in lines 84–85, a coming war will result in the burning down of Herot.

**HERWARD (*Heorowearð*):** Hergar's son. He seems to have been bypassed, at his father's death (his uncle Hrothgar taking the throne), either because he was thought too young to rule or because he had been out of favor with his father. See lines 2160–2162, and see under Hrothulf, below.

**HIGD (*Hygd*):** Higlac's wife, Hareth's daughter. Her name means "thoughtful," or "prudent."

**HIGLAC (*Hygelac, Higelac*):** a king of the Geats, Hrethel's son, younger brother of Herbald and Hathcyn. Higlac is both Beowulf's feudal lord and his uncle.

**HNAF (*Hnæf*):** a Danish king, killed by Finn; his sister was Finn's wife.

**HONDSHEW (*Hondscioh*):** a Geat warrior, one of Beowulf's companions on the journey to King Hrothgar's court. Hondshew is the man killed and eaten by Grendel, on the evening when the Geats instead of the Danes lay

sleeping in Herot, Hrothgar's hall—the evening when Beowulf, instead of becoming the monster's second victim, gave Grendel his mortal wound.

**HRETHEL (*Hreðel*):** a king of the Geats, Higlac's father, Beowulf's grandfather.

**HRETHRIC (*Hreðric*):** the older of Hrothgar's two young sons.

**HROTHGAR (*Hroðgar*):** a Danish king, second son of Healfdane, builder of Herot, and beneficiary of Beowulf's courage. One of the principal characters of the poem, he is depicted as near the end of his life, wise, brave, but troubled, remembering his glorious past, afflicted with first Grendel and then Grendel's monstrous mother, and worried about the fate of his sons, at his nephew Hrothulf's hands, after his imminent death. Hrothgar has befriended Beowulf's father, which more than satisfactorily accounts for the help Beowulf gives him.

**HROTHMUND (*Hroðmund*):** the younger of Hrothgar's two young sons.

**HROTHULF (*Hroðulf*):** Halga's son, Hrothgar's nephew. Although Welthow, Hrothgar's queen, invokes the spirit of goodwill prevailing at the Danish court, and predicts that Hrothulf will guard her two young sons, the Anglo-Saxon listener knew that Hrothulf was later to seize the throne, after Hrothgar's death, and also was to murder Hrethric, Hrothgar's legal heir. Hrothulf, the Anglo-Saxon listener knew further, was subsequently to be killed by Hergar's son, Herward—but none of this is stated in the poem.

**HRUNTING (*Hrunting*):** Unferth's ancient sword. Few things show more clearly the importance of weapons (and armor), in Anglo-Saxon culture, than their being assigned names—and, on occasion, other personalized characteristics.

**INGELD (*Ingeld*):** a prince of the Hathobards, Froda's son, married to Freaw, the Danish princess.

**JUTES (*Eotan*):** a Frisian people, or a people allied with (and possibly subordinate to?) the Frisians.

**NAGLING (*Nægling*):** the name of Beowulf's sword. See under Hrunting, above.

**OFFA (*Offa*):** a king of the Angles—those of them who did not migrate to Angle-land (England) but remained on the European continent. Offa is the husband and tamer of Thrith. Various historical and mythological narratives are fused in this briefly told tale. (See also the Old English poem "Widsith.")

**ONELA (*Onela*):** a Swedish king, younger son of Ongentho, and husband of the Danish king Healfdane's daughter. Onela seized the Swedish throne, after his older brother's death; his brother's sons fled to Herdred, king of the Geats. The Swedish king thereupon invaded Geatland, killed Herdred and the older of his two nephews (the legal heir to the Swedish throne), but then returned home and permitted Beowulf to rule Geatland. However, Beowulf soon supported an invasion of Sweden by the surviving nephew, and the latter took both Onela's life and his throne. The poet regards Onela as something of a model king.

**ONGENTHO (*Ongenþeow*):** a Swedish king, mighty in battle, and obviously respected by the poet. In the fighting which followed Hrethel's death, Ongentho first killed Hathcyn, the Geats' king, and was then himself killed by another group of Geats, led by Higlac. Ongentho is Onela's father.

**RENNSBURG (*Hreosnabeorh*):** the location of the battle between Swedes and Geats, in which first Hathcyn and then Ongentho are killed.

**SHILD (Scyld):** a Danish king, Beo's father, Healfdane's grandfather, and Hrothgar's great-grandfather. Shild is mythological; he has Scandinavian analogues, as Skjoldr, and scholars have elaborated a variety of possible religious/agricultural meanings for his story.

**SIEGMUND (Sigemund):** son of Vels, father (and uncle) of Fitla. This is the *Nibelungenlied* (and Wagner's) Siegmund in one of his assorted other incarnations.

**SWERTING (Swerting):** Higlac's grandfather.

**THRITH (þryð, Modþryðo):** Offa's wife, and a type of haughty, violent young woman very like Katharina, in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Like Katharina, Thrith is tamed and gentled by a husband stronger even than she; unlike *The Taming of the Shrew*, the poem does not tell us precisely how the miracle was accomplished.

**UNFERTH (Unferð):** one of Hrothgar's courtiers, skillful with words, and also a man of considerable reputation as a warrior; his father is Ecglaf. Unferth's sword, lent to Beowulf for the fight with Grendel's mother, is called Hrunting.

**VELS (Wæls):** Siegmund's father. The familial name is, in this version of the story, derived from Vǫlsung, in the Norse saga.

**WAYLAND (Weland):** a smith celebrated in many surviving Germanic poems; to ascribe a sword or a mail shirt to his gifted hammer was to evoke an automatic association of wonderful workmanship and, in most cases, also of wonderful men and deeds. Wayland is mentioned at some length in "Deor," perhaps the oldest surviving Old English poem. (see Raffel, *Poems from the Old English* [1960], pp. 39–40.)

**WELTHOW (*Wealhþeow*):** Hrothgar's queen, and the mother of his young sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund. Most of her speeches are full of tragic implications, well-known to the Anglo-Saxon audience. See under Hrothulf, above.

**WEXSTAN (*Wihstan, Weohstan*):** Wiglaf's father, and more or less vaguely related to Beowulf. Wexstan killed the older of Onela's nephews, when that Swedish king invaded Geatland, but whether he was himself a Swede, or a Geat serving the Swedes, is not known. In any case, after the survivor of Onela's two nephews returned to Sweden, killed Onela, and became king, Wexstan could not (and did not) remain in Sweden.

**WIGLAF (*Wiglaf*):** a Geat warrior, more or less vaguely related to Beowulf, possibly having some Swedish blood; his father is Wexstan. Chosen to accompany Beowulf to the aged hero's fight with the dragon, Wiglaf is the only member of a presumably select band who goes to Beowulf's help. He seems to have become king, after Beowulf's death.

**WULF (*Wulf*):** a Geat warrior, Efor's brother.

**WULFGAR (*Wulfgar*):** Hrothgar's herald. The precise familial link which leads the poet to call him "a prince born to the Swedes" (*þæt wæs Wendla leod*) is missing. **WULFINGS (*Wylfingas*):** a Germanic tribe, probably resident south of the Baltic Sea. Welthow, Hrothgar's queen, may have been a Wulfing.

**YRS (*Yrse*):** daughter of Healfdane. Her name is not actually given in the manuscript; despite the high degree of probability, editors have hesitated to fill the gap with anything more than [ ] and a footnote. A translator must either gamble or evade.





## *Afterword*

This translation of *Beowulf* first appeared in 1963. That year witnessed Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C., and President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, the beatitude of Thelonious Monk at the piano and a scalp-tingling Barbra Streisand singing "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered." It saw the first miniskirt, the first five-digit ZIP code, and the first woman in space. The Beatles declared "I Want to Hold Your Hand," and Bob Dylan, with faked Woody Guthrie accents, "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." Hollywood's creative energy peaked and in a few miraculous months produced *Tom Jones*, *Hud*, *From Russia with Love*, *The Birds*, *Cleopatra*, *The Leopard*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, and *Charade*. In Vietnam, President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother were killed in a military coup. The vivid rendering of *Beowulf* by Burton Raffel has held up well over the past half century or so—better, indeed, than many of its original readers.

Raffel's assertion in his Introduction that we were lucky to have *Beowulf*, that it was "great poetry" and not cruel and unusual punishment, was necessary in a world of youthful demographics and set examination texts. Kingsley Amis, preparing for his Oxford finals, had blasted *Beowulf* as an "anonymous, crass, purblind, infantile, featureless heap of gangrened elephant's sputum." And in *Annie Hall* (1977), Woody Allen was still advising a college-bound Diane Keaton: "Just don't take any course where they make you read *Beowulf*." How quickly things change. *Beowulf* is no longer on the endangered-species list. The poem has been breeding vigorously, spawning an exaltation of films, operas, puppet shows, animated cartoons, comic books, readings, staged musicals, and video and board games. Many of these remakes have a lot to answer for. In the most recent film version (2007), a gross, scaly, mucus-drooling, cadaverous Grendel roars and rips and pops people like pills. His mother, a slinky femme fatale with

otherworldly curves (Angelina Jolie), rises naked from the mere, dripping liquid gold onto her stiletto heels, wooing Beowulf (a computer-enhanced Ray Winstone) with lines like: “I know that, underneath your glamour, you’re as much a monster as my son, Grendel.” The great Danes grunt, drink, belch, chant, and fight in the high hall, rugby boors whose private habits your high school teacher would not want you to think about.

Scholarly tradition wants us to speak well of the works we study. But an Afterword must not proclaim too loudly that the original Old English poem is far more powerful and moving than its modernizations, far more fun and accessible and meaningful (whether to get in touch with your inner hero or for improving your SAT scores). Such protestations might suggest that there is a point to the opposite argument: that the real *Beowulf* is tedious, elitist, and irrelevant to the world today. We do not want to hear too much about the evil lurking within our precincts, or about the art of losing without flinching.

*Beowulf* is a comparatively recent arrival in the hall of fame of English poetry. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that scholars began to make sense of the charred and scorched manuscript and not until well into the nineteenth that *Beowulf* reached a wider audience. The poem was unknown to Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Byron, and Keats. The prose synopsis offered in the 1 May 1858 issue of *Household Words*, edited by Charles Dickens, marks the poem’s entry into public consciousness, in a world that did not mind as much as we do its “robust” attitudes to pastimes such as fighting, killing, and drinking. But *Beowulf* is a visitor from a distant land, a stranger whose words, idioms, grammar, gestures, and images we struggle to understand. Students of *Beowulf* have to accept a burden of ignorance about matters of authorship and chronology, composition, patronage, and transmission that would be intolerable to those who work in other periods of literary history. The poem gives few intelligible or adequate answers to ordinary literary questions about style, indebtedness, school, genre, performance, theme, or structure. And what we don’t know hurts us. *Beowulf* is a text from the past in the past’s own voice. It matters whether the poem, when new, was close to its oral roots, or whether it was a nostalgic reconstruction of a Northern heroic age. It matters whether *Beowulf* was a prop by which an aristocratic ideology established itself in a society not so different from that portrayed in the poem, or whether it was a late,

culturally charged act of repetition, imaginatively reconciling its readers to new realities. It matters “whodunit” and when and how.

Scholars agree on a few chronological boundaries, forming a triptych: first, the time and place of the poem’s action, the late fifth and sixth centuries in East Scandinavia, chiefly around the shores of the Kattegat (England is never mentioned, an awkward omission for the first native English “epic”); then the moment of composition, some time between the middle of the seventh century and the beginning of the eleventh, when an English poet, looking back, told of an age of Northern kings and retainers long gone; and, finally, the date of the sole surviving manuscript, into which two scribes, probably in the decade after 1000, copied the poem we call *Beowulf*. The breadth of the middle panel—a three-and-one-half-century window of opportunity—is both unattractive and worrisome, but then no other long Old English poem can be confidently situated before the tenth century.

As poetry, *Beowulf* holds our interest because it is extraordinary, a strange and enchanting offspring of the real and the dreamworld, of Clio and Morpheus. The unknown compiler of the extant manuscript apparently had an interest in monsters: uncanny creatures stalk singly or in packs through the works he anthologized. *The Wonders of the East*, which precedes *Beowulf* in the codex, illustrates thirty-two marvels. Here are dragons, one hundred fifty feet long and as thick as stone pillars; huge cannibals with long legs and feet; and thirteen-foot-tall marble-white women accessorized with boar tusks, camel hooves, and oxtails. *Beowulf*’s own beloved lord and uncle, Hygelac king of the Geats, was so gigantic that he, too, appears in a catalogue of monstrosities: no horse was strong enough to carry him, and after his death at the mouth of the Rhine, his bones were preserved for travelers to gawk at. The historian Gregory of Tours (d. 594) notes a raid on Frankish territory by the same Hygelac and dates it around the year 520. For some reason the *Beowulf* poet alludes at least four times to this fatal expedition, as if it were an anchor or touchstone, a way of breaking into and entering the past.

Readers coming to *Beowulf* for the first time are faced with a barrage of unfamiliar personal names (mostly beginning with H) and bewildered by an absence of clear reference points. Carthage stirs certain associations, but not Heorot. Who in the world is Hama, and what does Ingeld have to do with

anything? The names and deeds of Odysseus and Penelope, Agamemnon and Helen, Aeneas and Dido, ring bells: they and the Greek and Roman classics are part of our cultural heritage. But Hrothgar, Healfdane, Hergar, Halga, Hrethel, Hrethric, Herdred, Heatholaf, Hrothmund, Hrothulf, Hemming, Herbeald, Herward, Hildeburh, Hareth, and Higlac are total strangers. The Northern legends featured in *Beowulf* and taken for granted as belonging to both the poet and his public vanished from English memory soon after the Norman Conquest. We need to learn these stories in order to follow the poet's channel surfing, when he suddenly switches from the main narrative to another story, and then another, before returning. In *Beowulf*, these "digressions" are used in an allusive, referential way. To the Anglo-Saxons, the pleasure of recognition, of sharing in an erudite game, seems to have been as important as to readers of Ovid and Milton. Scandinavian story was something you had to know, like chess, claret, or cricket, if you wanted to be thought cultured. Some twenty different legends are alluded to by the poet. Most of the stories related have to do with the fall of a leader, an underdog's defiant resistance, the automaticity of revenge (called by Auden the earth's only perpetual motion machine), and the sorrow of lonely queens. Beowulf's own memory reaches back two generations, tracing the complex origins of the feud between the Swedes and the Geats. He can also forecast the feuds of the next generation: on the basis of a piece of information picked up at the Danish court, he turns the Ingeld legend into a political prophecy, a sequence of events likely to occur in the near future. Sometimes myth is pressed into service as history: Beowulf's story of Hathcyn's accidental slaying of Herbald seems to echo a fratricide in the Norse pantheon, the god Hothr's unwitting killing of Baldr. When the poet mentions earlier heroes of legend like Scyld, Heremod, Finn, Offa, Sigemund, Ermanaric, and Hama, he does not make them contemporaneous with the sixth-century events described, but sets them in a distant mirror, conveying the illusion of a many-storied long ago. His reconstruction of a Northern heroic age presents such an internally consistent picture of Scandinavian society around AD 500 that his imitation of historical truth has been taken for the reality.

One historical context for *Beowulf* that has enriched our view of the poem in recent years is archaeology. The excavation of the richly furnished Sutton Hoo ship burial in 1939 provided sufficient treasure, arms and armor, drinking vessels, and exotic precious goods to show that the poet need not

have been fantasizing about the wealth of the early North. The material culture of seventh-century Sussex came to look very like that depicted in the poem, give or take a garnet or two. (When you have *one* early epic and *one* lavish ship burial, the temptation to marry the two is strong.) Excavations in the 1950s of a seventh-century site at Yeavinger in Northumbria revealed large timber halls very like Hrothgar's Herot. The trouble is that most of these items—from cremations and ship burials to helmets, swords, and wooden buildings—are not tied to any one time or place and can be found somewhere in the North during most of the first millennium AD. The historical Herot has often and plausibly been localized near the village of Lejre on the Danish island of Zealand. (Thietmar of Merseburg, writing in 1013–18, described Lejre as the former “capital of the kingdom.”) Beginning in the late 1980s, and again in 2004–5, excavations at Lejre began to uncover the remains of a series of structures dating from the mid-sixth century to the late-tenth century, halls pretty much where and when legend said they should be, and far larger than anything so far excavated in England. It could have been in such a great central place, or so it is pleasant to speculate, that the Danish *scops* or “oral singers” depicted in *Beowulf* recited their legendary tales and songs of praise (88–98, 495–97, 853–97, 1063–1159). But just because fifth-or sixth-century Danes were imagined to behave this way does not mean that song in the high hall was how *Beowulf* itself was propagated.

Beowulf is a hero, demonstrating resolution and fortitude in the face of demonic and human enemies alike. His are the virtues of a warrior aristocracy, and he knows the lingo: “Each of us must experience the end of life in the world,” he tells the Danes quaking in the hall; “let him who is permitted achieve fame before death. That is for a slain warrior the best there is.” Beowulf's victories are praised by all onlookers, including the narrator: he was “the strongest of warriors,” “the strongest in might on that day of this life.” His loyalty, munificence, wisdom, and nobility are extolled; so, too, are the eloquent formal speeches in which he makes his qualities of mind and heart known. “He held to his high destiny,” says Wiglaf of his slain leader, “of all men in the world he was the most glorious warrior.” The last word in the poem is uttered by Beowulf's mourners, who commend their slain leader as “keenest to win glory.”

If *Beowulf* is widely hailed today as the first great masterpiece of English

poetry, it probably has less to do with its hero's might than its poet's melancholy. Few today automatically assume that fighting is glorious or even fun. The poem's heroic fellowship is precarious, a bright hall haunted by menace. Scenes of rejoicing are swiftly undercut by forecasts of disaster; alliterative pairings such as *æfter wiste...wop* "after the feast...weeping" and *gyrn æfter gomene* "sorrow after joy" are dark, mocking refrains. The sadness, the poignancy, the downbeat that we associate with *Beowulf* come from the epic poet's sense of duration, how time condemns itself and all human endeavor. Herot, like Troy, will be snuffed out by flames and only its memory will linger for a while.

One hallmark of a fine poetic translation is that it makes readers curious about the nature of the original. Unlike Raffel's vivid concreteness, Old English verse is composed in a highly patterned, formulaic style, studded with vagueness. But there are compensations: a single phrase, unremarkable, demanded by the meter, and exhausted by a chorus of previous poets, sometimes calls up a multitude of disparate and unexpected thoughts, the inferred unsaid, which in this poetry is often as important as the repeated just said. Longfellow was impressed by the lines in *Beowulf* in which a man mourns his son's death on the gallows (a melancholy scene if there ever was one). As the father looks upon his child's former dwelling, the sense of loss seems to be expressed on a more than individual scale. A word-for-word gloss follows this extract:

Gesyhð sorhcearig on his suna bure,  
winsele westne, windge reste,  
reote berofene—ridend swefað,  
hæleð in hoðman; nis þær hearpan sweg,  
gomen in geardum, swylce ðær iu wæron.  
Gewiteð þonne on sealman, sorhleoð gæleð  
an æfter anum; þuhte him eall to rum,

wongas ond wicstede.

(2455–62)

He looks, sorrow-mournful, upon his son's chamber, wine-hall deserted, windy rest, robbed of joy—riders sleep, men in grave; is not there harp's music, joy in dwelling, as once there had been. He goes then to couch, sorrow-song keens, lonely one for lone one; seemed to him all too spacious, fields and dwelling place.

The letters *ð* and *þ* represent the *th* sound in *that* and *thigh* respectively; *æ* represents the vowel sound in *cat*; all words except *gesyhð* and *gewiteð* are accented on the first syllable. Each verse consists of two half lines (normally with two stressed syllables each) linked by alliteration. The “little” words of Old English are still recognizable to speakers of modern English: pronouns such as “his,” “him,” and “all,” adverbs such as “then,” “too,” and “there,” prepositions such as “after,” “on” and “in,” and the conjunction “and.” Other words in the passage above are related to modern English words: e.g., *bur* gave us “bower,” *win-*, “wine,” *sorh-*, “sorrow,” *cearig*, “chary,” *sunu*, “son,” *hearpe*, “harp,” *gomen*, “game,” *geard*, “yard,” *windig*, “windy,” *rum*, “room,” *rest*, “rest,” *-stede*, “stead”; the verbal forms *is*, *wæron*, and *þuhte* correspond to “is,” “were,” and “thought” (as in “methought”). Still other words, especially those in the poetic register (e.g., *hæleð*, *wong*, *sele*) have disappeared from the language. Old English verse does without the articles “the” and “a,” as I have in my literal gloss.

But even with the verse stripped of rhythm and sound and inflections, the words muted and tired, the passage is still recognizably poetry, touching the deep wellsprings of grief and loneliness, the temporality and finitude of an indifferent world. The father's (and poet's) eye moves from the corpse, the lifeless “bone house” riding on the gallows, to a windswept hall, its horsemen vanished—an emptied world and the awful spaciousness of things. The meaning of some words is uncertain (e.g., *hoðman*, *sealman*, *reote*); the compression of *an æfter anum*, untranslatable: “the one for the other” but also “the lonely one for the only one” (or vice versa); and the punctuation, modern and interpretive.

The poet's vagueness disturbs us. A recent translation turns "windy rest" (= resting place, repose, bed) into "the draughty fireplace where the wind is chattering," a concrete, homey image that appeals to current taste. But the Anglo-Saxon poet's nonvisual and reticent "windy rest" allowed his audience to recall other windy places: not only the "windswept walls" that form part of the "ruined hall" topos but also the grave on the hill, the wind-battered sea cliffs, the last defense of the land, and the "windy hall" in which Satan must endure eternity. The poet's sequence of images conveys with economy how, lacking one person, the man bereft lacks the whole world. But why these unidentified "riders," why "harp music"? The answer is that they, like hawk and mead cup, are poetic shorthand, calling up a whole complex of ideas associated with the transience of earthly joy. Two hundred lines earlier, the *Beowulf* poet described another empty hall in terms of absence: "There is no delight of the harp, joy of the mirth-wood, no good hawk flies through the hall, nor does the swift horse pound the courtyard." The speaker of the poem known as *The Wanderer* contemplates a ruined "wine hall," buffeted by winds, and says: "Where has the horse gone? Where has the man gone?... Where are hall joys?" The fact that any piece of Old English verse is likely to resemble others means that the individual poem could hold its punches, letting its resonant formulas make the connections. "Riders" and "wind," "wine" and "harp" are loaded words, bearing traditional baggage that a poet had only to unpack, not invent.

So don't read *Beowulf*. Do something else, anything: paint your toenails, go to the mall, check the weather report, text message, contemplate a mole; at the mention of the heroic, shudder; return some DVDs, watch CNN news. And then, when the whole world seems as gray and flavorless as a latte left out in the rain, pick up your *Beowulf*, and yield yourself to its lonely fenland demons, drunken thanes in army blankets, and golden pagan hero.

—Roberta Frank