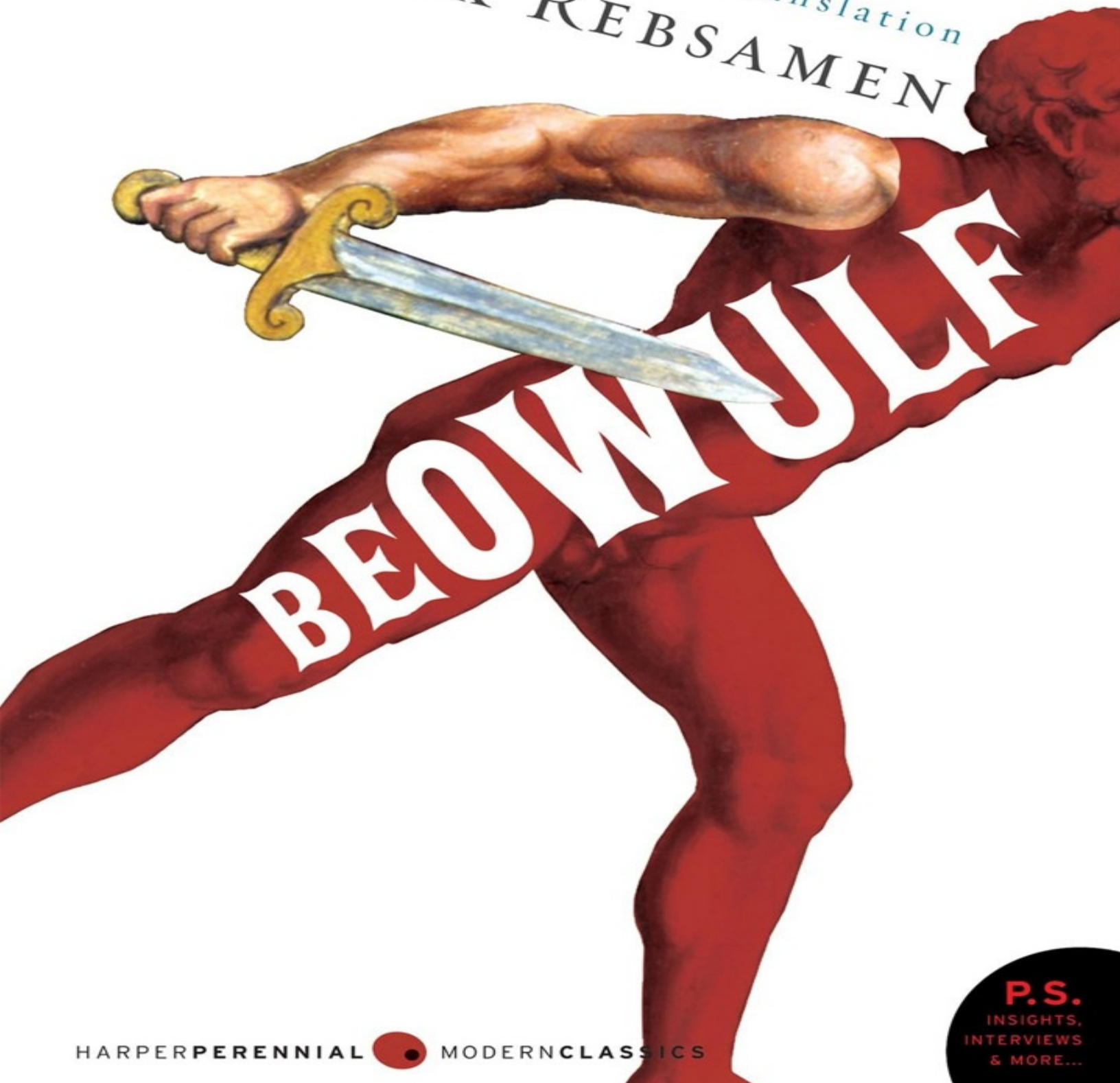


An Updated Verse Translation
FREDERICK REBSAMEN



HARPERPERENNIAL  MODERNCLASSICS

P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

Frederick Rebsamen

Beowulf

AN UPDATED VERSE TRANSLATION



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Acknowledgments



For advice, encouragement, and criticism, my grateful thanks to the following:

To Fred Robinson for telling me that, in constant search of the right words, I was neglecting certain matters of quantity and secondary stress. Though I have not been able to consistently capture all of the Old English forms after much revision of the manuscript, this translation is now much better than it might have been without that warning, and *Beowulf* scholars will note how I have profited by Fred's intelligent essays clarifying several disputed passages.

To Dick Ringler and the five students in his *Beowulf* study group for spending an entire afternoon comparing a sample of my work with the original, an uncommonly generous response to my request for Dick's esteemed opinion of the translation, and for the fine encouragement of this perceptive group, which has given me a chronic boost.

To Joe Tusso, whose critical edition of *Beowulf* reflects his long acquaintance with the poem, for understanding what I have tried to do and for giving me the kind of strong and informed approval that every writer cherishes.

To Carl Berkhout for spending much time with his helpful advice on many subjects relative to this translation.

I am grateful to my editor, Cass Canfield Jr., for making this second edition possible, and to John Williams for seeing this edition through the press.

Especially to L. D. Clark, longtime friend and ruthless critic, who spent too many hours applying the skills of his acclaimed scholarly writing to three early drafts of the introduction and keeping me from making all kinds of silly mistakes—then giving praise to the poetry at a time when I needed it, along with unflagging encouragement from the first day of work to the last.

Finally, the greatest debt of all, to the anonymous poet who created this wonderfully conceived work of early medieval imagination and wrapped it in such ringing verses that I heartily wish all students of English literature could read it in the language in which he composed it. I find that I cannot improve upon my dedication of an earlier book on *Beowulf*: "To the poet, whoever he was, whose song gave a richer light to that first bright flare of English civilization, this book is gratefully dedicated."

Introduction to the Perennial Classics Edition



Except for a few small changes that need no introduction, I am concentrating upon improvement of the poetry in this edition. Alliteration (with a change in one initial sound) remains the same, and the other “rules” of Old English verse forms are followed as far as it is practical to do so in Modern English.

As in the first edition, although it is impossible to translate *Beowulf* line by line, nothing of any importance is omitted. Old English was a partially inflected language and a poet could therefore do things with word-order intolerable in Modern English, things that I have “corrected” for the sake of clarity. This has necessarily led me astray from the text in places, but I have always returned to the text and caught up with what I missed.

Again I have avoided a sprinkling of commas and semicolons, but I have used them, along with dashes, when necessary. The best way to understand this translation is simply to read slowly with pauses between verses when it seems natural. Too much punctuation would destroy the rhythm of Old English poetry.

I am grateful to my editor, Cass Canfield Jr., for making this updated edition possible.

Introduction



In 1936, J. R. R. Tolkien delivered a lecture before members of the British Academy entitled “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*.” The wisdom and eloquence of this lecture finally delivered *Beowulf* from historians, archaeologists, mythologists, linguists—the list is long. Conceding that students of all these disciplines can find much to ponder there, he said, however, that “it is plainly only in the consideration of *Beowulf* as a poem, with an inherent poetic significance, that any view or conviction can be reached or steadily held,” and further remarked that “*Beowulf* is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content, and is largely independent even of the most important facts ... that research has discovered.”

In this translation of *Beowulf* —the only translation I am aware of that attempts throughout to imitate the Old English poetic form as closely as is practical in Modern English—I have tried to respect those words in every line. However, because of the modern reader’s unfamiliarity with ancient Germanic poetry and Anglo-Saxon history, any translation should be prefaced by a discussion of those aspects of the poem which establish a matrix for the poet’s invention: the historical background, the principal characters, the structure of the poem, the dates of composition and of the manuscript, the source and importance of *Beowulf*, the poet’s compromise between Christianity and paganism, and a description of the Old English poetic form, as well as a few words about *Beowulf* himself and the three monsters.

Historical Background

Beowulf is a poem, a work of fiction, centered on *Beowulf* and his fights with monsters. Yet many historical/legendary characters and events are mentioned in the poem, and the Danes, Swedes, and Geats provide the necessary background for *Beowulf*’s long and eventful life.

Both history and legend place the Danes and Swedes within the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., the North Germanic “Heroic Age” reflected in much of medieval Icelandic prose and poetry. The Danes lived in what is now Denmark and the southern tip of Sweden. Hrothgar, whose great hall was somewhere on the island of Zealand, is their king at the beginning of the poem, and the other members of that dynasty are accounted for in the course of the narrative. The Swedes, whose hostilities among themselves and against the Geats through three generations are featured in “installments” during the final third of the poem, lived in Sweden north of the “great lakes,” Vänern and Vättern.

The identity of the Geats remains obscure, though in this poem they must have lived in Southern Sweden, between the Danes and the two lakes, a territory I have referred to as “Götland” in this translation. Gregory of Tours, who wrote his history of the Franks near the end of the sixth century, says that a king named Hygelac (“Clochilaico” in his Latin) conducted a raid in Frankish territory around the year 520. An anonymous eighth-century history of the Franks repeats this statement. So we

may think of Hygelac's disastrous expedition up the Rhine, when we come to it in *Beowulf*, as having occurred around 520, and date the fictional events in the poem accordingly. Gregory and the anonymous historian identify Hygelac as a Danish king, but a third manuscript, the eighth-century *Liber Monstrorum*, written in England, says that "Huiglaucus" was king of the "Getis." Exactly who these "Getis" were, and the Geats of *Beowulf*, has never been clearly determined.

Hygelac, whose sister was Beowulf's mother, is king of the Geats at the beginning of the poem, and at the end Beowulf has replaced Hygelac's son on the throne and ruled for fifty years. Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, was a Waegmunding, a tribe unknown outside this poem. Wiglaf, who appears at the end of the poem as Beowulf's successor, is also a Waegmunding. There is no mention of Beowulf's wife (if he had one) or any descendants.

The Principal Characters

Seventy-five personal names appear in *Beowulf*, along with thirty-two names of places, families, nations, and swords. I have listed sixty-five of these names in an appendix for reasons there given, but while they lend a richness to the poem that would have been appreciated by an Anglo-Saxon audience, the modern reader need be primarily concerned with only a few. Only ten characters speak, four of them of minor importance. Thus the reader may concentrate on the six important speakers—Hrothgar, his queen Wealhtheow, Unferth, Hygelac, Wiglaf, and Beowulf—and of course the three monsters.

Structure

The structure of *Beowulf* is a gratifying surprise, completely unexpected in an age which favored straightforward heroic lays concerning conflicts between human beings. It is unlike any other poem in English literature or any other Germanic literature, and Tolkien's description of *Beowulf* as a "heroic-elegiac poem" emphasizes its uniqueness.

After a genealogy of the Danes and the establishment of Hrothgar in his great new hall, we learn of the ravages of Grendel and the arrival of Beowulf to help. From these opening lines through Beowulf's fights with Grendel and Grendel's mother and his return to his homeland, the progress is "interrupted" from time to time by allusions to earlier people and events, as brief as five lines and as long as ninety-two. These compact allusions provide a shift from Beowulf's fights with monsters to the more conventional tales of conflicts among humans, and are presented as pauses in the narrative and contrasts with or reflections of Beowulf's character and his deeds. The pace is relaxed and the narrative rich in details, with entertaining interludes like Unferth's challenge and Beowulf's response, and the description of the victory feast after Grendel's death.

The final third of the poem becomes strongly elegiac, an account of Beowulf as an old man fighting his final, futile battle, the end of a long and remarkable life. Worked into this section, not in chronological order but in a natural way, are four accounts of the Geat-Swede conflicts. There are also three accounts of Hygelac's last battle, Beowulf's nostalgic reminiscences, two anonymous speeches which contain some of the most beautiful elegiac verses in English literature, the introduction of Wiglaf, and a long, foreboding speech by an anonymous "messenger" to the Geats awaiting news of Beowulf's fight with the dragon. The handling of time in this section anticipates modern literature and greatly enhances its elegiac quality.

Thus the entire poem is an account of Beowulf's fights with three monsters surrounded by and

interlarded with “digressions,” as they are too often called, which round out the poem and give it that rich background that so annoyed early critics who wished to have *Beowulf* fighting other heroes instead of monsters. It was in response to this sort of criticism that Tolkien delivered his lecture, explaining why the poem is exactly right as it is, and pointing out that the contrast between the Grendel and dragon sections is “essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting, an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death.”

Date of Composition and of the Manuscript

The unique manuscript of *Beowulf*, produced about 1000 A.D., was preserved in ways unknown and eventually included in the great library of Sir Robert Cotton, who died in 1631. This manuscript, copied on vellum by two scribes, was damaged at the top and outer edges by a fire in 1731, which obscured letters and some entire words. But the Icelandic scholar Grimur Thorkelin made a copy of the manuscript in 1787, before the scorched leaves had badly crumbled, and also commissioned a professional copyist ignorant of Old English to make another copy, imitating the Old English insular script, in that same year. The importance of these two copies, and of the early editions of the poem beginning with Thorkelin’s in 1815, is profound, as the reading of any page of Frederick Klaeber’s edition of *Beowulf* will indicate. Though there are some uncertain readings here and there, and a few leaves are badly damaged, a good modern edition presents the poem as about 95 percent sound, a miraculous survivor of the ravages of history.

The manuscript is obviously faithful for the most part to the original composition. The rich language and innovative quality of both poetry and structure indicate that a major talent, strong enough to override the few corruptions and possible interpolations of later scribes, composed the poem pretty much as we have it.

The date of the original composition will be forever debated. In earlier years, most scholars agreed that the poem was composed at some time during the life of Bede, the great Northern English teacher, biographer, and historian who died in 735. However, the supremacy of Mercia (the English Midlands) after Bede’s death, under two successive kings who dominated all of England south of the Humber River, provided the best of poets with powerful patrons, and the later eighth century is therefore favored by some as a likely period for the poem’s composition. Recently an entire book and a book-length anthology of essays have been published indicating that the *Beowulf* poet may have lived at any time between the late seventh century and the early eleventh. The important question is this: When and where lived an Anglo-Saxon king with enough wealth and sophistication to sponsor such a skillful poet as this, who must have been in demand at the best of courts?

The Source and Importance of *Beowulf*

Anglo-Saxon England is curiously viewed by most as a place of warring primitive tribes worshipping pagan gods and dominated by illiterate kings constantly fighting among themselves and drinking the nights away while their unlettered minstrels recited tales of conquest and bloodshed, sheltering in smoky halls strewn about with bones and cracked drinking horns. This may well have been true of some kingdoms from the first arrivals of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes in England around 450 and on down through the final conquest of the Romano-Celtic inhabitants about a century later, but beginning

with the Christianization of Kent in 597 and the ensuing arrival in Northumbria of Celtic Christian missionaries from Wales, Ireland, and Iona, with the establishment of monastic seats of learning under several very literate and sophisticated kings, that picture must be drastically altered.

Anglo-Saxon audiences loved to hear tales of the early North Germanic peoples like the Danes, Swedes, and Geats of the sixth century, just as we enjoy books and movies about Henry VIII and Sir Thomas More, Henry's many wives and his daughter Elizabeth and all the battles and courtly intrigues of the sixteenth century. A poem like *Beowulf*—i.e., long and leisurely, distinguished by tales of the North Germanic Heroic Age—could have been composed at any time between about 650 and the beginning of serious Danish and Norwegian invasions of England after the first third of the ninth century. Northumbria in the seventh century was ruled for a time by two kings, Oswald and his successor, Oswiu, brothers who had been well educated when young by Celtic Christian teachers on the island of Iona. Following them came another educated king, Aldfrith, whose twenty-year reign (685–705) made possible the learning, scholarship, and artistic production of Northumbrian monasteries during the Age of Bede, from the late seventh century through the first third of the eighth. During this period were produced the many fine literary works of Bede, including the first great coordinated history of the European Middle Ages, his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Bede's friend Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne, produced one of the most beautiful illuminated manuscripts of any period anywhere in the world, the Lindisfarne Gospels. During this same period a magnificent stone cross, now preserved at the Ruthwell Church in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, and originally standing some eighteen feet tall, was produced by a master artist, who included, along the margins on two faces of the cross, runic inscriptions which form an early Northern version of one of the finest poems in Old English, "The Dream of the Rood," in which the cross of the Crucifixion speaks, telling its marvelous story.

Immediately following this period, and covering most of the rest of the eighth century, two Mercian kings, Aethelbald and Offa, made their courts the most powerful throughout England south of the Humber, Offa being treated by Charlemagne as a friend and equal worth corresponding with. During the reign of either of these kings, *Beowulf* could have been composed. In fact, from the Age of Bede down to the Viking Age in England (an unlikely time for an English poem praising Danes), a number of kings in various areas of England held courts rich and knowledgeable enough to attract such a man as the *Beowulf* poet.

In addition to the learning and sophistication of several Anglo-Saxon kings, an early-seventh-century cenotaph ship burial in East Anglia, known as the Sutton Hoo burial, has given us an example of the numerous treasures and exquisite artwork to be found at the court of one early king, items too rich and varied to describe here but sufficient to rank him with any king in the Germanic world. Museums throughout England contain a splendid variety of other treasures; literary descriptions and manuscript illuminations add to this picture of royal wealth. And who knows what evidence of the magnificence of Anglo-Saxon courts disappeared after the Battle of Hastings?

The Old English poetry that has survived, most of it in four great manuscripts, is almost all a blend of the old Germanic poetic form with the new Christian teaching that was first composed, according to Bede, by Caedmon in the third quarter of the seventh century. It is much earlier than any other vernacular poetry in medieval Europe and in many ways distinct from the later recorded Icelandic poetry, the only other sizable body of early Germanic poetry that has survived in manuscript. The great variety of length and subject matter of Old English poetry, the more than 30,000 lines that have come down to us, precludes any kind of summary here. It is a noble body of verse, including many poems of great beauty and strength that fully reward the effort required to

learn how to read them.

It was in this tradition that the *Beowulf* poet, innovative though he was, composed his work, and we may imagine the splendor of a court wherein such a poet may have worked. The hall would be hung with rich tapestries, furnished with handsomely wrought benches and trestle tables, distinguished by a “high-seat” inlaid with ivory and burnished with gold, the king’s table graced with imported glass and silverware, elaborate drinking horns and cups of precious metals and stones. The royal family and important members of the king’s retinue would be richly dressed, with brooches, bracelets, necklaces, and armlets of gold and garnets. Fine hawks and dogs and horses, heirloom armor and weapons, saddles and bridles often adorned with ivory and silver, would be a part of this picture. And of course the ever-present minstrel with his harp would be there at the feet of his king, ready to recite from his large repertory when the moment was right.

In the literature of Western Europe, *Beowulf* is by far the earliest poem of such length and distinction in any vernacular language after the fall of Rome. In it we find the earliest references to heroes of such later Icelandic works as the *Völsunga Saga* and the *Hrólfs Saga Kraka*. It is a thoroughly English poem, comparable in technique, language, patristic wisdom, and beauty to shorter poems like “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer,” yet different from and greater than any other Old English poem. *Beowulf* stands at the beginning of English poetry, “between the worlds” as R. W. Chambers said. It salutes the dying of the old and the birth of the new, and belongs to everyone whose native tongue is English.

Religion

The *Beowulf* poet was either a Christian or very familiar with and influenced by Christianity. The very tone of the poem in places, especially in the final third, reflects the Christian patristic influence that pervades much of Old English poetry. But some of the principal characters are historically North Germanic pagans, and much of this tradition is retained by the poet, notably in some of the characteristics of *Beowulf*. The poet’s skill in blending these traditions is one of the most remarkable aspects of his work.

The way in which the poet solves the problem of religion in this heroic-elegiac poem composed for a Christian audience is one thing that leads me to believe that the poem was composed not long after 700. At that time, although the Anglo-Saxons were generally converted to Christianity, they were also strongly aware of their pagan past. Thus the poet, while introducing the idea of only one god, a kind of Old Testament god whose name is spelled exactly as today, does not push things further, makes no mention of Christ or anything else in the New Testament. Also the concepts of Heaven and Hell were ambivalent at that time, especially in a tale of Northern kings who lived in the distant past, and I have not capitalized these words in the translation.

Not one pagan god is ever mentioned. Although the Old English word *wyrd*, akin to Modern High German *werden* and based on a concept of “that which will happen,” appears in the poem, it is used only ten times as a proper noun, and far from being the name of a god, it is rather a kind of enigmatic force—once referred to as “she”—somewhat similar to Fortune in later medieval literature. It is used twice as a verb (to injure or destroy), once as a common noun (fact or deed), and once as an adjective (destined), and it is not capitalized by any modern editor of *Beowulf*. A significant passage, referring to Grendel’s abduction of one of Beowulf’s men, says that Grendel would have carried off even more men “had not wise God and that man’s [Beowulf’s] courage withstood *wyrd*.”

God, by contrast, is mentioned thirty-two times as God and at least sixty times (I have not tried to

count them all) under several other names—Shaper, Wielder, Measurer, Father, Deemer, Glory-King, and Old English words now lost such as *Frea* and *Dryhten*. Though the pagan Germanic tradition is reflected in many ways, one god, named God and introduced through Christianity, is in charge.

Beowulf and the Monsters

Beowulf is obviously a creation of the poet, though partial comparisons have been made between him and somewhat similar characters in folklore and Icelandic sagas. As related to other characters in the poem, he would probably have been born shortly before 500 and died as a very old man. His “fifty-year reign” (like that of Hrothgar and Grendel’s mother) is a poetic cliché.

That Beowulf’s origin is obscure, that he apparently never married and/or produced any children, that he returned alone from the battle that took the life of his king instead of dying by his side in the best Germanic-heroic tradition, that he was almost entirely inactive in the Geat-Swede conflicts, that he seems at times superhuman and at other times merely a remarkable man, that he is such a curious blend of pagan and Christian (compared by some with a Christian knight), that he never appears anywhere else in all the literature of the North—these things are not bothersome or difficult to understand when we realize that a major poet was trying something big and new, and that he created for his work an original character to bring together all of its complex features.

As for the monsters, they were real enough to Anglo-Saxons ten or twelve centuries ago. Grendel and his mother were creatures of evil and darkness, feared by the Anglo-Saxons before and after conversion to Christianity, seen by Christians as descendants of Cain, God’s enemies, lurking in the night outside the firelit halls. The way the poet describes these monsters, with just a few details here and there, somehow makes them more fearful and menacing than any kind of detailed portrait would have done.

The dragon is yet one more indication of the poet’s originality. To quote Tolkien again: “... real dragons, essential both to the machinery and the ideas of a poem or tale, are actually rare. In northern literature there are only *two* that are significant.” One is the third monster in *Beowulf* and the other (which is briefly referred to in *Beowulf*) is found in several Icelandic works, most elaborately in the *Völsunga Saga*. But this dragon was once a man, a brother of Sigurd’s foster father who became a dragon in order to guard a rich treasure and was mortally stabbed by Sigurd, then carried on a lengthy conversation with his slayer before dying. Compare this with the *Beowulf* poet’s dragon and you have once again a sample of the poet’s inventive powers. Dragons were of course familiar to Anglo-Saxons as large flying flame-throwing serpents who traditionally guarded treasures, but nowhere else in Germanic literature is there such a dragon as this.

Old English Verse Forms and This Translation

Old English poetry has no stanzaic form and no rhyme (with the exception of a few later poems) except by accident. It consists of lines which run on to form sentences, each line composed of two half-lines, or verses, with a natural pause between them, so that the sentences may conclude at line-end or between half-lines. There is no set number of syllables per line—in *Beowulf* a normal line contains between eight and twelve. The half-lines are tied together by alliteration of consonants or vowels, any vowel alliterating with any other vowel through an emphatic pronunciation of stressed words that causes a sharp release of breath approximating a consonantal sound.

Each half-line has two strong stresses. Alliteration occurs only on stressed syllables. The first

stress of the second half-line, called the “head-stave,” cannot alliterate with the second stress of that half-line, but it must alliterate with one or both stressed syllables of the first half-line. Recitations of Old English poetry were accompanied in some way by a harplike instrument—indeed, it is called a *hearpe* in Old English—which may have been used to accentuate stresses, possibly to “fill in” for a missing stress in a defective half-line, but there is no way of knowing just how this was done.

Old English half-lines contain clearly defined stress patterns, bunching the two strong stresses at the beginning and then stepping down through secondary to weak, or bunching them both in the middle between weak stresses, or separating the two strong stresses with descending steps through secondary to weak, or approximating the Modern English iambic or trochaic measures. There are five of these patterns with a variation on one, some of them difficult to achieve in Modern English since secondary stress is not as clear or frequent today as it was a thousand years ago. These half-lines, or verses, with their clearly defined rhythmic forms, are the primary building blocks of Old English poetry and derive from a strictly oral tradition of pagan Germanic poetry at a time when there were no manuscripts, when minstrels carried tales in their heads and recited long poems, partly from memory and partly through the use of an oral-formulaic system which permitted them to compose as they went along, drawing upon a large store of “prefabricated” half-lines or entire lines and mixing them with fresh inventions. Some entire lines are pale clichés, adding nothing to the poem, like “on that day of this life” (which occurs three times in *Beowulf*), but they give the minstrel time to think ahead. This is not peculiar to Germanic poetry—such lines are more frequent in the *Odyssey*, another poem derived from an ancient oral tradition, than in *Beowulf*.

Because of the primary importance of the half-lines, which must have been recited slowly and clearly with distinct stresses and a natural pause between them in most cases, they are separated in this translation by a space, as editors print the original. There is often a contrast between both the rhythm and the content of half-lines which also brings them together in a way difficult to describe, and sometimes they seem to float, repeating each other with variation and usually contrasting in rhythm, or acting as brief clauses with an absence of coordinates or subordinates that seems natural because of the pause between them in an oral presentation.

Since I am unaware of any translation of *Beowulf* that makes a serious attempt to imitate the original, I have tried in this translation to accomplish three things—to adhere strictly to the rules of alliteration, to imitate as closely as is practical the stress patterns of Old English half-lines, and to choose Modern English words and compounds that give at least some idea of the strength and radiance of the original while also reflecting the tone of the poem. A few restrictions upon the placement of unstressed syllables and requirements of quantity have been noted by modern scholars, and though these were certainly observed by the best poets, I have relaxed them at times to accommodate the stress patterns of Modern English and occasionally ignored other “rules” for the sake of a clear and forceful verse. I have often given up the secondary stress in one type of half-line (strong-secondary-weak-strong) because I had to choose between an awkwardly contrived verse and good words, and I usually chose the good words. Also, some “formulaic” half-lines are lacking a syllable when translated into Modern English (e.g., “Beowulf spoke” and “Ecgtheow’s son”) because I have preferred their simplicity to syllable counting.

Old English poetry cannot always be translated line by line, though this is sometimes possible if the words survive in Modern English. I have therefore not hesitated to translate words or half-lines from one line and place them two or three lines below or above in order to achieve the best effect. *Beowulf* is a poem, and what I have tried to produce here is another poem, closely reflective of the original. A line like *tholode thrythswyth thegnsorge dreah* cannot be literally translated into prose or

verse with anything like the effect of the original. It literally means “he suffered strength-strong thane-sorrow he suffered,” so that *thrythswyth*, a superb compound invented by the poet and composed of noun and adjective, is completely lost, and only the second compound may be salvaged. I have therefore translated “stooped in shadows stunned with thane-sorrow”—not literal but (I hope) decent poetry. I have also freely invented my own compounds, always attentive to both meaning and Old English poetic form, and have never misrepresented in any important way what is said or done in the poem.

I have respected the Old English spelling of names to retain the flavor of the original, but have stuck to one spelling throughout. I have silently compensated for manuscript corruption and destruction and have chosen what I consider to be the best interpretation of perplexing words, phrases, and sometimes entire sentences.

I have reluctantly inserted into the translation, at the beginning and in other places throughout, a few prose explanations of obscure passages that are important to the poem and were obviously clear enough to an Anglo-Saxon audience. I can think of no other device for solving this problem except the use of footnotes, which I dislike, or rewriting, expanding, and clarifying these passages, which would violate the poem and destroy their effect.

My debt to those who came before me is profound. The translation is based upon five modern editions of *Beowulf*—those of F. Klaeber, C. L. Wrenn, E. V. K. Dobbie, A. J. Wyatt as revised by R. W. Chambers, and the standard German edition by three successive editors referred to as the Heyne–Schücking–von Schaubert edition. And now I have the new Mitchell-Robinson edition as well. My thinking over the years has been influenced by scores of essays, monographs, and books. Old English scholarship during the past century has been magnificent, and I would be lost without it.

One request: If readers will pause from time to time and read a few lines aloud, slowly and emphatically and with slight pauses between half-lines, they may find a faint echo of what a recitation probably sounded like, though the harp is forever silenced.

In “The Making of *Beowulf*,” an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Durham in 1961, G. V. Smithers said that “English literature begins with a masterpiece, which has no comparable Germanic antecedents in the same literary kind or form.” *Beowulf* is indeed the first masterpiece in English, and it also had no followers, Germanic or otherwise, in the same literary kind or form. As I have said elsewhere, it seems to me that the poet is here presenting his personal elegy for the demise of an old and in many ways admirable tradition at the moment when it was giving in to and merging its best qualities with a new one. There is no other poem quite like it, and this translation has been done in honor of the nameless poet who created it, in an attempt to make his poem live again for the modern reader.



SCYLD SCEFING, *the first name mentioned in the poem, seems to come from the mists of legend.* Later in the poem, a Danish king named Heremod, who died without an heir, is mentioned. Thus the mysterious arrival of Scyld, an unknown child drifting ashore in a boat, began a new dynasty. Yrse, the fourth child of Healfdene (whose name, not in the poem, is supplied from Norse tradition), was married to Onela, a Swedish king who plays a part in the final third of the poem.

The ominous words “Gables ... waiting for hate-fire” refer to another Norse tradition, not developed in *Beowulf*, of a long-lasting feud between Danes and Heathobards. According to this tradition, Hrothgar marries his daughter to Ingeld, the new young king of the Heathobards, but this merely postpones hostilities, and the Heathobards attack, burning Heorot, though they are finally vanquished. Upon Hrothgar’s death, his nephew Hrothulf takes the throne and kills Hrethric, Hrothgar’s elder son. Hrothgar’s younger son Hrothmund and his other nephew Heorowearð are also in line for the throne. These four people are merely referred to in the poem with portentous overtones.

The descent of Grendel and other monsters from Cain after the biblical flood is explained in the early Middle Ages by the corruption of Noah’s son Ham, whose offspring continued the breed of monsters begun with Cain.

One important note for pronunciation: The initial consonant cluster “sc-” should be pronounced as “sh” in “show.” Thus “Scyld Scefing” (above) should be pronounced like “Shyld Shefing.”



I

Yes! We have heard of years long vanished
how Spear-Danes struck sang victory-songs
raised from a wasteland walls of glory.
When Scyld Scefing shamed his enemies
measured meadhalls made them his own
since down by the sea-swirl sent from nowhere
the Danes found him floating with gifts
bound to their shore. Scyld grew tall then
roamed the waterways rode through the lands
10 till every strongman each warleader
sailed the whalepaths sought him with gold
there knelt to him. That was a king!
Time brought to him birth for his people
a gift to the Danes who had grieved too long
cold and kingless—the Keeper of men
shortened their longing with Scyld's man-child
sunlight for darkness. To this son the Wielder
Life-Lord of men loaned a king's heart
banishing the ache of a barren meadhall.
20 Beaw was renowned his name went traveling
sung wide and far by seafaring minstrels.
So should a prince show his heartstrength
by his father's side share gold-treasures
forge friend-warriors to fight against darkness
in his last winters. With love and action
shall a man prevail in memory and song.
At the hour shaped for him Scyld took his leave
a kingly departure to the King's embrace.
30 They bore their savior back to the sea
his bones unburned as he bade them do
child of the mist who chased their mourning
loved and led them through the long winters.
Ready at seashore stood a ring-prowed ship
icy and eager armed for a king.
They braced him then, once bright with laughter
shaper of hall-songs, on the ship's middle-board
hard by the mast. From hills and valleys
rings and bracelets were borne to the shore.
40 No words have sung of a wealthier grave-ship
bright with war-weapons ballasted with gold
swords and ring-mail rich for drifting
through the foaming tide far from that land.
Their lord was laden for long sailpaths

with love and sorrow splendid with gifts
for those who had ferried him far through the mist
once sent them a sailor strange treasure-child.

50 At last they hung high upon the mast
a golden banner then gave him to the sea
to the mounding waves. Their mindgrief was great
dark with mourning. Men cannot know
cannot truthfully say—singers of tales
sailors or gleemen—who gathered him in.

Then Beaw held them banished war-ravens
sailed through the summers strengthening peace
like his father before him known far abroad
a king to contend with. Time brought a son
high-minded Healfdene who held in his turn
through long glory-years the life-line of Scyld.

60 Then four strong ones came forth from his queen
woke to the world warmed the gift-hall—
Heorogar and Hrothgar Halga the good
Yrse the fair one Onela's hall-queen
that battle-wise Swede's bed-companion.

Hrothgar was beckoned born for a kingdom
shaped as a lord loved by his hall-thanes
who bore him high as boys became men
and men grew mighty. His mind told him
to raise a throne-house rarest in Denmark
mightiest meadhall in measure and strength

70 that the oldest among them ever had beheld
to give freely what God had provided
share his wealth there shape borderlands
love and lead them in light against darkness.

Then, as I heard, help came crowding
from hills and glens hewers of timber
trimmers and weavers. It towered at last
highest of them all—Heorot he named it
who with words wielded the world of the Danes.

80 Hrothgar was king kept his promise
gave from his gift-throne goldgifts and peace.
Gables were crossed capped with horn-beams,
waiting for hate-fire high anger-flames.

It was yet too soon for swordswings to clash
not yet the day for dark throne-battle
a blood-minded son and his bride's father.

90 Then an alien creature cold wanderer
could no longer endure from his dark exile
bright bench-laughter borne to the rafters
each night in that hall. The harp sounded
the poet's clear song. He sang what he knew
of man's creation the Measurer's work:

“He shaped the earth opened the heavens
rounded the land locked it in water
then set skyward the sun and the moon
lights to brighten the broad earthyard
beckoned the ground to bear gardens

of limbs and leaves—life He created
of every kind that quickens the earth.”

They lived brightly on the benches of Heorot
caught up in laughter till a creature brought them
fear in the night an infernal hall-guest.

Grendel circled sounds of the harp
prowled the marshes moors and ice-streams
forests and fens. He found his home
with misshapen monsters in misery and greed.

The Shaper banished him unshriven away
with the kin of Cain killer of his blood.

The Measurer fashioned a fitting revenge
for the death of Abel drove his slayer
far from mankind and far from His grace.

Cain sired evil cunning man-killers
banished from heartlove born in hatred
giants and fiends jealous man-eaters
long without penance. God paid them for that.

Then Grendel prowled, palled in darkness,
the sleep-warm hall to see how the Danes
after beer and feasting bedded down for rest.

He found inside slumbering warriors
unready for murder. Bereft of remorse

from love exiled lost and graceless
he growled with envy glared above them
towering with rage. From their rest he snared
thirty hall-thanes loped howling away
gloating with corpses galloping the moors
back to his cavern for a cold banquet.

At dawning of day when darkness lifted
Grendel's ravage rose with the sun.

The waking Danes wailed to the heavens
a great mourning-song. Their mighty ruler

lord of a death-hall leaned on his grief
stooped in shadows stunned with thane-sorrow
bent to the tracks of his baneful houseguest
no signs of mercy. His mind was too dark
nightfall in his heart. There was no need to wait
when the sun swung low for he slaughtered again
murdered and feasted fled through dawnmist
damned to darkness doomed with a curse.

It was easy to find those who elsewhere slept
sought distant rest reached for night-cover

found beds with others when the bad news came
the lifeless messages left by that caller
murderous hall-thane. Men still walking
kept from the shadows no shame in their hearts.

Now a lone rage-ruler reigned through the night
one against all till empty and still
stood the long meadhall. Too long it stood
twelve cold winters wound in despair—

the lord of the Danes dreamed of his lost ones
watched for a sign. Then it widely was known

in dark Denmark that death lived with them

when weeping heartsongs wailed of Grendel
Hrothgar's hall-monster hell's banquet-guest—

lashed by hunger he longed for nightfall
with no pause or pity, poison in his heart.
No plans for payment passed through that mind
money or goldgifts remorse for slaughter—
no somber mourners sued for revenge
death-settlement from that demon's hands.

160

He raged at them all envious hell-fiend
in dark death-shadow doomed young and old
trapped and snared them trailed in nightshade
cloud-misted moors—no man can follow
where God's enemies glide through the fog.
Dawn brought to them blood-signs of rage—
outcast from grace Grendel went prowling
the empty hall-benches. Heorot received him
in cold darkness damned to his rule.

170

Yet he never could greet the peaceful gift-throne
love and bounty life-joy and gold
for the old betrayal outlawed him there.

It was long despair for the lord of the Danes
a breaking of mind. Many a counselor
gathered to whisper groped for messages
ways to escape those woeful night-visits.
Some made promises prayed to idols
swore to honor them asked them for help
safety from murder. Such was their custom
the hope of heathens hell-thoughts in mind.
They ignored the Measurer Maker of heaven

180

Shaper of glory shamed by terror
unable to praise or pray to the Father
wish for his guidance. Woe unto those
with ill in their hearts hopeless and doomed
forcing their souls to the fire's welcome
praying to names that will never help them
praise without hope. Happier are they
who seek after deathday the Deemer of men
free their soul-bonds to the Father's embrace.

190

With sinking heart the son of Healfdene
endlessly waited wept for an answer
no hope for relief. Too long and merciless
slaughter and greed seemed to his people
narrow and endless nightbale and tears.

In the home of the Geats Hygelac's thane
gathered the stories of Grendel's torment
a good man and strong strongest of all
in that broad kingdom born for deliverance
shaped for that hour. He ordered a boat,
lithe wave-cutter, loudly proclaimed
200 he would seek the Battle-Danes sail the wave-swells
hail their king there kindle their hearts.
Though they loved him life-seasoned elders
answered his courage urged him onwards

gazed at the weather wished for the sun.
With care this champion chose his spearmen
culled from the Geats their keenest fighters
good men and faithful. Fifteen in all
they sought their seacraft strode to the cliffs
followed their chief to the fallow waves.

210 Fast by the headland their hard-keeled boat
waited for westering. Winding in swirls
the sea met the sand. They stored their weapons
bright shields gleaming spears and helmets
strong war-weapons. Shoved through the breakers
the stout-bound wood slid from the land.

They flew on the water fast by the wind blown
sail flecked with foam skimmed the waverolls
through day and darkness. Dawn grayed the sky
and the hour grew near when over the wave-tops
220 the coiled bowsprit brought them a sign.

A rising of land reached towards the sun
shining seacliffs steep rock-pillars
stood before them. The sail grew limp
shallows lapped at them shore-sand received them.
The Weather-Geats waded walked their ship up
lashed it to land. Linked steel-corselets
clinked and glistened. They gave thanks then
to the God of them all for guiding them safely.

230 Watching above them the warden of the shores
glimpsed from the cliff-top a glinting of armor
as they bore from their boat bright shields and spears
rich with war-weapons. He wrenched his thoughts
groped within his mind who these men might be.

He roused his horse then rode to the seashore—
Hrothgar's cliff-guardian heaved up his spear
shook it to the sky shouted his challenge:

“Who might you be in your burnished mailcoats
strutting with weapons? Who steered this warboat
deep-running keel across the wave-swells

240 here against this shore? I assure you now
I've held this guard-post hard against sailors
watched over Denmark down through the years
that no hateful shipband might harbor unfought.

Never have boatmen beached more openly
shield-bearing thanes unsure of your welcome
hoisting no signal to hail peace-tokens
friendship to the Danes. I doubt that I've challenged
a loftier shieldman than your leader there

250 hale in his war-gear—no hall-lounger that
worthied with weapons—may his wit not belie
so handsome a swordman. I will hear quickly
first where you came from before you move on
you possible pirates pushing further
into Danish land. Now let me advise you
horseless sailors hear my counsel
my heartfelt words: Haste will be best
in letting me know the land you came from.”

The ablest among them answered him clearly
lifted up his spear unlocked his wordhoard:
260 “We are mindful of manners men of the Geats

Lord Hygelac’s hearth-companions.
My father wandered far through this world
earned his way there Ecgtheow by name
survived many winters wartime and peace
till age wearied him. He won many battles
named by Northmen in nations abroad.
Now we have come here with kind intentions
to seek out your lord son of Healfdene
victor of men. Advise us well!

270 We bear to your lord leader of the Danes
a helpful message—but we hold no secrets
now that we’re here. You know if it’s true
stories told to us sorrowful tales
evil in Denmark some demon or giant
a devilish creature who in darkness of night
roams the moorpaths murder in his heart
hell’s messenger. To Hrothgar I offer
words to consider serious counsel
how this wise ruler may win over deathdays
280 if an end to sorrows ever will come forth
a taming of torment time for revenge
healing of heartbreak in this helpless land.
Unless this happens as long as he rules
darkness and bloodgrief will doom his people
banished forever from that best of halls.”

The coastguard replied proud horse-soldier
no fear in his words: “One way or another
a sharp warden can weigh carefully
words and intentions if he’s worthy in thought.
290 I’ve heard in your speech heartstrong fealty
to the lord of the Danes. I’ll lead you now
with your spears and helmets to the hall above—
I’ll tell my companions to tend to your ship
guard carefully against all comers
this newly tarred vessel nestled in sand
to hold it in trust till the time comes round
when homeward it bears the best among you
brings back alive beloved warriors
on this ring-prowed ship riding foamwaves
300 back to the Weather-Geats wondering for news.”

They marched forward then mounted the headland
left their keel-ship lashed to beach-anchor
roped to the sand. Around their mask-helmets
golden boar-heads beamed to the sun
flashed a war-gleam on fire-hardened steel
signaled their weapons. They strode together
crested the sea-wall till they saw glinting
that timber-strong hall trimmed bright with gold
tall horn-gables towering in the sun
310 high to the heavens Hrothgar’s gift-hall.
Its light shone forth over land and sea.

The coastguard paused pulled his horse round
stopped by the roadside studied them well
hefted his spear hailed them again

paused for a moment with these parting words:
“Fare you well now—may the Father almighty
hold you from harm help from this moment
teach you the way. I turn to the sea
back to the beaches bastions of Denmark.”

320 The stone-cobbled road ran on before them
as they marched together. Their mailcoats glistened
laced by smith-hands—linked steel-jackets
clinked an armor-song as they came to the hall
strode in their war-gear straight to the door.
They settled broadshields bright by the wall
rounded and hardened by ringing forge-hammers.

They bent to the benches breast-coats in rows
life-guarding corselets. They leaned ash-spears
ranked by the door reaching above them
330 gray-tipped treelimb. Geats rested there
wealthy in weapons. A warrior came forth
eager for news-words asked who they were:
“From where have you brought those broad-rimmed shields
gray-gleaming mailcoats good mask-helmets
such a heap of armor? I am Hrothgar’s
counselor and friend. How far have you traveled
crossed the wave-rolls to come to this door?

My wits tell me you are welcome callers
in full friendship no fugitives with you.”
340 The chief of the Geats gave him an answer
tall and helmeted taught him with words
the meaning of his men: “We are mighty Hygelac’s
board-companions—Beowulf is my name.
I have come to greet your great people-king
to tell your Dane-lord tidings of hope
explain to your king if he plans to receive us
why we sailed westward to this splendid meadhall.”

Wulfgar replied watchful Northman
son of the Wendels wearing their strength
350 no hurry in his mind: “I will hail my chief,
mindful of murder, mix words with him
greet the gift-throne give him your name
since you’ve come to greet him with grand helpwords.
I will step to the high-seat stand before him
bear his answer back to you here.”

He entered the hall where Hrothgar sorrowed,
gray in his mindthoughts grief cloaking him,
strode to the gift-throne stepped before him
skilled in the customs of kings of the North.
360 Wulfgar spoke then words mixed with light:
“Here we have strangers hailing from far
sailing the gulfstreams from Geatish country.
The greatest among them as I gauge the man
is known as Beowulf. They bring hope-tidings

wish to share words wait peacefully
to greet you, my lord. Do not leave them there
but give them welcome gladman Hrothgar!
Their weapons are stout steel boar-helmets
gleaming with gold. Their Geatish king
is a prosperous man a mighty ruler.”

Hrothgar answered helm of the Danes:
“I knew their chieftain a child long ago.
His father was Ecgtheow who found his wife
in the hall of the Geats where Hrethel gave him
his only daughter. This day his son
has come to find me a friend of his youth.

Sailors have told me, sea-messengers
ferrying gifts from Götland to Denmark
with thankful tokens, that this tall grappler
can grind as strongly in the grip of his hand
as thirty war-thanes. I think that the Measurer
Maker of us all has urged him here,
sent to the Danes, I dare to imagine,
relief from Grendel. For this great mercy
I promise him now priceless heirlooms.

Make haste, my friend, fetch them in here
all of them together to greet all of us,
tell them clearly that they come as lamplight
to darkness in Heorot.” To the door he turned
Wulfgar the Wendel wove them a speech:

“My lord has told me my beloved hearth-king
chief of the East-Danes that he honors your kin.
You have come in time, the tide has brought you
like welling waves welcome to his heart.
Come forth with me in your corselets of steel
your hard mask-helmets where Hrothgar awaits you.
Leave your shield-boards your spears by the benches
until you have traded talk with my lord.”

Some remained there stayed by their weapons
held them from harm. Their hero rose then,
around him his thanes ready for orders.
They walked together Wulfgar before them
under Heorot’s roof helmets gleaming
stood at the hearth hard by the gift-throne.
Beowulf spoke then, burnished mailcoat
work of wonder-smiths winking in firelight:

“Hail to you, Hrothgar! I am Hygelac’s thane
nephew and friend. I have known much peril
grim death-dangers. Grendel’s ravages
came to my ears in my own homeland.

Sailors have said that this strong meadhall
with high gold-gables this Hall of the Hart
stands empty and idle when evening-light fades
when the dark sky lowers and light thins to gray.
My people have urged me, elders and youth
best of Weather-Geats brothers of my heart,
to cross the gulfway come straight to you
offer you my strength stand by your side.

They saw for themselves as I surfaced from ambush
420 broke through the waves to the winds of sunrise
how I crushed water-sprites cracked their blood-teeth
shoved them deathwards down by the sea-floor
fought them by night in narrow-dark waters

on the sandy ground. Grendel is next—
I will settle alone this sorrowful feud
this baleful business. I beg of you now,
lord of the Ring-Danes royal man-leader,
a small favor-gift from sovereign to friend—
do not refuse me now that I'm here

430 come from afar to cancel your problem—
I and my men no more than this war-band
will cleanse your Heorot close out this evil.
I also have heard that this hellish monster
with careless strength carries no weapons.
I will therefore swear in honor of Hygelac—
to keep my protector proud in his heart—

I'll bear no swordblade no shield to that fight
no boar-head helmet—with my handgrip only
I will fight this fiend find his life-core
440 man against monster. Tomorrow you will find
at rising of light the Ruler's judgment.

If this demon wins no doubt he will banquet
on bodies of Geats gorge with all of us
swill and swallow snatch our lives away
munch on our bones. Do not mourn for me
or shame your heart in shadows of defeat
if he cracks my bones bends me deathwards
hauls me away hoping to taste me
slash me to morsels with murder in his heart
450 staining the moors. Do not sorrow for long
for my lifeless body lost and devoured.

But send to Hygelac if struggle takes me
this best of battle-shrouds breast-protector
greatest of corselets good Hrethel's gift
Weland's hand-smithing. Wyrð is determined!"

Hrothgar answered helm of the Danes:
"Beowulf my friend you have brought from home
a gesture of honor joining with us now.

Your father once caused the cruelest of feuds—
460 his hands emptied Heatholaf's lifeblood
a man of the Wylfingas. The Weather-Geats then
dared not hold him for the harm he caused.
From there he sought the South-Danes' country—
over angry waves the winds delivered him.

I first ruled then the realm of my people
held in my youth a young kingdom
homeland of the Danes—Heorogar was dead
my older brother born of Healfdene
borne to the grave—he was better than me!

470 I managed that feud fixed it with payment
sent to the Wylfingas sailors with gifts
saved your good father with fine peace-tokens.

It wounds me to say weary with mourning
aching with grief how Grendel comes calling
each twilight in Heorot tortures us all
with nightblack murders. My men are fewer
some carried away—wyrð has swept them
into Grendel’s grasp. God could easily
stem this heart-sickness sweep it away.

480 Often my hall-thanes hearts strong with beer
bold in their ale-cups boasted in firelight
that they would linger lie here in waiting
for Grendel’s ravaging ready with swordswings.
Then was this meadhall at morning’s raven-call
dark with their doom as the day shoved forth,
benches and bolsters black with battle-gore
hall-rafters trembling. Heorot grew cold then
stronghearted warriors were snatched into night.

490 But sit now to banquet bear us good news
tell us good tidings in time as you wish.”
Benches were bared the beer-hall made roomy
Geats were gathered together with all.
There the stern-hearted settled by the fire
welcome and ready. The warden of ale-cups
brought to their hands the bright hall-drink
taught them greetings. At times the minstrel
touched his harpstrings. They were happy together
a great band of them Geats with the Danes.

UNFERTH (meaning “discord” or “nonsense”) is a complex character who is twice called a *thyle* (“orator” or “jester”) and sits at Hrothgar’s feet, a position of counselors or jesters or poets. Here he is the traditional “court challenger,” enabling Beowulf to establish his credentials as a monster killer and giving him license to insult both Unferth and the Danes with impunity. Beowulf calls him a fratricide who will suffer either “in hell” or “in the hall,” depending on how the manuscript is interpreted, and it is later said that he was “not honorable towards his kin in swordplay.” This may mean that he found himself serving one lord and his brothers another, or he may have refused to support his brothers in battle. In any case, Unferth is well tolerated by the Danes and lends his respected sword to a grateful Beowulf.

Before and after the killing of Grendel, Hrothgar leaves Heorot to sleep in his “bower,” an outbuilding within the palisade compound characteristic of many Anglo-Saxon “burgs.”

500 Then up spoke Unferth Ecglað’s swordson
held to his station at Hrothgar’s feet
unbound battle-runes. Beowulf’s errand
boasting of sea-strength burned in his heart—
never would he grant greater adventures
on land or sea to sailors or hall-thanes
than he had survived, hale sword-champion:
“Are you that Beowulf who with Breca swam
on the broad sea-swell struggling together
proud wave-wrestlers wagering your lives
with reckless boasting risking for praise
510 deep water-death? Not one counselor
friend or enemy could force you to cancel

that sorrowful swim—shipless wanderers
rowing with your hands reaching for salt-swells
measuring the sea-road with stroking arms
embracing the ocean broad water-fields
wintry with waves. You worked at your folly
for seven nightfalls—he outswam you there
stronger than you. The sea at dawning
heaved him ashore on Heatho-Raemas' ground.

520 He found his way then fared to his home
beloved country land of the Brondingas
proud timber-hall where his people waited.
That son of Beanstan beat you at swimming
bettered your boasting brave sea-warrior.
Now I expect, proud though you swagger,
brave at battle-rush bragging as you go,
a grimmer contest with Grendel here
if you dare sleep now in this darkened hall.”
Beowulf spoke then son of Ecgtheow:

530 “Unferth my friend you find much to say
eased with beer-cups all about Breca
his seafaring ways. I say to you now
I was greater in swim-strength gliding through waves
longer with arm-strokes than my lagging friend.
We boasted together—boys eagering
young in judgment yearning for renown
game for water-wolves—that we would gamble
lives against the sea loud ocean winds.

540 With naked swords we slashed through the waves
ready with warblades for wandering whales
dark sea-monsters. No swifter than me
could Breca swim there—I stayed beside him
unwilling to leave him alone against all.
Through five nightfalls we floated and swam
on the ice-hard waves till an angry sea-flood
broke out above us—blackening sky
and freezing northwinds forced us apart
towering salt-swells struck between us.

550 Strange sea-creatures surfaced around me—
the mailcoat I wore woven with gold
hard and hand-locked held me from death
laced by wonder-smiths linked against carnage.
To the deep sea-floor something pulled me
hard gripfingers hauled me to sand
with grappling-tight claws—it was granted to me
to reach this devil rush him to sleep
with sharp sword-point—swift blade-slashing
strong in my hand haled him deathwards.

560 Then more came at me many a water-sprite
seagoing demons—I served them all
with quick sword-thrusts sent them to hell.
They missed their supper sea-bottom banquet
squatting on the sand serving their hunger
with my tasty corpse cold ocean-feast.
By gray dawnlight lapped with salt-foam

rolled by tidewaves they rested on land
sleepened by swordswings—the sailpath was cleared
sun-bright waterways washed of their blood.

Light from the East lifted the storm-clouds
570 God's bright beacon burnished the sea—
looming headlands leaned high above,
wind-scoured cliffwalls. Wyrð often spares
an undoomed man when his mind-strength prevails.

With sword's edges I sent into death
nine sea-monsters. I have not yet heard
of a harder struggle under heaven's archway
a riskier night in narrow ocean-streams.

From dark water-death waves bore me up
weary of swimming—the sea lifted me
580 led me to shore in the land of Finns.

I have never heard tell tales of yourself
strong with swordplay swimming through nightwaves
with gnashing sea-demons. Never has Breca
fought through darkness in deep waterways—
and you were never known for such deeds
nothing to brag of renowned as you are
for killing your brothers bringing them down,
your own blood-kin. You'll answer for that
wandering in hell though your wit be strong.

590 I'll say one thing son of Ecglaf—
never would Grendel grieve all of you
mangle your hearts with murder in Heorot
torture your lord in this tame meadhall
if your courage held strong as you claim it does.

Grendel has learned through long winters—
no need to bother with brave Shield-Danes
no interruptions of his nightly visits.
He takes what he needs no one stopping him
finds no contest with cowering Danes

600 snares and slashes safe in Heorot
owning you all. But I'll show him
sooner than he knows a new kind of battle
with men of the Geats. On the morning after
when southern sunlight shines on this hall
we will lift our meadcups to merciful peace
bright bench-laughter banishing your grief.”

Grief-heavy Hrothgar murder-stunned king
heard in those words hard promises
news of deliverance from long heartbreak
610 found in Beowulf fair morning-thoughts.

Laughter and song leapt to the rafters
warm welcome-words. Then Wealththeow came forth
folk-queen of the Danes daughter of Helmingas
Hrothgar's bedmate. She hailed all of them
spoke her peace-words stepped to the gift-throne
fetched to her king the first ale-cup
warmed his mind-chill wished darkness away
from the tall high-seat—he took from her hands
the gleaming cupful gave her his thanks.

620 Through the high meadhall went Hrothgar's queen
offering hall-joy to old and to young
with rich treasure-cups till time brought her
where Beowulf sat. She bore him a cup
with gold-gleaming hands held it before him
graciously greeted the Geats' warleader
gave thanks to God for granting her will
sending her mercy a man to believe in
hope from abroad. He held the meadcup
high in his hands hailed the queen there
630 brought to Wealhtheow battle-strong words.
Beowulf spoke son of Ecgtheow:
"I swore to myself when I sailed from home
mounted my ship with my men around me
that I alone would ease your heartgrief
settle this feud here or fall deathwards
in Grendel's grasp. I'll give you his lifeblood
deliver his fiend-soul or finish my days
here in Heorot high treasure-hall."
His words were welcome to Wealhtheow's heart
640 that bountiful boast—then back with her lord
the proud folk-queen found her station.
Cheers from the benches chased night-shadows
strong warrior-songs soared through the hall
rose to the rafters till ready for sleep
Healfdene's son heavy with thane-grief
yearned for evening-rest. Years had taught him
that Grendel roamed raging with envy
Heorot on his mind from the moment that sunrise
flushed towards the sky till final nightshades
650 dark with shadow-shapes shoved across the meadows
wound around Heorot. Hall-feasters rose.
Their weary war-king wished for Beowulf
luck in the night left him the gift-throne
that great meadhall gave him farewell:
"Never have I offered to any other man,
from the first moment I found shield-strength,
this hall of the Danes house of our nation.
Have now and hold these havoc-stained walls
remember your strength stand against darkness
660 with luck and courage. You will lack for nothing
if you risk this nightfall and rise with the sun."
He left the hall then Healfdene's son
lord of the Shield-Danes beloved treasure-king
went to his bedrest Wealhtheow beside him
to comfort his sleep. The King of glory
granted for that night a guard against helldeath
a strong hall-warden holding in darkness
a keen house-watch for the king of Heorot.
The Geats' champion gathered his men
670 matched against evil the Measurer's strength.
He stripped off his armor steel-meshed mailcoat
gilded mask-helmet gold-handled sword
set them aside to serve him elsewhere

rich war-weapons wonder-smiths' handwork.
He kindled their courage with keen boastwords

as they bent to bedrest in that best of halls:

"No meaner am I in mortal combat
grim hand-wrestling than Grendel himself.

I will not send him to sleep with my blade
carve out his life though I could easily.

He has learned nothing of linden-shield play
fighting with armor fearless though he be
in dark thane-murder—on this dangerous night
we'll have no swordplay if he seeks me here
no clear weapon-fight—then the wise Deemer
will show his mercy the Shaper of all
will measure us both, bring judgment here."

He bent to his bolster Beowulf the Geat
put his head to rest—around him his warriors
steelhearted sailors settled down to sleep.

Not one believed they would leave Heorot
sail once again seek out their homeland
the known meadows of their native country.
Too many stories of that tall wine-hall
emptied of Danes by dark night-slaughter
had found their ears. But the Father of men
wove them battle-speed—Weather-Geats prevailed
reprieved from hate-death hailed to victory
by the strength of one saved from farewell
by a tight handgrip. It truly is known
that God manages men of this earth.

He slipped through the darkness under deep nightpall
sliding through shadows. Shield-warriors rested
slumbering guardians of that gabled hall—
all except one. That wandering spirit
could never drag them to cold death-shadow
if the world's Measurer wished to stop him.

(A waking warrior watched among them
anger mounting aching for revenge.)

He moved through the mist past moors and ice-streams
Grendel gliding God's wrath on him
simmering to snare some sleeping hall-thanes
trap some visitors in that tall gift-house.

He moved under cloudbanks crossed the meadowlands
till the wine-hall towered tall gold-gables
rising in night-sky. Not for the first time
he came to Heorot Hrothgar's gift-hall—
never had he come craving a blood-feast
with worse slaughter-luck waiting there inside.

He came to the hall hungry for man-flesh
exiled from joy. The ironbound door
smith-hammered hinges sprang at his touch—
raging then for gore he gripped in his hand-vise
the ruined bolt-work wrenched it away
leapt into the hall loomed with blood-rage
aching with life-lust—from his eyes shone forth

a fearful glowering fire-coals smoldering.
Near him he spied sleeping together
close war-brothers waiting peacefully

730 prime for plucking. He exploded with fury
growled with greed-hunger glared all around him
burning to separate bodies from life-breath
drain blood-vessels before breaking of day.
His luck left him on that last slaughter-night—
no more after sunrise would he murder and run.
Wakeful and watching wonder in his mind
Hygelac's nephew held to his bedrest
anxious to measure that monster's strength.

740 Nor did that thief think about waiting
but searched with fire-eyes snared a doomed one
in terminal rest tore frantically
crunched bonelockings crammed blood-morsels
gulped him with glee. Gloating with his luck
he finished the first one his feet and his hands
swallowed all of him. He stepped closer
groped with claw-hands grabbed the next one—
the watchful Geat grabbed back at him
gripped with his fingers that great demon-hand
tightened his grasp tugged steadily.

750 Soon that fen-stalker found himself caught
grasped and twisted by a greater handgrip
than any he had known in the earth's regions
iron finger-clamps—into his mind
fear came nudging—nowhere could he move.
His thoughts yearned away he wished for his mere-den
devil's company—doubt pulled at him
a new sensation slid into his mind.

Then Hygelac's thane held to his boasting
mindful of his speech stood quickly then
760 tightened his fist—fingers crackled
Grendel pulled back Beowulf followed.
That dark wanderer wished for more room
to be on his way back to the moor-hills
flee to the fens. He felt his knuckles
crushed in that grip. A grim visitor
that fate-marked fiend found in Heorot.

The hall thundered—to hovering Danes
safe hut-dwellers sounds of that battle
clattered and roared. They raged together
770 warrior and guest—the walls rumbled.
With great wonder the wine-hall survived
twin horn-gables trembling with combat
towering high above—it held steadily
inside and out with iron log-bonds
forged by smith-hammers. The floor shuddered
strong mead-benches sailed to the walls
burnished banquet-seats bounced and clattered.

Hrothgar's wisemen hallowed counselors
had never believed that a living creature
780 might break Heorot bring down the walls—

only fire's embrace flames' greediness
could swallow that hall. Storm-sounds of death
rocked the horn-gables hammered the roof—

shivering Danefolk shook with hell-fear
heard through the walls a wailing sorrow.
God's demon-foe ground his blood-teeth
howled to be gone home to the ice-streams
far from that hall. Hygelac's thane
strongest mortal mightiest of hand

790 locked that hell-fiend hard within his grasp.
He found no reason to free that monster
spare him to flee far across the moors
nor did he consider that sinful life
useful to anyone. Anxious for their leader
men of the Geats grabbed treasure-swords
lifted them high to help their champion
fight for his life with file-hardened edges.

They were not prepared for this new hand-battling
those hard-swinging swordmen hewing with steel-bites
800 slashing about them with shield-breaking cuts
seeking that fiend-soul—they fought without knowing
that the choicest of blades champions' war-weapons
were helpless to harm that hell's messenger.

He had cast his spell on keenest thane-weapons
finest treasure-swords though his time was short—
that final night-visit finished his hall-raids
destiny struck his damned hell-soul
banished it forever past boundaries of grace.

810 Then that giant ravager rejected by God
marked with murder measured by his sins
finally conceived in his fiend's mindthoughts
that his loathsome body would bear no more.

Hygelac's thane held fast to him
tightened his grip—Grendel yearned away
his arm stretched thin thronging with pain—
a great death-wound gaped in his shoulder
sinew-bonds weakened snapped viciously
bonelockings burst. To Beowulf there
victory was granted. Grendel fled then

820 sickened with death slouched under fen-slopes
to his joyless home no hope for his life—
he knew at last the number of his days.
To the Danes' misery a dawning of mercy
rose from that battle, bright deliverance.

Heorot was cleansed healed of thane-slaughter
aching morning-grief, emptied of murder
by that tall visitor—victory was bright
joy to his heart. He held to his promise,
evening boastwords, banished from that hall
830 dark sorrow-songs consoled the Danes
for long torture-years terror in the night
an empty meadhall from evening till dawn.

He hailed the sunrise hoisted a signal
a clear token-sign that terror was dead

nailed Grendel's arm that great handgrip
near the high gable-point of Heorot's roof.

By morning's light many a warrior
gathered watchfully by the gift-hall's door.
Chieftains and followers from far and from near

840 gazed at that wonder grisly monster-arm
hand and knife-claws high death-trophy.
Grendel's life-loss gladdened the Danes
who followed his footprints where he fled to his death
left his sorrow-tracks staining the moors
went back to the mere bleak monster-home
teeming with nicors tomb of the damned.

The water-top trembled welling with blood
roiled restlessly with red venom-waves
hot demon-gore heaved from the depths—

850 Grendel was deathwards doomed man-killer
laid down his life in that loathsome mere—
hell received him and his heathen soul.

They turned away wonder in their hearts—
old counselors carried by horses

many a young one mounted beside them
turned back from the mere. Beowulf's renown
filled their mindthoughts—many a Spear-Dane
mindful of that night remembering hell-years
swore that no man under mighty heaven

860 from south or north on sea or on land
was greater in battle than Beowulf the Geat.
Nor did they blame their bountiful lord
gladman Hrothgar good man and king.

HROTHGAR'S MINSTREL now improvises a song of Beowulf, then moves on to the dragon slayer Sigemund (an early legendary Danish hero) and his nephew Fitela, who shared his adventures after the dragon slaying, thus praising the victory over Grendel and anticipating Beowulf's final battle. This is the earliest literary account of the famous Völsung family (Waelsing in *Beowulf*), later versions of which portray Sigemund's son Sigurd (later Siegfried) as the dragon slayer.

At times the riders ready for contest
let their war-steeds leap to the race
where broad meadowlands bright grass-tables
widened the trail. At times the minstrel
heavy with memory mindful of the past,
ancient war-sagas old monster-tales,
870 wove his verse-songs—one word found another
skillfully bound. He sang at first
of Beowulf's valor victory in Heorot
death of a monster and his dark water-home
a champion's tale. He told what he knew
stories he had heard of Sigemund the Dane
marvelous moments of mighty sword-feats
Waelsing's adventures wide traveling
secret wanderings seldom disclosed
except to Fitela faithful companion
880 when he fell to telling tales of his youth
to his only shield-friend always by his side—
uncle and nephew in narrow adventures
seeking forest-fiends strange wood-giants
ending them with swords. After his deathday
Sigemund's renown was sung in battle-songs
tales of dragon-breath days of sword-slaughter
glorious rewards. Under gray barrow-stone
he gambled his life gathered his courage
fought against his fate, nor was Fitela with him.
890 It chanced that his sword-point struck through the flesh
pierced that serpent stuck in the barrow-wall—
that marvelous dragon died of murder.
Sigemund survived unsinged by that breath
earned a treasure-mound for his own delight
a loan from destiny. He loaded a boat
bore to its bosom the bright slaughter-prize
that serpent's goldnest—the steaming dragon
monstrously hot melted to the ground.
The wandering Waelsing was widely renowned
900 most hailed of heroes after Heremod fell
stumbled to his death restored to Sigemund
the greater glory-name. Good King Heremod
stooped to evil-days stunned his kingdom
joined fiend-creatures fared to hell with them
after his deathfall. Danes mourned for that
bowed to anguish baleful life-sorrow.
They ached with yearning for those early throne-years
bountiful memories—many a wiseman
had looked to that lord for long peace-days

910 feasts and friendship as his father's king-love
had brought to the Danes—deep treachery
darkened their gift-hall as that dangerous man
bent down to evil. Beowulf prevailed
Hygelac's war-thane held to his promise
brought to all of them bright victory.

They raced their mounts measured the pathway
on the track to Heorot. The hastening of day
shoved up the sky—soon came fugitives
from safe night-lodgings to see that arm-trophy
920 high upon the hall. Their hopeful king
keeper of the hoard came from the bride-bower
marched with his house-guard to Heorot's doorway
and his queen with him, waiting for hope-news,
measured the hall-yard maidens at her side.
Hrothgar spoke then stood by the doorstep
stared above him at the steep roof-gable
garnished with gold and Grendel's hand:
“May thanks to the Wielder for this wondrous sight
be long in our hearts. Loathsome misery
930 Grendel has brought me. God brings to us
wonder after wonder Wielder of glory.
Until this day I dared not imagine
relief from sorrow shame and treachery
sinful murdering when stained with gore
this best of meadhalls mournfully stood
empty and idle—agony and grief
gripped our heart-thoughts with no hope for mercy
a hand to defend us from that foul hell-monster
sorcery and death. Through the Deemer's will
940 a visiting Geat has vanquished forever
this murdering demon that no Dane's courage
could banish or harm. That heartstrong woman
mother of this man marked by the Wielder
to bear such a son may say to the world
that the old Measurer honored her womb-seed
blessed her in childbirth. I choose you now
beloved Beowulf best among warriors
as the son of my hopes—hold this kinship
near to your heart—you will never be poor
950 in goods of this world while I wield this goldhoard.
I have often allowed to lesser warriors
weaker in battle-strength bounteous rewards
for smaller victories. You've assured it now
through your great courage that glory will be yours
forever and always. May the almighty King
reward you for this with wisdom and strength.”
Beowulf answered Ecgtheow's son:
“With war-willing hearts we waited for terror
gambled our lives gave up to murder
960 a thane of Hygelac. I hoped as I struggled
that you for yourself might see that monster
in all his strangeness stripped of his life.

I hoped to bind him hard in my grasp
clamp his fiend-corpse to a cold slaughter-bed
hold in my handgrip his hateful life-core
bring you his death—but his body betrayed me.
I could not hold him here by the gift-throne
hard as I tried when the high Measurer
planned differently—he pulled too strongly
fled with his life. But he left his hand
to mark our struggle his mighty fiend-claws
and death-wrenched arm. No ease from revenge
did he buy with that bargain no booty from hell—
not long will he live loveless murderer
laboring in sin for sorrow has him
clamped in a life-grip lashed to his crimes
in baleful death-bonds—he will bide in misery
stained with hall-blood stand for judgment
bound to the will of the bright Measurer.”

Then Ecglaf’s son Unferth the heckler
stood silent there stunned by that trophy
hushed with horror humbled orator.
They stared at that hand by the high roof-gable
terror-warped fingers—the tips of the nails
were hard as smith-steel sharp death-talons
heathen’s handspurs a hellish warrior’s
sword-tips of evil. They all agreed there
that the best of blades battle-swords of old
could not hew that arm from its huge shoulder
hack from its body that hell-fiend’s claw-hand.

Soon it was time to restore the meadhall
shape it for feasting—they flocked then to Heorot
warriors and women worked through the day
washed the gore-tracks. Golden tapestries
were hung on the walls wondrous designs
elvishly woven for the eyes of men.

In that bright meadhall benches were shattered
beams unanchored iron-hard hinges
wrenched and twisted—the roof only
kept to its shape when that shambling killer
fled to the moors marked with a death-wound
lifeblood draining. Nor is death avoided
not easily tricked try it as we may
but each soul-bearer must seek in the end
by fate impelled a final slumber-bed—
each earth-dweller earns a resting-place
where his body will lie bowered from sky-light
sleeping after banquet. Soon it was ready—
to the hall he went Healfdene’s son

ready for feasting firelight and peace.
Never have I heard of happier warriors
more highly behaved with their hoard-guardian.
They bent to the benches by bright fire-flicker
lifted their cups. Comrades together
Hrothgar and Hrothulf hoisted their mead-drink

uncle and nephew honored by them all
no guile in their hearts. Heorot was filled then
with family and friends—no feuding in the air
darkened the Danes no deep treachery.

1020 To Beowulf then bountiful Hrothgar
gave a golden banner beacon of victory
with bright battle-dress breast-coat and helmet.
To the Geat came next a great treasure-sword
borne to his hands. To Beowulf at last
an ale-cup was served. No shameful gifts
were laid before him for his friends to see—
I have not yet heard of a handsomer reward
four such treasures trimmed well with gold
brought with such grace to a guest in Heorot.

1030 On the helmet's crown a hammer-hard ridge
wound with steel-wire stood against blade-bites
a fire-tempered tube to toughen the head-guard—
no file-sharp edges would eat through that crown
when shielded swordmen stepped into battle.
Then the king of the Danes called for attention—
eight fine horses entered the meadhall
with gold-laced bridles. On the best was mounted
a silver saddle studded with garnets
the gleaming battle-seat of gladman Hrothgar

1040 when that son of Healfdene sallied to warplay
rode before his men to the rush of swordswings—
he was always in front when they fell around him.
To Beowulf then the Battle-Danes' leader
offered all of it urged him to take
weapons and horses hold and use them.
With royal manners the mighty Dane-lord
guardian of that hoard gave from his treasure
horses and weapons worthy of his kingdom—
no courteous man could quarrel with those gifts.

1050 Each of the Geats every man of them
who crossed with Beowulf the curling sea-road
was worthied with gifts by the wise old king
honored with heirlooms—then he offered wergild
gold for that wretch ravaged by Grendel
viciously murdered—as more would have been
had not God in his wisdom and one man's courage
withstood wyrd there. The Wielder controlled
all of mankind as he always does.
Forethought is best future in the mind

1060 plans for everything. All who are given
loan-days in this world life before darkness
will suffer and enjoy sorrow and happiness.

AT THIS POINT Hrothgar's minstrel celebrates Beowulf's victory with a highly allusive episode recounting an earlier fight between Danes and Frisians which he calls the *Freswael* ("Frisian slaughter"). A fragment of a heroic poem about half the length of this episode, printed in 1705 from a manuscript leaf now lost, gives Finnsburuh as the site of the battle. Those two accounts are the only extant versions of an obviously well-known story that has engaged *Beowulf* scholars for more than a

century. From a wilderness of versions, drawing upon both episode and fragment, I summarize as follows:

A Danish king Hoc has two children, Hnaef and his sister, Hildeburh, who marries Finn Folcwalding, king of the Frisians. Hnaef and sixty retainers visit Hildeburh at Finnsburuh in Frisia. For some reason, the Frisians attack the Danes at dawn in the hall assigned to them and fight for five days with many Frisian casualties (including Hildeburh's son) but no Danish dead until Hnaef is finally killed, leaving the Frisian forces badly depleted and unable to vanquish the beleaguered Danes.

As winter approaches, a truce is made between Finn and Hengest (now in charge of the Danes), giving the Danes an honored place in Finn's hall and equal status with the Frisians, Finn paying wergild for Hnaef and staging a formal cremation for dead warriors, including Hnaef and his nephew, Hildeburh's son. Some Frisians apparently return to their homes, and Hengest spends an unhappy winter at Finnsburuh, his thoughts turning to vengeance with the coming of spring. Hunlafing (encouraged by Guthlaf and Oslaf) gives Hengest a sword to urge him on. The Danes attack and kill Finn, loot Finnsburuh, then carry Hildeburh back to Denmark.

1070 Then sweet strumming silenced the company
harpstrings sounded for Healfdene's son
fingers drew notes found story-words
hushed mead-benches when Hrothgar's minstrel
mourned a winter-tale matched it with song
of the house of Finn that fatal night-visit
when that doomed hall-guest Hnaef the visitor
fell to death-rest in Frisian slaughter.
Nor was Hildeburh's heart rewarded
by that hostile truce—tormented queen
bereft of loved ones by linden-shield play
her brother and son slain in treachery
by deep spear-bites—dark was her mourning.
With heavy heart-thoughts Hoc's daughter-child
measured destiny when darkness paled
when the graylight sky spread before her eyes
black murder-bale. Battle-slaughter won
1080 fetched from life-breath Finn's warrior-thanes
all but a few—ended at last
when Hengest and his men held against them all—
nothing could flush them fighting was stalled
with ominous silence—at the end of slaughter
was no victory. They vowed peace-terms—
to Danes was offered their own winter-home
hall-room and high-seat to hold peacefully
with half of everything enemies together—
before the gift-throne Folcwalda's son
1090 would honor the Danes each day and night-time
welcome with rings warriors of Hengest
give from his treasure gold arm-bracelets
in full friendship with Frisians around them
equal in boasting beer-cups and song.
So they swore together solemn companions
a firm peace-pact. Finn gave to Hengest
in full hall-council hard oath-bindings
with his elders' advice: In honorable plenty

1100 he would hold them all—no envious hall-thane
with words or with deeds would damage that peace
no Dane would lament with malice on his tongue
that they now followed forced by that truce
their lord's life-taker through the long winter—
if one Frisian with foul hate-words
mindful of mischief should mention battle-thoughts
a sharp swordedge would silence that tongue.
Oaths were honored old gold-treasures
brought from the hoard. The best warrior
lord of the War-Danes was laid upon the pyre.

1110 Heaped on the balefire battle-gear waited
bloodstained corselets cloven mask-helmets
gilded with boar-heads grim slaughter-guards
with too many warriors wounded to rest.
Then came Hildeburh where Hnaef lay waiting
bade that her son be swallowed by flames
next to her brother nephew by his side
at his uncle's shoulder—she sang in her grief
a keen sorrow-song as they settled him there.
The great slaughter-fire circled to the sky

1120 reared to the heavens. Heads melted there
sword-woundings burst blood sprang from them
fire-bitten bodies. Flames swallowed all
greediest of spirits sucked them away
the Finns and the Danes—fled was their glory.
Frisians grew restive bereft of friends
some took winter-leave sought their blood-kin
homes and meadhalls. Hengest remained
suffering with Finn a slaughter-stained winter
dreaming of release—he longed for Denmark

1130 though he dared not sail on the surging waters
his ring-prowed ship. The sea howled at him
wailing with storm-wind—winter locked the waves
in icy bindings till the earth welcomed
a young new-year as it yet calls forth
the altered seasons always beckoning
glory-bright weather. Then winter was gone
fair was the earth-bosom. The exile yearned
longed to be gone. Grief and vengeance
stronger than escape seethed in his heart-blood—

1140 a final meeting formed in his mind
memory of malice moved him to stay.
He did not reject that gesture then
when Hunlafing bore him a bright vengeance-sword
bore to his bosom that best of warblades—
its edges were known to all around him.
Once more to Finn Frisian war-king
came anxious swordbale in his own homeland
when Guthlaf and Oslaf with grim memories
spoke of their sorrows that sea-voyage to death

1150 woeful winter-grief. No wavering heart
they found in Hengest. The hall grew red
with Frisian blood-wounds—Finn perished there

king with his men and his queen was taken.
To their broad ship then the Shield-Danes bore
whatever they found in Finn's meadhall
stripped it of swords secret treasure-hoard
wondrous gemstones. On the welling sea
they ferried his wife to family in Denmark
safe with her kin.

The song was ended

1160 the gleeman's tale. It was time for joy
bench-laughter brightened bearers brought forth
wine in wonder-cups. Then Wealhtheow approached
with gold-gleaming neck-ring where nephew and king
feasted in friendship yet faithful as kin.
There was Unferth the heckler at Hrothgar's feet—
they held him in trust hailed his courage
though to his family he failed in honor
at clashing of swordedge. The queen spoke then:
1170 "Take this cupful my king and husband
treasure-hall's lord. Look to happiness
gold-friend to men—to these Geats offer
welcoming words as a wise man should.
Be glad with these Geats give of that treasure
fetched to your goldhoard from far and from near.
I have heard men say you would have for a son
that hero among them. Heorot is purged
this bright wine-hall. Wield while you can
these fine riches and to family give
this land and kingdom when you leave this world
1180 to seek your destiny. I am sure that Hrothulf
our kind brother-son will care for our young ones
guide and hold them if you go before him
give up this world in your waning years.
He will surely repay us shelter our sons
if he well remembers how we watched over him
held him as our own gave help in everything
saw that our kin had a safe childhood."
She turned to the benches where her boys were sitting
Hrethric and Hrothmund and a host of young ones
1190 the youth together—there the good one sat
Beowulf the Geat by the brothers' side.

HAVING PUBLICLY REMINDED Hrothulf of his duty to her two young sons—as she later solicits Beowulf's help with them—Wealhtheow turns to where they sit with Beowulf and presents him with further rewards, including a gold neck-ring compared by the *Beowulf* poet with the legendary Brosinga necklace in one of his briefest and most obscure allusions. Drawing upon both history and legend, we may think of Hama as having stolen this great collar or torque from Eormenric (the historic Gothic king Ermanaric) and carried it to the "bright city" where he chose "eternal glory"—probably a reference to his acceptance of Christianity. We then have the first of several references to Hygelac's later invasion of the lower Rhine, where he is killed. Though Beowulf later presents this neck-ring to Hygd, the poet here says that Hygelac wore it on his fatal expedition.

A cup was offered in kind friendship

with terms of welcome then twisted gold
placed before him fine arm-bracelets
corselets and garments with the greatest neck-ring
of all on this earth that ever I heard of.
No tales have told of a treasure so rich
a finer hoard-ring since Hama carried
to that bright city the Brosinga necklace,
famed gold-marvel, fled with that treasure
from Eormenric's torment to eternal glory.
That neck-ring was worn by war-King Hygelac
Swerting's nephew when he sailed from home
led a plunder-raid on his last voyage
fought for war-booty. Wyrð took him then
when boasting with pride he brought to them all
death among Frisians. He ferried that treasure
studded with gemstones over seething wave-rolls
fated king-warrior—he fell beneath his shield.

To the Franks he left his lifeless body
gold-laced mailcoat and glorious neck-ring.
Then lesser warriors looted that treasure
as he lay battle-shorn lord of the Geats—
he paid for that pride.

Applause filled the hall
as Wealhtheow spoke stood before her guest:
“Have luck with this neck-ring beloved Beowulf
accept these gifts gold-gleaming treasures
and use them well—may you win always
make known your strength and save for these boys
wise counsel-words—I'll reward you for that.
You have earned such fame that from far and near
in this wide middle-earth men will honor you
as far as the sea circles this windyard
these high cliffwalls. Keep while you live
peace with your courage. I'll repay you for that
with bright treasure-gifts. Be to my sons
a gentle hero with joy in your heart.

Each man at this feast is faithful to all
loyal to his lord loving in mindthoughts—
these thanes are together good men and strong
these drunken warriors do as I bid them.”

She sat then to banquet the best of feasting
warmed with wine-cups—warriors rejoiced
unwary of their fate waiting for destiny
like friends before them at failing of day
when Hrothgar left them to lie in his bower
went to his rest. War-Danes guarded
the darkening meadhall as in days gone by.
They cleared the bench-planks, brought for sleeprest
bedding and bolsters. A beer-drinker there
ready for his doom rested among them.

They set by their heads where hands could reach them
bright linden-shields—on benches above them
over sleeping warriors weapons were ready
hard mask-helmets hand-locked corselets

stout-shafted spears. They were seldom caught
unready for war waking or sleeping
at home or afield held themselves ready
for their lord's command moments of swordplay
their war-sovereign's needs—they were worthy men.



II

They sank to their sleep. One sorely paid
for his evening slumber like others before him
since Grendel came to them greedy hall-watcher
rage in his blood till he blundered at last
death came to him. The Danes discovered
that one still living waited for that night
slouched through the shadows searching for revenge
grim murder-fiend—Grendel's hell-mother
bereaved monster-wife mourned for her child.
1260 She was damned to hide in a dark water-home
cold wildwood stream since Cain murdered
his only brother-kin beat down to earth
his father's son-child. He was sent for that
marked with murder from man's company
banished to wasteland. Then woke from his loins
misbegotten monsters. Among them was Grendel
hate-hearted fiend who found at Heorot
a waking strength-warrior waiting in that hall.
Grendel grabbed him grappled his hand—
1270 but mindful of power the mercy of his strength
that bountiful gift from God's kingdom
the warrior caught him clamped in his fingers
that great claw-hand crushed that night-killer
gripped him to death. Grendel went slinking
crossed the moorland to his cold death-cavern
exiled from mercy. Then his mother sorrowed
grieved for her child greedy for man-blood
went prowling for vengeance payment for her son.
She came then to Heorot where careless Shield-Danes
1280 slumbered peacefully. They soon found there
the old night-torture when in through the door
came Grendel's mother. Her great warrior-strength
was less than her son's as little as a woman's
is weaker in warfare than a weaponed man's
when bloodied swordblades smith-hammered edges
slash helmet-crowns hard over boar-crests
gold-handled swords slash against helmets.
Sleeping warriors woke to the fight
reached for swordblades raised linden-shields
1290 hoisted their weapons—helmets and corselets
were left by the benches in that lunging raid.
She yearned to leave them longed to be away
flee with her life when they found her there—

quickly she snared a single warrior
fastened in her claws as she fled to the moor.
That ill-fated Dane was dearest to Hrothgar
of all warriors in that wide kingdom
powerful guardian plucked from his rest
bountiful thane. Nor was Beowulf there
1300 who slept through the night in a separate bower
champion of the Geats with his great treasures.
Sorrow came to Heorot—she snatched from the gable
that high-hung monster-arm—horror came back then
to the wakening death-hall. It was woeful bargaining
each party to pay the price of slaughter
with a loved-one's life.

That forlorn treasure-king,
sorrow-gripped lord, sang a mourning-song
grieved for his heart-thane hearth-friend and warrior
a king's counselor killed in his hall.

1310 Quickly was Beowulf battle-weary guest
called to his bower. At breaking of day
he went with his shieldmen walked through the dawn
to the king's rest house—that bereft throne-warden
wondered in misery if the Wielder of us all
ever would spare them save them from fiendgrief.

Then Hygelac's thane with hand-chosen warriors
crossed the floor-planks clinked an armor-song
stood before the king sorrowing Dane-lord
asked if his night-rest had eased his suffering
1320 if the breaking of Grendel had brought peace to him.

Hrothgar answered helm of the Shield-Danes:
“Don't ask about happiness! Horror has come back
to the Danes in Heorot. Dead is Aeschere
good Yrmenlaf's guide and blood-brother
my closest adviser counsel to us all
shoulder-companion when shields were hoisted
defender of my life when foot-warriors clashed
and helmets were struck. So should a man be
always beside us as Aeschere was!

1330 He found in Heorot a hell-spawned murderer
restless hand-killer. From our high meadhall
that slaughter-stained spirit has sought her mere-cave
I know not where. She now has avenged
the felling of Grendel that feud you began
with violent grappling that great handgrip
that settled our account for those cold death-years
the closing of Heorot. He cringed at your hand
went dying through the night and now this she-fiend
has avenged her monster-son vicious man-killer—

1340 too far she has carried this feud over blood-kin
it seems to us all aching in our minds
weeping for Aeschere warrior of my heart
high-minded hall-thane—now his hand is idle
that once granted us each wish and command.
I have heard evening-tales hearth-talk of scouts
of hall-messengers hailing from abroad

that they have sighted a solitary pair
monstrous moor-walkers moving through shadows
sorrowful fen-spirits. They say that one of them
1350 misshapen exile is most like a woman—
the wanderer with her woefully deformed
prowled the march-tracks manlike to their eyes
yet bigger by far than the best of warriors.
In times long past tenders of the land
named him Grendel. No one can say
what creatures spawned them their kin in this world.

They live secretly in a sombre land
1360 dwell by wolf-slopes wind-tortured bluffs
gloomy fen-hollows where a forested stream
dives from the bluffs down past earthlight
flows underground. Not far from Heorot
measured in miles the mere lies hidden—
reaching above it with rime-covered branches
strong-rooted trees stretch from rock-slopes.
At night may be seen a strange wonder-sight—
fire on the water. No wiseman lives
who knows the bottom of that black monster-home.

1370 Though the heath-prancer by hounds labored
the strong-antlered hart may seek life-haven
driven from afar he will die beside it
forfeit his life there for fear of crossing
plunging his head in that hell-cursed water.
A surging of waves swirls to the clouds
when whistling winds come whirling in anger
to that sorrowful place—the sky hangs gloomy
and the heavens weep. Our hope for mercy
lies only in your help. The home of these fiends
dark moor-cavern monsters' water-den
is not far from Heorot. Find it if you dare!

1380 I will reward you with weapons and gold
ancient treasure-gifts time-tested corselets
as I earlier did if you answer this plea.”
Beowulf spoke son of Ecgtheow:
“Do not grieve, old battle-king! It is better for all
to fight for our friends than fall into mourning.

Each one among us shall mark the end
of this worldly life. Let him who may
earn deeds of glory before death takes him—
after life-days honor-fame is best.
1390 Arise, good guardian let us go quickly
to find the moor-tracks of that murdering fiend.
I promise you firmly she will find no safety
in the earth's caverns or the cold forest-mounds—
nowhere in this land will she live for long!
At this painful dawning have patience with sorrow
bear your death-grief in your deep-wounded heart.”

Up stood the king called to his God then
thanked him for the words that warrior had spoken.
Then for Hrothgar a horse was saddled
1400 curly-maned war-steed. The wise Dane-leader

went forth in splendor. Warriors advanced
marched from the hall. The monstrous tracks
were easy to follow on the narrow path
where that loveless creature loped through the trees
over wild moorland wandering streams
bearing that body the best counsel-thane
of all who with Hrothgar made Heorot their home.

The lord of the Danes led through wilderness
steep stone-passes solitary trails

1410 narrow-dark gorges unknown trackways
slippery rockbluffs secret demon-dens.

He rode before them following the signs
guided his warriors Geats with the Danes
till suddenly they found frosted tree-branches
stretching mournfully over sloping grayrock
joyless treelimbs over trembling water
dreary and wind-driven. Danes were silent
with sorrow in their hearts at the sight before them

1420 when they circled the mere saw greeting them
on the moldering bank of that bloodstained water
on the edge of that hell-sump Aeschere's head.

The water-top heaved as they hovered around it
with hot gore-swells. Horn-notes sounded
a strong battle-song. They sat by the bank.

In that hell-murky mere many a snake-creature
curious water-worms cut through the gore—
on the hard bank-slopes black fiends were roiling
serpents and mere-sprites slid along the rock—
by cold morninglight they moved through the water

1430 slithering with greed. They scattered then in anger
bitter and blood-swelled as the bright horn-notes
signaled a challenge. The chief of the Geats
shot from a yew-bow a sharp arrowhead
struck to the life-core a loathsome mere-creature
ended its misery—it afterwards became
a lazier swimmer when its life departed.

With a barbed boar-spear it was brought to shore
hooked with steel-teeth hauled to the edge
rolled on the rockbank robbed of lifeblood—

1440 they gazed in wonder at that grisly swim-serpent
blackening with death.

Then Beowulf prepared
called for his armor careless of his life.

Bright warrior-mail bonded by hands
linked armor-coat locked against swordswings
covered his breastcage enclosed his heart
that no fiendgrip might fix upon his life
grapple to his soul with grim hell-fingers.

A gleaming mask-helmet guarded his head
gilded with boar-crests bordering the rim

1450 old treasure-helm ancient wonder-smith's
shield against steel-bites that no sharp blade-edge
might slice through to him as he sought the mere-ground
stroked to the bottom of that baleful pond

wrapped against death in rich armor-bonds.
Nor was it the worst of weapons that day

that Unferth loaned him orator of Heorot—
a hard cutting-sword Hrunting by name
praised through the years by proud weapon-thanes.
The hammer-forged blade of hand-twisted steelbands
1460 was hardened by blood—the bite of its edges
had never yet failed a firm-handed warrior
anyone who dared death in battle-rush—
its strength was known in stories of war-clash
when edges and spearshafts sang through the air.

That son of Ecglaf strong counsel-thane
offered no charges no challenging wine-words
when he loaned his battle-blade by that blood-red mere
to the better sword-champion—though brave in memory
he dared not dive in that deep hell-water
1470 to foster his fame—he forfeited there
stories of his past. The proud guest-warrior
was ready now for all eager for that fight.

Beowulf spoke son of Ecgtheow:
“Beloved Hrothgar Healfdene’s son
remember your words in the warmth of Heorot
before I go swimming in search of this monster—
if ever I serve you in your hour of need
and part with my life-breath you have promised to be
for me and my folk-thanes a father to my name.

1480 Let your good hand harbor my shield-thanes
my board-companions if battle takes my life
and send to Hygelac, Hrothgar my lord,
those marvelous treasures that you made my own.
He will learn from that gold, the Geats’ hall-king
good son of Hrethel, when he sees those rewards,
that I found in Denmark a fine goldwarden
proud ring-giver and prospered while I lived.

Give to Unferth my good treasure-sword
twist-hammered blade bound by steel-smiths
1490 a man’s war-weapon. I will manage with Hrunting
earn my goldgifts or enter into death.”

After those words the Weather-Geats’ leader
turned to his work—no time would he waste
for answering speech—the spiteful water
swallowed him away. It was wondrously long
before downstrokes bore him to the depth of that mere.

Soon that water-fiend warden of the depths
guardian of fury through fifty murder-years
found an alien creature come to explore
1500 from the earth above her that bleak hell-home.

She grabbed him then with her great handspurs
clenched him with claws—the covering mailcoat
linked corselet-rings locked with steelmesh
stopped those talons from stabbing his heart—
those loathsome fingers failed against smith-hands.
The black she-wolf bore him away
tugged through the water that warrior from above

to her deep cavern-den—caught in that grasp
he could wield no weapons—wondrous creatures

1510 pressed around him reached for his life
crunched with nail-teeth gnashed at his breast-coat
greedy for his blood. Then that grim wolf-woman
dragged him to her cave cold rock-chamber—
no roiling water could reach to that den
roofed against flood-water far beneath the earth—
firelight shimmered there on the floor of that dungeon
restless flame-shadows flickered on the wall.

Now he could see her sorrowful blood-fiend
1520 great mere-monster—he grabbed his sword then
swung high with it swept it down at her
struck at the head with a sounding blade-tone
steel-song ringing. He soon discovered
that his bright swordedge could not bite that flesh
strike to that life—that strong treasure-sword
failed him at need. Those file-hard edges
had cut through battle-mail in countless shield-fights
sheared through mask-helmets—that marvelous war-weapon
had never forfeited the fame of its past.

Beowulf remembered boastwords in Heorot
1530 Hygelac's hearth-thane held to his promise—
he flung the sword then far across the cave
flushed with anger no failure in his heart—
he remembered his handgrasp mindful of Grendel
his great gripstrength. A good war-thane
fighting for fame following name-glory
will trust his courage no care for his life.

He grabbed her then Grendel's hell-mother
grappled her shoulders in his great handvises
tugged at her arms with angry heartstrength
1540 twisted her backwards bent her to the floor.
She clamped his arms in her cold fiendgrip
returned his tugging with tight claw-fingers—
she toppled him over with towering strength
raging with fire-eyes felled him to the floor
leapt on his chest lifted her shortsword
broad murder-knife burning to avenge
her only offspring. Over his breastcage
a hand-locked mailcoat harbored his life
countered the piercing of point and edge.

1550 He would soon have died there deep under the earth
Ecgtheow's son strong Geat-champion
but his hard battle-coat held against that thrust—
close-woven steelmesh clenched against swordbite
kept him from death—the Deemer of this world
decided that contest the King of mankind
strengthened that warrior as he stood to his feet.

He saw then glittering a great hoard-weapon
smith-wrought by giants a sword for victory
blade for a champion best of war-weapons
1560 gleaming with goldwork greater in steel-weight

than any other man could manage in warfare.
He seized it by the hilt, that heavy wonder-sword
grasped in his hands the gold-gleaming handle
raised it in anger rage in his heart

swung at her neck with his strong handgrip
till it bit through the flesh burst fiend-muscles
broke through bone-rings—the blade cut through
felled her to the floor fated hell-creature—
the sword was blooded and Beowulf rejoiced.

1570 Light came rushing radiant and warm
as God's bright candle glows in the heavens
glittering above. He gazed about him
moved along the wall wielding his giant-sword
with a great hilt-grip, Hygelac's shield-thane
towering with rage—yet ready for vengeance
he stepped through the cavern searched for Grendel
anxious to repay that prowling visitor
for years of torture in that tall meadhall
twelve long winters of woeful murder
1580 when he fell upon Hrothgar's hearth-companions
slew them in their sleep swallowed them down,
fifteen warriors of the folk of Denmark,
and carried from the hall to his cold water-den
the same number. He saw him then
Grendel slumped there with a great shoulder-wound
wearyed by his crimes waiting for judgment
lifeless at last after long murder-years
horror in Heorot. With a hard swordswing
Beowulf slashed at him struck through his neck
1590 ended that hall-feud for Healfdene's son.

Watching at the mere top the waiting Shield-Danes
Hrothgar's counselors cold in their hearts
saw a welling of blood waves of death-gore
rise to the surface. Sorrowful advisers
battle-weary thanes borne down by grief
carried to their king a care-heavy message—
they hoped no longer that the leader of the Geats
might rise in victory through that roiling water
return to his men—they murmured in sorrow
grieved that the she-wolf had slaughtered him below.
1600 The sun swung low. They left the mere then—
those mourning Sword-Danes sought with their king
their good meadhall. Their guests stayed on
sick with horror stared at the blood-froth.

They wished without hope that their hero would surface
dive up to them. Deep below the earth
that broad wonder-blade wasted and quivered
withered in that blood—it wavered and dripped
melted and shrunk like shining icicles
1610 when the Ruler of heaven unwraps frost-bindings
warms water-ropes, Wielder of us all,
of times and seasons the true Measurer.
The lord of the Geats looked at the treasures

heaped and glittering in that grisly fiend-hall—
from the wealth before him he wanted no more
than Grendel's head and that golden swordhilt—
the blade had vanished burned down to nothing
melted in the heat of that hell-spirit's blood.

1620 Soon he was swimming straight up to earthlight
shot through the surface of that seething mere.

That peaceful pond was purged of evil
opened to sunlight when those alien spirits
paid for their loan-days with their pitiful lives.

He came then to land leader of the Geats
proud of the booty he bore in his hands
great hell-mysteries haled from the depths.
His thanes received him thankful to their God
for bringing him back from that baleful journey
safe from his fight with that foul death-mother.

1630 His hard mask-helmet hand-woven corselet
were quickly removed. The mere grew quiet
calm monster-pond colored with fiend-blood.
They left that devil's hole led by their champion,
no mourning in their minds, measured the trackways
the known moorpaths. Marching Geat-thanes
bore the great head, grim death-plunder,
climbed through the mist past the cold rockstream
followed the pathway—four good warriors

1640 bore on their spearshafts, struggling with the weight,
Grendel's gore-head through green forest-trees.
Fourteen spear-fighters filed across the meadow
marched upon the hall with its high gold-gables
Geats all together—their good warleader
towered among them trod the meadowgrass.
Once more he approached the proud wine-hall
champion of the Geats great monster-bane
to hail the king there Hrothgar the Dane.

Hefted by the hair the head of that murderer
was borne into the hall where beer-drinkers waited—
1650 Shield-Danes gathered there with their good hall-queen
to gaze upon hell that huge fiend-head.

Beowulf spoke son of Ecgtheow:

“From Grendel's mere, gladman Hrothgar
bountiful lord, we bring gifts to you
tokens of victory tidings of relief.

I barely endured that deep monster-fight
under dark blood-water where death came pressing
stabbing at my heart—I would still be there
if the great Shaper had not shielded my life.

1660 No help was Hrunting with hell's sorcery
that battle-sharp blade could not bite her flesh—
then the great Wielder Glory-King of all
gave me a wonder-blade granted to my sight
a huge giant-sword hanging by the wall.
I reached for the hilt raised it quickly
slashed at that she-wolf sliced through her neck
ended her misery. Then that old wonder-blade

burned and dwindled, dark murder-blood
melted it away. This marvelous swordhilt
I bring back to you. Both man-killers
are banished from Heorot hall of the Danes.
I promise you this night, proud land-master,
you may sleep soundly sorrowing no more.
All of your warriors women and children
youth and elders aged counselors
all of your subjects may slumber in peace
retrieved from night-murder, prowling thane-killers.”

Then that ancient swordhilt old gold-treasure
strange work of giants wonder-smith’s pattern
was placed in the hands of Healfdene’s son—
after long winters, leaving the Danes
with nightbale and tears, terror was sleeping.
Those murdering moor-stalkers mother and fiend-son
kept to their cavern under cold forest-stream.
That old treasure-hilt ancient wonderwork
came into the hands of Heorot’s treasure-king
the best battle-lord in the breadth of Denmark.
Hrothgar was gladdened gazed upon the hilt
curious sword-handle—cut into the gold
was a tale of evil that old earth-struggle
when great flood-waters fell upon earth-giants
carried them away—the Wielder of all
God of creation crushed their wickedness
with welling water-rush washed them from earth.

Written in rune-marks on that rich swordhilt,
gleaming goldplate garnished with serpents,
was a curious name, who caused that sword
to be shaped and hammered smithied in yoredays
a weapon for the mighty. Then the wise Dane-lord
Healfdene’s son spoke his mindthoughts:
“It can well be said by sons of this earth
by those who remember moments of the past,
clashing of spearshields that this keen battle-thane
was born for glory! Beowulf my friend
your fame is founded far across the waves
where wise men gather. Guard it carefully
strength with wisdom. I will stand by my word
make good my promises. To your Geat-friends now
you will come with counsel courage for their hearts
through long comfort-years.

Not so kind was Heremod
to the kin of Ecgwela care-heavy Shield-Danes—
he brought them no joy but baleful murder
dark death-sorrows to his Danish followers.
With hot rage-thoughts he ravaged his people
hearth-companions till hate severed him,
jealous slaughter-king, from the joys of men
though the great Measurer marked him for honor
lifted him on high haled him to a throne
a towering meadhall. To his mind came rushing
blood-hungry thoughts—no bracelets or rings

he gave to his warriors but woeful misery
shame and sorrow sharp death-grieving
endless murdering. Mark carefully
this lesson of anguish—old in winters
I warn you by this. It is wondrous to see

how almighty God in his endless wisdom
grants unto a man a mind to rule with
kingdom and meadhall to keep until death.

1730 At times the Measurer maker of us all
brings moments of pleasure to a proud earth-king
gives to that warrior worldly power-goods
hall and homeland to hold for his own
renders him ruler of rich meadow-lands
a broad kingdom—he cannot foresee
in his own unwisdom an end to such wealth.

1740 He dwells in happiness no hindrance bothers him
no illness or age or evil reckoning
darkens his mind no deep serpent-thoughts
edge-hate in his heart—but all this loan-world
bends to his will welcomes him with gold
till high throne-thoughts throng into his mind
gather in his head. Then the guardian sleeps
the soul's warden—it slumbers too long
while a silent slayer slips close to him
shoots from his bow baleful arrows.

1750 Deep into his heart hard under shield-guard
strikes the arrowhead—no armor withstands
that quiet marksman cold mind-killer.
What he long has held too little contents him
greed grapples him he gives no longer
gold-patterned rings reckons no ending
of borrowed treasure-years bright earth-fortune
granted by God the great Measurer.

The last of splendor slips into darkness
that loaned king-body cracks upon the pyre
swirls away in smoke—soon another one
steps to the gift-throne shares his goldhoard
turns that treachery to trust and reward.

1760 Guard against life-bale beloved Beowulf
best of warriors and win for your soul
eternal counsel—do not care for pride
great shield-champion! The glory of your strength
lasts for a while but not long after
sickness or spear-point will sever you from life
or the fire's embrace or the flood's welling
or the file-hard sword or the flight of a spear
or bane-bearing age—the brightness of your eye
will dim and darken. Destiny is waiting
and death will take you down into the earth.

1770 I have held the Shield-Danes for half a century
ruled them under heaven harbored them from war
against many a people on this proud earthyard—
no enemy to peace asking for bloodshed

spearshaft or swordedge for settlement of feuds.
Then in my homeland happiness departed
joy turned to sorrow when jealous-mad Grendel
careless murderer came into my hall—
through long winters I leaned on my sorrow
a breaking of mind. To the bright Measurer
thanks for deliverance from long heartache,
for this swordstruck head severed from that murderer
this grim death-trophy through the Deemer's mercy.
But sit now to banquet songs and ale-cups
with your hearth-companions. By peaceful morninglight
goldgifts will travel from my treasure to you.”

Beowulf was gladdened by those bountiful words
sat by the gift-throne with his Geats around him.
Bright bench-laughter bore to the rafters
sounds of victory servants brought ale-cups
to Geats and to Danes. Then dark night-shadows
loomed above the hall. Hrothgar rose then
king of the Spear-Danes called for night-sleep
for silence and peace. Soon then Beowulf
yearning for bedrest bent to his hall-bench
sank gratefully to slumber in Heorot
once more a night-guest in that mighty hallroom.
The Danes' thane-servant thoughtful of their needs
spread bench-covers bore final cupfuls
readied the meadhall for rest in the night.

The great-hearted slept in that steep-gabled hall
tall and gold-trimmed—Geats rested there
till the black-shining raven raised morning-gray
a lifting of darkness. Dawnlight came shoving
bright above Heorot banishing night-creatures.
Hygelac's thanes hailed the sunrise
yearned for the sea a sail to carry them
to that known headland the hall of their king.
Their hero commanded Hrunting to be borne
returned to Unferth old Ecglaf's son
urged him to take it—he told well of it
thanked him for the loan of that long-famed warblade
shining warrior-steel sharp helmet-bane
when good men gather to gamble their lives.
Then sea-ready warriors with their strong weapons
yearned to be gone. Their good sail-skipper
stepped to the gift-throne stood before the king—
gladman Hrothgar hailed him once more.
Beowulf spoke son of Ecgtheow:

“Now we Geat-thanes guests across the sea
are set for sailing over steep wave-rolls
home to Hygelac. Here you welcomed us
opened your goldhoard granted us treasures.
If ever on this earth I may earn your love
help you in sorrow sickness or defeat
save you from slaughter my ship will return.
If news comes to me across the seaswell
that scurrilous neighbors scheme for your life

trap you in Heorot like those hell-spawned demons
I will sail back to you bring you an army
1830 thousands of linden-shields. My lord Hygelac
king of the Geats kin and battle-friend
still young in winters stands behind me—
he will back me well when I bring help to you
a forest of spears file-sharp warblades

a navy of shieldmen when your need is great.
If Hrethric travels to the home of the Geats
I promise you now, proud treasure-king,
he will find friends there. Fortune abroad
comes to the sailor who himself prevails.”

1840 Hrothgar answered helm of the Danes:
“These stronghearted words were sent down to you
from the high Wielder. I have heard no man
so young in winters so wealthy in thought.
You are strong in body bold in mind-courage
wise within your words. I will wager you now
if it comes to the Geats that cold battle-death
a whining spearshaft or sharp battle-blade
sends from this earth that son of Hrethel—
if age or steel strikes down your uncle

1850 leads your dear king from these loaned earth-days
and you live after him beloved Beowulf—
Geats will not find a greater hall-thane
to raise to their gift-throne. Your good mindthoughts
bring more pleasure the more you stay with us.
You’ve brought to us all to both our people
to men of the Geats and these good Spear-Danes
peace between us no time for warplay
anger and hatred as in earlier days.

As long as I wield this wide kingdom
1860 gifts will take ship from shore to shore
gold will bring greetings to Götland from Denmark
the ring-prowed ship will shove across the waves
gifts and love-tokens. We will live in friendship
forged against enemies fast in loyalty
your people and mine proud blood-brothers.”

Then Hrothgar gave to his good heart-son
twelve treasure-gifts to that tall champion
bade him go then to greet Hygelac
sail there in safety with his strong prowship.

1870 Then the old battle-king embraced his hero
clasped him in his arms kissed him farewell
with tears of regret for that time of parting
sweet sorrow-thoughts. It seemed to them both
the old wiseman and the warrior from Götland
that no more in that life loaned by the Measurer
would they share hearth-words. To the Shield-Danes’ king
that young sea-warrior was so strongly beloved
it swelled in his heart surged with regret
that this son of Ecgtheow would sail far from him

1880 back towards his home. Then Beowulf left
gold-proud warrior gladdened with treasure

measured the sea-path. His sail was waiting
riding on anchor ready for the sea.

The bountiful gifts of that good Dane-lord
were praised by the men. That proud hall-king
was blameless in all best of warriors
till age wearied him withered his strength.

They came to the sea sailors from abroad
a band of warriors bearing ring-corselets
linked armor-mail. The landwarden watched
as their burnished weapons winked in the sun—
from the high cliff-top he hailed all of them,
no challenge in his heart but cheerful greeting,
rode to meet them made them welcome
in their bright armor back to their keel-ship.

The sand-bound vessel soon was gift-laden
its broad board-deck burdened with gold
horses and treasures—the high mast towered
over Hrothgar's bounty bright with rewards.

To the good beach-guard Beowulf gave then
a gold-wound sword a gift to honor him
on the benches of Heorot bettered by that weapon
sword for a champion.

The ship took wind
drove across the waves from the Danish cliff-coast.

The sail grew taut tugged by ocean-winds
mast-ropes trembled tight sail-anchors—
piling seaswells pounded clinker-boards
bound for Götland—the good wave-cutter
plunged into the foam flew with sail-wing
followed the swan-road skimmed across the sea
till headlands of home hovered above them
the known seacliffs—nudged by the wind
the keel carried them to calm shore-sand.

The coastguard came riding ready for beaching—
through long watch-days he waited for their mast
gazed at the skyline for signs of homecoming.
They roped to shore-sand the ring-prowed ship
lashed to its anchor the lean wave-plow
safe from surf-crashing surging water-throngs.

Treasures were borne from the broad ship-bosom
war-gear and horses. The high meadhall
lifted its gables by the looming seawall
where Hygelac waited wise Hrethel's son
good treasure-king with his Geats around him.

The hall towered there high above the sea
where Hygd the fair one Haereth's daughter-child
waited with her king wise and generous
though young in winters worthy folk-queen
made for a kingdom—no miser was she
with gifts to her Geats gold and weapons
treasure from her hands.

AT THIS POINT a nameless woman is abruptly introduced as a contrast to Hygd and a puzzle to *Beowulf*

scholars. A vicious torturer and man-killer before marriage, she is sent “overseas” by her father to marry King Offa, who tames her into a model queen, her progression thus being the opposite of Heremod’s. The abruptness of this allusion and obscurity of her name, also the elaborate praise of Offa, have caused much speculation about the possible spuriousness of this passage, and since two historic kings were named Offa—the first a Continental king of the Angles in the fourth century and the second an English king of the Mercians in the eighth—it is impossible to determine what the *Beowulf* poet had in mind, if indeed it is not an interpolation in honor of the Mercian king, in whose reign some critics have suggested that the poem may have been composed. Garmund is the father of the Continental Offa, Eomer is Offa’s son, and Hemming is their kin.

Beowulf then predicts trouble between Danes and Heathobards, which will eventually lead to the burning of Heorot foreshadowed earlier in the poem. Hoping to settle an old feud, Hrothgar has betrothed his daughter Freawaru to Ingeld, son of King Froda of the Heathobards, who was slain by Danes in battle. Beowulf, in his report to Hygelac, then imagines that an old Heathobard warrior, incensed by a young member of Freawaru’s retinue who struts about wearing the sword of a slain Heathobard warrior, will urge the son of the slain warrior to take revenge, after which Ingeld will be forced to renew hostilities.

Beowulf’s unpromising youth is a common folktale motif also found in a Latin life of Offa the Angle. Beowulf is granted a large landholding by Hygelac—“seven thousand,” the poet says, without further specification—but in any case it is nearly half of the Geatish kingdom, though somewhat less than Hygelac’s holding.

She tortured and murdered

powerful princess proud king’s daughter—

not one hall-thane hero or servant

save the fond father of that fearsome maid

dared look at her by the light of day—

his hands would be locked lashed with death-bonds

no hope for his life—that harmless crime

would soon be settled with a slashing blade

swift swordbites would sever from life

1940 that pitiful wretch. No peaceful lady

would torture her thanes truss them for death

condemn to the blade dear retainers

for imaginary insults to her maiden honor.

Hemming’s kinsman calmed that slaughter-maid—

ale-drinkers say that she softened hate-moments

mellowed murder-thoughts measured her commands

since first she was given, gold-endowed princess,

to that young champion chosen for his queen

sent across the waves by her sorrowing father

1950 to Offa the king come to his meadhall

to share the gift-throne. She soon bent to him

welcomed hall-thanes hailed peace-offerings

used her wealth there for young and for old.

With high love-thoughts she held to her king

who of all mankind, as men have told me,

was strongest of throne-men from sandshore to sandshore

on the earth’s broadland—Offa was spear-keen

tall thane-master in thronging of war

generous gift-king great with gold-treasures

1960 strength for his homeland. His son was Eomer
hall-worthy king-child Hemming's kinsman
Garmund's grandson good warrior-prince.

Over the shore-sand with his shoal of warriors
Beowulf went marching measured the sea-rim
wide cliff-beaches. The world-candle shone
southward to the sea. They stepped to the path
mounted the sea-wall where their mighty lord
Ongentheow's bane bountiful hall-king
helm of the Geats held his gift-throne

1970 shared his gold-hoard. Good news-tidings
of Beowulf's beaching were borne to Hygelac—
strong and treasure-proud sailors were landsafe
home with their lives—linden-shield thanes
stepped to the hall hailed their people-king.
Soon were benches bared to receive them
the roomy wine-hall ready for feasting.

The beloved sailor sat by his king
nephew by his uncle urged by welcome-words
glad hearth-greetings from Hrethel's son
1980 hearthlord of the Geats. The good peace-queen
moved throughout the hall Haereth's daughter-child
bore among the benches bright ale-vessels
served them with her hands. Then Hygelac spoke
asked for news-words from his nephew beside him
eager for tidings of that trip to Denmark
Sea-Geats sailing to that sorrowful hall:

“What luck did you have beloved Beowulf
when you foolishly left on that long sea-sail
seeking adventure over salty water
1990 monsters in Heorot? Did you help the Danes
win for Hrothgar a healthier meadhall
for that thane-deprived king? My thoughts troubled me
seethed with sorrow for that senseless voyage
a bad bargain. I begged you to stay
ignore that fiend foul murder-guest
to let the Shield-Danes look to their feud
deal with Grendel. To God I give thanks
that I see you now sound and war-proud.”

Beowulf spoke son of Ecgtheow:

2000 “That great struggle, good Hygelac,
is no secret now how I snared Grendel
a grim grip-battle in that great meadhall
home of the Spear-Danes where that hell's demon
ruled in darkness with death and thane-grief
through long sorrow-years. I stopped that murder
so that no other creature of the kin of Grendel
on this broad earthyard may boast of that fight—
there were dawn-sounds of victory vengeance in Heorot
for greed and murder. I greeted Hrothgar
2010 when I first entered that ill-fated hall.

Soon that wise one war-son of Healfdene
was healed from mourning found hope in my words

made room by his sons a seat by the gift-throne.

Joy was sung there—seldom have I known

hall-thanes happier under heaven's arch-vault
such great mead-laughter. Then the good folk-queen
weaver of peace-thoughts walked through the hall
greeted the young ones gave arm-bracelets
to cheerful warriors as she went to her seat.

2020 At times in the hall Hrothgar's daughter-child
offered ale-vessels to the old counselors—
hall-thanes thanked her hailed her by name
fair Freawaru as she fetched the hall-drink,
passed among the benches. She is promised, I hear,
gold-worthy maiden, to great Froda's son.

The helm of the Danes hopes for peace now
bargains with Heathobards a bride for a truce
buys with his daughter, his dear girl-child,
a settlement of strife. Seldom it happens
2030 after spilling of blood that swords will relax
blood-spears stay idle though the bride prevail.

Then the young hall-king Heathobards' leader
and his thanes around him may think sorrow-thoughts
when he walks with his queen in the wide meadhall—

a Danish warrior walks in their company
wears at his girdle a great treasure-sword
gold-hilted warblade wonder-smith's heirloom
Heathobard weapon, worn to that battle
on that sorrowful day when their spear-king fell
2040 laid down his life with his loved ones around him.

Then an old battle-thane can bear it no more
stares at that Sword-Dane as he struts past him
remembers with mourning morning-cold death
grim spear-slaughter, speaks to a young one
reminds him of honor urges him on
wakening war-thoughts with words of revenge:

'Do you see, young friend, the sword on that Dane
that weapon your father wore to his death
on his last earth-day, that old treasure-sword
2050 he bore to the field when he fell to Shield-Danes
who won that war-day after Withergyld lay
sank with his sword on that sorrowful meadow?
Now this man-child of a murdering Dane
walks beneath this roof wearing that battle-blade
that is yours by birth, boasting of murder
proud of that heirloom pilfered from your kin.'

He whispers and urges whips him with words
with mourning messages memories of tears
till the queen's hall-thane is quiet at last
2060 stilled by a swordbite sleeps forever
stripped of his life—his slayer escapes
slips through the night to the known woodland.

Then the truce is broken battle is renewed
oathwords forgotten. Ingeld remembers
longs for his father—love for his wife
is cooled by that longing for kin and companions.

I have small hope now for Heathobards' friendship
peace with the Danes in the days to come

truce through marriage.

I will tell you more

2070 of my fight with Grendel give you my story
describe clearly for my king and friend
that hard hand-battle. When heaven's gem
glided under earth came an angry guest
blood-minded monster to that mighty wine-hall
where we all waited wardens of the night.
He seized Hondscioh slaughtered him there
our doomed companion—he died quickly
good soldier-friend—Grendel murdered him
crunched him greedily gulped all of him
2080 crammed into his mouth that doom-marked warrior.
None the sooner for that would he stop his murdering
bloody-toothed killer baleful visitor—
not yet was he ready to run from that hall
but sure of his strength he seized my fingers
in his great claw-hand. A glove hung on him
wide and deep-fingered woven by elf-smiths
death-bloodied trap trimmed skillfully
with hides of dragons hell's murder-work.
He hoped to stuff me in that huge corpse-bag
2090 cram me inside carry me from Heorot
one more victim—I waited no longer
stood to greet him grappled his hand.
It's too long to tell how I tamed that monster
gave him revenge with my good handgrip—
in that high meadhall Hygelac my lord
I memoried your name. He managed to escape
held to life-breath for a little more time
left behind him high beneath the gable
his hand on the wall wandered in sorrow
2100 to that foul fen-mere fell to his death.
For that grim battle-rush the guardian of the Danes
heaped me with heirlooms horses and armor
many a goldgift when morning-sun rose
and benches brightened with banquet in Heorot.
There was song and laughter—the Spear-Danes' king
stretched his memory for stories of childhood.
At times the old one touched his harpstrings
strummed the songwood sang of the past
moments of heartgrief high victories
2110 remnants of his youth from reaches of his mind.
At times he brooded bound by his years
an old sword-warrior sorrowing for friends
worn with winters welling with memories
yearning for dead ones young hearth-fellows.
In that high meadhall we held to our feasting
drank from treasure-cups till dark shadow-pall
sank through the light. Then sorrow came calling
greedy for thane-blood Grendel's hell-mother

2120 from her cold moor-cavern mourning for her son
dead forest-fiend. That dark-minded she-wolf
avenged her monster-child vile fen-stalker
killed for her offspring. It was kind Aeschere
counselor for kings cold with slaughter-death.
Nor could they find him when night-shadows paled
bear up his body for burning on high
lift him to the pyre beloved companion
for funeral flames. She fetched his corpse
through the dark forest-track to her deep water-den.
That was for Hrothgar the hardest of griefs
2130 sorrows he suffered through slow winters.
Then the king asked me for kindness once more
begged me to plunge through that poisonous water
search for the source of his soul's misery
pay for that loss. He promised me treasures.
I swam to the bottom of that bloodstained pond
dived past hell-demons to that deep monster-home
where that devil's she-wolf dragged me inside.
For a while we wrestled raged through that cavern—
the mere welled with gore from Grendel's mother
2140 as I carved her head off in that cavern of death
with a huge giant-sword—from hell's earth-cave
I rose with my life unready for death.
Then that son of Healfdene in his hall once more
brought marvelous treasures to mark my victory.
That king of the Danes kept his promises—
I lost no reward for my work that day,
gold for my strength, for he gave me victory-gifts,
Healfdene's offspring, to my own desire.
I bring them to you best of hall-kings
2150 give them with pleasure—my place is in Götland
my life at your service—little do I have
of kin in this earthyard closer than my lord.”
He bore to his guardian the golden boar-banner
bright-burnished helmet hand-linked mailcoat
gold-handled sword. The Geat-champion spoke:
“Hrothgar gave to me this great treasure-sword
a warleader's weapon—words come with it
borne from the king with this best of heirlooms.
He said that Heorogar held it for his own,
2160 lord of the Shield-Danes, for long battle-years.
Nor would he give it to his good male-child,
beloved Heorowearð, though his heart was strong.
Use it as you wish my young warrior-king!”
Then, as I heard, to the hall came forth
four war-horses well-matched and foot-swift
apple-fallow steeds—he served his king there
with kind words and treasures. So a kinsman should do—
no weaving of death-nets for his dear companion
no sly trickery treacherous design.
2170 To King Hygelac helmsman of the Geats
his nephew and friend was fast in promise
each man to the other mindful of gifts.

To Hygd the fair one folk-queen of the Geats
he bore the neck-ring—since that bright feast-day
her breast was enriched with that royal goldgift.
Three horses he gave her haltered and saddle-bred.

So he lived in honor Ecgtheow's son
heartstrong warrior borne high to praise
by pride and mind-strength—not poisoned with ale
2180 did he slay his hearth-friends with hard murder-blades.
He held to his strength strongest of them all,
through those long life-days loaned by the Wielder,
harbored it well. In the hall of the Geats
as he grew to manhood no good was thought of him
nor did the Geat-lord grant him renown
make him treasure-gifts on mead-benches there—
warriors believed that his worth was little
no champion there. But change came to him
courage and war-strength as he climbed to manhood.

2190 Then King Hygelac called for his gift—
to the hall was borne Hrethel's treasure-sword
gold-handled warblade—no Geatish edge-weapon
was stronger in story more steeped in battle-blood.
He bore that treasure to Beowulf's hands
gave him seven thousand of separate domain
hall and high-seat. They held together
the kingdom of the Geats kept it in friendship
the old homeland though Hygelac's rule
was broader in kind a king's boundaries.

THE FINAL THIRD of *Beowulf* begins at a time when Beowulf has been ruling the Geats for fifty years, at which point a nameless servant or slave, fleeing punishment for some transgression, stumbles upon a dragon's treasure and steals a cup with which he hopes to buy a pardon. The dragon discovers the theft and begins the destruction that leads to Beowulf's final battle.

The treasure was first buried by nameless nobles, who protected it with a curse referred to near the end of the poem. It was much later unearthed and enjoyed for a time by men who gradually died out, leaving the final survivor who delivers the elegy at the beginning of this section and deposits the treasure in a barrow by the sea, where the dragon discovers it. Ironically, Beowulf dies thinking that the treasure he has won will benefit his people; instead, the Geats burn or bury all of it with Beowulf. As the anonymous messenger indicates towards the end, the old curse will probably punish the Geats since they left much of the treasure undestroyed in the burial mound.

The Geat-Swede conflicts and the fall of Hygelac are presented in a natural if unchronological way at appropriate moments throughout this section of the poem in highly allusive episodes, by the poet himself, by Beowulf, and by the anonymous messenger. In the opening sentence the poet mentions the deaths of Hygelac and his son Heardred, thus bringing together two separate events in a long series summarized as follows:

Three generations of Geats and Swedes are involved in these events. After Haethcyn accidentally kills his older brother Herebeald, King Hrethel of the Geats dies of a broken heart. The Swedes then attack the Geats in Geatish territory at Hreosnabeorh, after which Haethcyn leads a punitive expedition into Swedish territory at Hrefnawudu/Hrefnesholt (alternate names for "Ravenswood"), where Ongentheow, king of the Swedes, kills him and is himself killed by Wulf and Eofor, young

Geatish warriors.

The first generation is now gone. Of the Geats, only Hygelac, his young son Heardred, and Beowulf remain. Of the Swedes, there are Ongentheow's sons Onela and Ohthere, and Ohthere's sons Eanmund and Eadgils.

During a pause in the Geat-Swede conflicts, Hygelac leads an expedition up the lower Rhine into the land of Franks and Frisians (including Hugas, Hetware, and Merovingians), where he is killed as he prepares to leave, Beowulf alone escaping. Heardred is now king of the Geats and Ohthere rules the Swedes.

When Ohthere dies, Onela seizes the throne from his nephew and sets in motion a series of conflicts that leave only two principals alive: Eadgils, now king of the Swedes, and Beowulf, now king of the Geats. Fifty years later, Wiglaf, chosen by Beowulf to succeed him, wears the armor of the slain brother of Eadgils, presumably still king of the Swedes, an unfortunate situation.



III

2200 Long afterwards in lingering years
after sharp swordswings sang in anger
and death found Hygelac by distant waters—
after Battle-Swedes came crossed into Götland
brought to Heardred baleful spear-play
bore him from life in the land of Weather-Geats
haled from the gift-throne Hereric's nephew—
after Beowulf rose to rule that kingdom
fathered the Geats for fifty winters
learned through the years lessons of the throne—
2210 once more a monster moved through the night
a raging flame-dragon ruled in darkness
fire-grim guardian of a great treasure-mound
steep stonebarrow—a secret pathway
led to this wealth. A wandering fugitive
stumbled inside by the sleeping dragon
stole from the treasure a studded ale-cup
jeweled gold-vessel. The jealous goldguard
did not hide his wrath raged at that theft
by a sneaking runaway. Soon the Geatfolk
2220 found that his fury fell upon their land.
Not at all willfully did that wandering slave
breach that barrow bear the cup away
but in desperate need that nameless servant
hiding in heath-slopes from hateful whiplashing
sorrowful slave-wretch stumbling for his life
fell into that gloom. He found quickly
that terror waited there walled him in fear—
the slumbering serpent lay still in repose
unwary of his guest winking jewel-stones
2230 heaped in his coils—one cup was taken
an offering for mercy.

Many were the heirlooms
in that deep earthhouse old hall-treasures
gathered there in grief in gone sorrow-days
rings and bracelets bountiful throne-gifts
left hopelessly by a last survivor
dear gold-memories. Death took them all
in times long vanished victor of men
till one still living alone with that wealth
lordless hall-warden could hope no longer
2240 to wield that treasure—time was upon him
boundary of life. A barrow stood ready

under the bluff-rock above the waterways
nestled in the cliff narrow and secret.

He bore those treasures to the barrow's fold
ring-hoard of warriors worthy of a king
sealed them in sorrow and spoke his grief-words:
"Hold you now, Earth now that heroes are sleeping
these treasures of men. They were taken from you
by good warrior-friends gone into silence—

2250 funeral fire-greed has fetched my people
from their loaned life-days, led into darkness
bright hall-laughter. Where are the sword-bearers
quick board-servants to burnish the ale-cups
vessels of victory? They have vanished away.

Hard mask-helmets hand-wrought with gold
shall gleam no longer—good men are sleeping
who should polish them well for warriors and kings.
This moldering mailcoat maimed in battle-clash
with bites of edges over breaking of shields

2260 crumbles in darkness—this death-stained swordvest
can march no longer linked ring-corselet
by a warrior's side. No sweet harp-strumming
gathers the songwords nor the good falcon
swings through the hall nor the swift battle-steed
clatters in the yard. Cold death-wardens
have sent into silence sons of this land."

So the mourning one mindful of youth-years
one after all of them wanders alone
through day and night-time till death's welling

2270 comes to his heart. The hoard lay open—
the old fire-serpent found it waiting there
who burns through the air blasting hall-timbers—
searing hate-creature soaring through the night
ringed with fire-breath raging through darkness
torturing earth-dwellers—ever shall he seek
hidden treasure-hoards heathen gold-chambers
to guard in his coils—no good does it bring him.

Three hundred winters he hoarded his prize
wrapped his riches in his rocky barrow,
crafty treasure-ward, till a trembling slave
kindled his anger claimed a gem-cup
bore it to his lord begged a settlement
a gift for his life. That great treasure-mound
was touched by thief-hands—time was granted
to that lucky wretch. His lord received it
ancient elf's work ale-cup for kings.

2280 Then that serpent woke swelled with anger—
he searched the stonework saw beside the mound
a hostile foot-track where that hopeless slave
had stolen near to him stepped past his head.
2290 So may the undoomed easily survive
sorrow and ruin he who reaps the favor
of the world's Wielder. That waking flame-serpent
rushed round his treasure raged for that thief
who crept past his sleep swelled him with goldgrief.

Hot with hate-thoughts he hurtled outside

circled the barrow—he saw no creature

on the wild heathland hiding from fury.

At times he shot back to his bountiful riches

2300 searched for his cup—soon he discovered
that some man-creature had diminished his hoard
plundered his goldnest. No patience eased him

as he watched and waited for waning of that day.

That fearful treasure-guard fumed with yearning

writhing to ransom his rich jewel-cup

with flames from the sky. The sun grew heavy

dragged down the day—the dragon was ready

on his wall by the sea soared with balefire

fueled by his fury. The feud had begun,

2310 sorrow for landfolk which soon would be ended
by their great people-king, grievously paid for.

That serpent went sailing spewing flame-murder

blistering meadhalls—mountains of hate-fire

moved through the land—he would leave no creature

alive on the earth lone night-flyer.

That death-dragon's work was widely visible—

with vicious vengeance, violent greed-death,

that winged sky-monster seared and blasted

the home of the Geats. To the hoard he dived

2320 dark stonebarrow as day broke the night.

With great fire-bellows he flung through the land

bale-flames and ashes—to his barrow he fled

for shelter from sunrise. Soon all failed him.

To Beowulf was sent sorrowful tidings

grief-heavy news that his great meadhall

mightiest of gift-thrones had melted in flames

cindered by dragon-heat. That darkest message

was horror to his heart hardest of fate-strokes.

He thought for a time he had turned from the Wielder

2330 angered the Shaper with shameful action

bittered his Maker—his breast was troubled

with dark wonder deep soul-questions.

The dragon had charred that champion's kingdom

blasted to ashes the earth around him

from sea unto sea. Soon that battle-king

lord of the Geats would give him answer.

He called for a shield shaped to his war-needs

a great iron-round for the Geats' defender

steel life-guardian—he had learned clearly

2340 that no good treewood could turn back those flames

board against fire-breath. The border of loan-days

had come for that lord last of earth-moments

and the dragon as well doomed to depart

who had lived with treasure for long centuries.

The old people-king was too proud for war-troops

had no wish to battle that wondrous night-flyer

with strong warriors—no serpent's fire-blast

bothered his heartstrength no hot-searing flames

brought fear to that warrior who had wagered before
crushed sea-monsters on the swelling waves

sailed on to Heorot hall of the Spear-Danes
salvaged Hrothgar from hell's murderer
grappled with Grendel and his grim mother-fiend
returned with his life.

Not the least of battles
was the meeting of hands where Hygelac died
king of the Geats who came to his death-fight
in the land of Frisians far from his home—
Hrethel's warrior-son won his death there
battered by swordswings. Beowulf escaped
by the might of his hands hard grappling-strength—
he hauled to the shore helmets and corselets
of thirty warriors from the throng of battle
when he turned towards the sea. Seldom did warriors
of the Hetware race have reason to boast
of fierce spear-battle—few clung to life
to seek their homeland after hard swordbites.

Then Ecgtheow's son only survivor
sailed heart-heavy to the home of the Geats.
There Hygd offered him hoard and kingdom
did not trust her boy to take the gift-throne
defend it strongly against slaughtering guests
harbor it from harm after Hygelac's death-day.
None the sooner for that could sorrowing Geatfolk
beg Beowulf to borrow their throne
take loan of the gift-hall from beloved Heardred
child-king of Hygelac chosen by his blood—
he hailed him as lord held him in friendship
counseled him kindly till he came to manhood
and the Geats' gift-throne.

Grim fugitives
sons of Ohthere sought his help there—
they fled from Onela uncle and throne-thief
greatest of sea-kings Swedes' warrior-lord
who seized the gift-hall from his good brother-sons.
Heardred paid there for hosting his friends—
Hygelac's child-king chose a life-wound
when throne-hungry Onela Ongentheow's son
followed his nephews felled young Eanmund
then fled to his homeland when Heardred lay dead—
left the gift-hall the Geats' kingdom
in Beowulf's care. He was kind to his people.
He remembered that day dark murder-time
gave then to Eadgils good warrior-help
backed him in sorrow—with swordmen and horses
he sent that young one beyond the lake-waters,
Ohthere's son, who settled that feud
mindful of slaughter, stepped to the throne
of the Swedish kingdom.

Then King Beowulf
Ecgtheow's son-child suffered and triumphed
burnishing his name with bright gift-years

2400 till that fearful twilight when the fire-dragon soared.
He marched then to battle one man among twelve

lord of the Geatfolk to look at that monster.
He had seen before then the source of that feud
cause of that torment—it came to his hand
precious treasure-cup through that poor fugitive
who had angered the dragon entered his gold-barrow—
that thief-slave was now the thirteenth among them
unwilling guide-servant guiltily led them
to the sleeping serpent. He stepped fearfully

2410 to the old earth-hall ancient stonebarrow
under the seacliff set into the rock
near the swirling waves. In its walls were gathered
gems and goldwork. The guard of that treasure
monstrous fire-warrior minded his booty
held it under earth—not easily bought
was that glittering gold not given away.

He sat by the cliffside keeper of the Geats
hailed his men then hearth-companions
wished them good luck. His wavering heart-thoughts
wandered towards death—wyrð was close then
2420 ready to receive that solemn warrior-king
seek out his soulboard sunder it from breath
spirit from body-flesh—the center of his life
would soon be delivered from its locked flesh-home.

Beowulf spoke son of Ecgtheow:

“Fierce spear-charges I fought in my youth
moments of shieldclash—I remember it all.

In my seventh life-year I was sent from my father
given for training to that good folk-king

2430 Hrethel of the Geats who gave me father-love
measured my childhood mindful of our kinship.
No less was I loved in those long growth-days
than the sons of that king kind uncle-friends
Herebeald and Haethcyn and Hygelac my lord.

The oldest of his sons by sorrowful chance
slept in a murder-bed through a sibling’s error
when Haethcyn was shamed shot from a horn-bow
wounded Herebeald with a wandering arrow
missed his target murdered his elder

2440 his blood-loyal brother with a baleful point.
No payment was made for that pitiful crime
but aching heartwounds were offered to Hrethel—
no vengeance followed the fall of that prince.

Same is the sorrow of a solemn hall-lord
sharp soul-torture when his son rides hanging
young upon the gallows. Then he gropes for mercy
sings a horror-song as his son dangles there
food for the raven—he can find no help
no mercy or revenge for his mourning heart.

2450 Each morning his mind measures that deathfall
his son’s departure—no patience soothes him
to wait through the years for young followers

heirs to his treasure when his only prince
has spoken his last left him for darkness.
He stares in sorrow at his son's life-home
the wasted wine-hall by winds emptied
bereft of bench-joy—riders are sleeping now
silent in their graves—no sound of the harp
warms the meadhall where men once gathered.

2460 He stays in his bed sings his heartsongs
no longer does he roam—too roomy they seem
fields and homestead. So Hrethel in his way
grieved for Herebeald heavy with bloodgrief
wandering in pain—no way could he find
to bring his slayer to settle for that death
nor could he hate Haethcyn his blood-son
or love him still for that loathsome deed.

His grief was too great too grim for living—
he gave up his hall-joy for God's comfort.
2470 To his kin he gave as a king should do
his land and homestead when he left this earthyard.
Then trouble began between Geats and Battle-Swedes
across the lakelands as they clashed in shield-war
hard killing-times after Hrethel's deathday
when sons of Ongentheow sought out the Geats
with angry armies not eager for peace
held them to sword-play at Hreosnabeorh's mound
struck against their shields with sharp blade-edges.

2480 Later in that kind my kinsmen answered them
took then their blood-pay as the tale is known
though one paid there with his precious life-breath
a hard bargain—Haethcyn fell deathwards
king of the Geats killed in spear-battle.
On the morrow, I heard, a man took vengeance
with swift sword-anger slew that king-killer
when Eofor quenched there Ongentheow's life
mindful of hall-gifts remembered his lord
did not spare his swordswing split through the helmet—
the battle-bleak Swede bent down to death.

2490 I repaid lord Hygelac in proud battle-play
for the treasure he gave times of the gift-throne,
served him with my sword. He soon gave me land
homestead and meadhall. He had no reason
to search among Gifthas or good Spear-Danes
or the Swedish kingdom for servants to his throne
to lavish rewards on a lesser warrior—
always at swordtime I stood before them all
guided my spearmen in strong war-clashing
and still I am ready while this sword endures

2500 this treasured Naegling that I took from death
on that sorrowful day when I slew Daeghrefn
killed him with my hands Hugas' sword-champion—
no time did he have to take corpse-plunder
fetch breast-corselets to the Frisian leader
but gave up his life guardian of the banner
stronghearted warrior. No sword killed him

but my clenched handgrip crushed his bone-house
the springs of his heart. Now this sword I won there
finest of smith-blades will fight for that hoard.”

2510 Beowulf spoke then boastwords to fight by

a last venture-speech: “I lived in my youth
through hard war-moments—now I am ready,
weary with loan-days worn down with years,
for final glory-time if that grim hall-burner
will come to meet me from his mound of gold.”

2520 He greeted them then the Geats around him
good helmet-men gave them farewell
his final boastwords: “I would bear no sword
no shield or helmet if my hands could win
settle this fire-fight with this fuming monster
grapple him deathwards as with Grendel I did—
but here I expect hot flame-blasting
life-searing breath—better then for this
are war-shield and corselet. Not one footstep
will I move from this stone this smoking barrow.

2530 Wyrð will decide the way of this meeting
and man’s Measurer. My mind is strong
no more will I boast of monsters of the past.
Wait in these woods in your webbed corselets
with shields and spears to see which of us
will manage to survive vicious war-wounds
or kneel here to death. This is not your fight
nor the measure of anyone but only myself
to meet this monster match death with him
reach for his life. If luck moves with me
I will gather this gold or give my life here
if cold deathbale carries me away.”

2540 Beowulf rose then with his round iron-shield
war-helmet gleaming went with his years
under the stone-cliff—in his strength he trusted
one against all no way for a coward!

His tread was still young after years of warclash
at borders of his land when boar-banners rushed
with a sounding of horns. He saw by the cliffwall
a stonebarrow standing—a stream broke from it
burst from the wall bright with fire-flash
blistering the sand—he could step no closer
unburned by that breath nor bear that dragon-heat
standing so close as his shield grew hotter.

2550 Then from his breast bolstered with anger
the lord of the Geats loosened a wordblast
stormed stouthearted—under steep graystone
his battle-stout voice boomed to the mound.
Hate was awakened the hoard-guardian knew
the sound of that leader—there was little time then
to settle for peace. From the stone treasure-cave
burning breath-flame burst in a flash
old anger-fire—the earth trembled.

2560 The strong hall-king hefted his shield then
sought some relief from that singeing blast—

that ringed serpent was ready for combat
greedy for revenge. The good warrior-king
unsheathed his sword then swift in its edges
old treasure-blade. Each of those fighters
warrior and monster was wary of the other.
Beowulf stood still with his steep iron-shield
death faced with death as the dragon coiled then
swelling with fury simmering with rage.

2570 He burst then roaring broke from the mound
struck to his fate. The strong iron-shield
turned back the flames the fires of that breath
protected that loved one too little that time
as he found that day the first war-moment
when wyrd turned from him took from his hands
luck at sword-play. He lifted his sword,
son of Ecgtheow, struck the fire-snake
with that ancient blade—the edge weakened
bit that fiend-bone in a feebler way

2580 than the king had need of though he cut strongly
swung with heartstrength. Then the hoard-guardian
after that swordswing slithered with anger
spewed his balefire—that searing flame-flash
cindered the meadow. The mighty Geat-lord
could not boast of victory—his blade failed him there
sharp treasure-steel betrayed by hell-bone
bit too softly. Sad came the moment
for that old warrior-king Ecgtheow's son
to yield ground-plain give to that monster—
much against his will he would wander elsewhere
2590 depart from that earthland as each man will do
give up his loan-days. Not long after that
monster and man-king met once again.

The hoardwarden strengthened with hot breast-roars
the bellows of his breath—in that burning air
embraced by fire-loops the folk-king suffered.
Not exactly in heaps did those hand-companions
sons of noblemen stand close to him,
those brave swordswingers, but they bent to the woods
sheltered their lives. There swelled in one of them
2600 shame in his mind. No man can deny
claims of kinship if he cares for valor.

Wiglaf his name was Weohstan's son
Aelfhere's kin keen linden-man
young sword-warrior—he saw his manlord
with blistered war-mask blasted by heat.
He remembered the bounty from his blood-kin lord
wealthy homestead of the Waegmundingas
all land and folk-right his father had owned.
He could bear no shame brandished his shield,
2610 yellow lindenwood, lifted on high
his old treasure-sword. That was Eanmund's weapon
Ohthere's son sorrowful fugitive
struck down in battle by brave Weohstan
who gave his armor to Onela then

strong mask-helmet steel-meshed mailcoat
ancient wondersword. Onela returned them
his nephew's war-gear to Weohstan's hands
found no fault there no feud between them
though he killed in battle his blood-brother's son.

2620 He kept that armor carried it to Götland
stored it safely till his son was ready
grown to his shield shaped for battle-fame.
Among the Geats then he gave to Wiglaf
that great weapon-prize as he went from life
forth from the earth. For the first time now
this strong hearth-soldier stepped into war-play
fought with his lord on that fire-black meadow.
His mind did not melt nor that mighty gift-sword
failed him at need—that fiery gold-serpent

2630 soon discovered that when they came together.
Wiglaf spoke then words heart-heavy
shouted with scorn this shameful message:
“I remember the times when we took mead-drink
when all of us promised our proud warrior-king
by the high gift-throne where he gave us swords
that we'd pay him back for this bright armor
if ever he needed us, offer him at spear-time
our helmets and swords. So did he choose us
picked from his hall-thanes these proud shieldmen

2640 graced us with gifts gave me kin-treasures
gathered us to back him good hearth-warriors
eager helmet-men. Our old gift-lord
decided to fight this fire-spewer
alone once again with his great wonder-strength
armed with a war-name earned through a lifetime
forged now with deeds. Now the day has come
when this heartstrong chief needs help in battle
good sword-wielders. Let us go quickly

2650 fight beside him in this fiery business
grim flame-terror. God knows in me
I'm ready for fire to feed on my body
cinder me with flames beside my protector.
It's a poor showing if we pack our shields
haul them back now no help to our leader—
we should fell this monster fight beside our lord
our flame-wounded king. I can clearly tell you
that it's not old custom to cringe at this moment
leave him to suffer singed and age-worn
burning in this battle. Now both of us here
2660 will share swordswings shields and helmets.”

He stepped through that hell-reek hoisted his weapons
brought help to his kinsman kindled him with words:
“Beloved Beowulf bear up your heart—
you said in your youth in yore-days of glory
that you never would allow while life held to you
the lowering of your name. Now known through the earth,
great-hearted Beowulf, bear up your mind-strength
to finish this dragon—I will fight beside you.”

2670 After those help-words the hell-serpent came
raging gold-miser glaring with death-eyes
flushed with fire-fury to flash away the life
of that hateful challenger. Hard flame-launching
shriveled the shieldwood seared through mailcoats—

now helpless to bear that hot serpent-breath
the young hall-thane hid beside his lord
held to the iron-round hoping for relief
from those awesome flame-spears. The old battle-king
remembered his glory-name mightily struck then
with his sharp blade-edge borne so strongly
2680 that it stuck in that neck. Naegling burst then
broke upon that bone Beowulf's trophy-sword
old and battle-hard. That best of honor-blades
failed him at need finest of smith-steel
could give him no help. His hand was too strong
overswung each sword as stories have told me
struck too forcefully when he stepped to battle—
wonder-hard weapons did not work for him.

For the third time then twisting in hate-coils
that monstrous fire-dragon mindful of his feud
2690 struck past that shield with his searing bellows-breath
went straight to Beowulf bit round his neck
with bitter venom-teeth. Beowulf stopped then
his life-force draining in dark blood-welling.
Then, as I heard, that hall-king's champion
young kin-warrior came to that monster
with craft and weapon-skill as his king taught him.
He ducked past the head—hot flame-belching
burned his hand then as he buried his sword
burnished treasure-blade in that black snake-belly.

2700 Then that great fire-breath grew feebler at last
that blistering blast bellowed more softly
as the blade took hold. Then Beowulf rose
gathered his mindthoughts grasped his shortsword
bitter and battle-sharp broad steel-edges—
the Geat-lord struck severed the ring-bones.
They felled that fiend found his life-core
kinsmen together cut him to hell-death
king and his soldier. So should a man be

2710 a thane with his lord. The leader of the Geats
fought his last blood-fight the bourne of his deeds
daytimes of this world. Then that dragonbite wound
burned into his blood blistered and swelled there
a monster's deathbite. Murderous poison
welled within his breast baleful serpent-gall
pushed towards his heart. The proud one wandered
slowly by the wall sat by the barrow-stone
lost in life-thoughts. He looked upon giants' work
how the stone arches stout with pillar-strength
the old earth-hall entered the cliffside.

2720 Then with his hands that heart-loyal thane
laved him with water, his beloved blood-king,

youth knelt by age yearning to comfort
his wound-weary lord loosened his helmet.
Beowulf spoke then sick with a life-wound
mortal slaughter-bite. He saw clearly
that his long life-years could linger no more
earth's bright moments—all was departing
the number of his days death immeasurably near:

2730 “Now I would give to my good son-child
my armor and weapons if only a land-heir
had been granted to me to guard my kingdom
prince of my loins. I have led this people
for fifty love-winters. No folk-king there was
any on this earth of any neighborland
who dared come to me with dark battle-rush
goad me with spears. In this good homeland
I lived through loan-years looked to my kingdom
sought no treachery swore no oath-lies
spared anger-words. For all these things
2740 sick with life-wound I sing in my heart.

The Shaper of men cannot shame my going
with murder of kinsmen at the moment of silence
when life darkens. Leave me to rest here
go to that goldhoard under gray cliffrock,
beloved Wiglaf, now the worm lies cooling
sleeptened by swords stripped of his treasure.

Hurry, my warrior, help me to see
this serpent's wealth-hoard wound gold-collars
bright wonder-gems—bear them before me
2750 to ease my heartbane help me to leave
this life and people that I long have held.”

Charged with those words Weohstan's son-child
obeyed his beloved life-weary kinsman
stepped through the stench of stilled dragon-breath
entered the rock-vault of that ancient barrow.
Enclosed there by pillars piles of heirlooms
glinted in the gloom gleaming treasure-heaps
glittering gemstones by the gray rockwork
wonders by the walls in that worm's gold-den
2760 the old dawn-flyer's ancient wine-vessels
rich silver-cups bereft of polishers
stripped of ornament. There were swordstruck helmets
old and rust-laden arm-bracelets tarnishing
curiously twisted. A king's treasure-mound
gold upon the ground will grab at the minds
of all hall-warriors hidden though it be.

High above the hoard like a hovering glow-lamp
hung a golden banner greatest of handworks
laced with limbcraft—light shone from it
2770 gleamed through the darkness a guide for his eyes
to stare at wonders. Of that serpent's coil
no trace could be seen—swords had removed him.
Then, as I heard, that hoard was plundered
smith-wonders gathered by a sorrowing warrior
who piled in his arms plates and jewel-cups

to his own liking and the old gold-banner
brightest of standards. Biting steel-edges
fire-hardened swordblades freed that treasure-trove
quenched the hate-fire hot terror-breath
2780 of that lone mound-miser who measured the land
belching with flame-waves burning through the night
searing the darkness till he died of murder.

Wiglaf hurried then weighted with that bounty
trembling to learn if his beloved shield-king
was breathing life-breath as he last saw him
lord of the Weather-Geats waiting for treasures
sick with blood-bane bordered in darkness.

2790 Wrapped in those riches he rushed to his lord
stricken bounty-king seared and wound-weary
at the end of life. He laved him again
wakened him with water till words came pressing
broke through his breast. The battle-king spoke then
gazed at the goldworks that great treasure-pile:
“For these fine war-trophies I finally must say
thanks to the Wielder Wonder-King of all
our glorious Deemer for such dear gold-marvels
that I now may leave to my beloved Geatfolk
at this last death-moment darkening of light.

2800 Now that I’ve bought this bright treasure-mound
with my old lifeblood look to my kingdom
the needs of my Geats—I must now leave you.
Tell my battle-friends to build me a mound
high by the balefire on the headland’s point.
It will signal my name to sons of this nation
tower to the sky on tall Hronesnaes
so that sea-travelers in time will call it
Beowulf’s barrow as they beat through the swells
sail their prow-ships on the pounding waves.”

2810 He removed from his throat a marvelous neck-ring
gold-gleaming collar gave it to his thane,
young spear-warrior, yielded his armor
helmet and mailcoat hailed him farewell:
“You are the last of our beloved kinsmen
the Waegmunding clan. Wyrð has guided
all of my family to fate’s shadowland
my fine companions—I will follow them now.”

2820 Those words were the last of that long-loved king
his final heart-thoughts for the hot balefire
bone-cracking flames—from his breast at last
his soul went seeking safety in praise.

Young Wiglaf then yearned for his master
wept within his mind as he watched the old one
loved throne-warden lay down his earthyears
moments of his life. The monster sprawled there
uncoiled earthdragon cut down from flight
ended by swordswings. That old death-flyer
no longer wielded his wealthy ringhoard
but steel blade-edges stopped his life-fire
hard and battle-sharp smith-hammer’s leaving.

2830 That soaring night-flyer stilled by murder-wounds
fell to the earth near that fire-kept treasure.
No longer at sunset did he sail with hate-flames
roaming the night-dark raging for his cup
scorching the skyways but he sank at last
hushed by the swordwork of heartstrong warriors.
Few good battle-men bold though they be
strongest in warfare swordmen to be feared
reckless in life-dare ready for deathday
would stand against the blast of that searing heat-breath
2840 touch with their hands the tiniest of gems
if they found waiting there a waking moundguard
coiled in his barrow. Beowulf exchanged
those lordly treasures for his life's boundary—
king and enemy earned the end there
of their loaned earth-days.

Not long from then
those safe war-watchers stole from the woods
cowardly trust-breakers ten sword-shirkers
who dared not earlier enter with their shields
in that hard moment of their manlord's need.
2850 They came with their shields shamed war-weapons
aching with silence where the old one lay.
They looked then at Wiglaf who watched hopelessly,
one man alone by his lord's shoulder,
bathed him with water—no breath came to him.
No way could he find no wishful begging
to lengthen the life of that loved gift-king
nor change the Measurer's moment of release—
the judgment of God would guide the destiny
of every man-creature as it always does.
2860 Then grim welcome-words welled in the heart
of that young shieldman for those shameful wretches.
Wiglaf spoke then Weohstan's offspring
grief-heavy warrior glared at unloved ones:
“That he may say who will speak the truth
that this good manlord who made you such gifts
rich war-trappings that you wear this moment,
by bright ale-benches bettered you with swords
burnished shield-boards byrnies and helmets
from lord to his thanes, lent you the finest
2870 of all steel-swords smith-wrought with care—
that he then utterly all that battle-gear
entirely wasted in the time of his need.
That lonesome folk-king could find no cause
to boast of his war-thanes but the broad Wielder
Worldshaper granted that our great manlord
alone with his sword served that monster.
Little of life-help could I lend him then
give him at battle but I gathered my courage
over my war-strength to aid my kinsman.
2880 Always the weaker was that old night-flyer
when I struck him below—slackened fire-breath
flamed from his head. Too few warriors

crowded around him courage was lacking.
Now shall treasure-gifts the taking of swords
all homeland joys in the halls of your kinsmen
all happiness cease. You will sorrowfully wander
stripped of landrights beloved homesteads
alone in your exile when other battle-thanes
learn of your failure your flight to the woods
dragging your life-shields. Death will be better

for each one of you than a wasted life.”

He sent the news then a solemn messenger
up by the cliff-edge where the curious Geats
all morning-long mourningly waited
shrouded in fear of the Shaper’s will—
the end of his life or unlikely return
of their loved hall-king. He lacked no doom-words
that ready news-speaker who rode to the headland
but called out clearly to the crowd waiting there:

“Now is the goldking of the Geatish landfolk
friendlord to us all fast in his death-sleep
dwelling in peace now through that serpent’s teeth.
Unflaming lies now that lone night-scorcher
sickened by shortsword. With sharp Naegling
our war-crafty leader could work no life-wound
on that venomous head. Hard by Beowulf
Wiglaf waits for us Weohstan’s blood-son
young war-champion watching over death
holds with sorrow a silent head-guard

by monster and lord. We will live to see
dark slaughter-days when the death of our king
is widely heralded over wave-rolling seas
to Franks and Frisians. That feud was started
hard against Hugas when Hygelac went forth
sailing with float-troops to Frisian territory
where the swordstrong Hetware humbled him in battle
gained victory there with greater force-fighting
till that best of spear-kings bent down to death
fell among foot-troops—no fine gold-plunder

he brought to our hall. Since that heavy slaughter-day
no stern Merovingians have sent us peace-tokens.
Nor will Battle-Swedes bear us good tidings
wish us good will but it’s widely known
that stout Ongentheow struck to the life-core
of Haethcyn Hrethling at Hrefnawudu’s edge
when eager for power the proud Geat-force
went seeking with spears the Swedishthane-warriors.

Soon the old one Ohthere’s father
taught them battle-lore turned back their forces
cut down their leader recaptured his wife
grand throne-lady of her gold bereft
Onela’s and Ohthere’s old queen-mother—
followed them then fugitive invaders
till they sheltered at last that sorrowful evening
in dark Hrefnesholt heavy with life-loss.
He laughed at that army the leavings of swords

wearied by their wounds. Great woes he promised
those wretched survivors right through the night
said that at dawning with swords' edges

2940 he would hew them down hang them on gallows-trees
for the pleasure of birds. At breaking of day
the sorrowful Geatmen were consoled once more
when they heard Hygelac's horn-song of challenge
heartlift for survivors when revenge came calling,

a band of sword-thanes bearing through the woods.
Great were the bloodtracks of Geats and Swedes there
loud shield-clashing leapt through the trees
as two great armies tried for victory.

2950 Then the old warrior wise in spearways
turned back his people took them to shelter,
lord Ongentheow leading them away—
he had learned of Hygelac's hard warrior-ways
that proud one's swordcraft—he put no trust
in open battle-play with the best of Geats
guarded his hoardwealth held there in safety
his wife and children—he went to ground then
shielded by earthwall. Then the old Swede-lord
was hounded once more—Hygelac's boar-banner
2960 sailed above them streamed through the morning
when Geats came running rushed the shieldwall.

Then brave Ongentheow old warrior-king
was brought down to earth by edges of swords—
at last he consented to live or die there
by Eofor's judgment. In earlier fighting
Wulf Wonreding wielded his sword
with such blade-strength that blood sprang in streams
from that gray hairline. Still game for fighting
the old Swede-lord swung back at him
repaid that wound with a worse exchange
2970 when that proud folk-king fought for his life.

Nor could that warrior Wonred's young son
give the old one a good counterblow
for the Swedish war-king slashed through his helmet
stained him with blood till he bowed at last
fell down to earth. Yet fate was not ready—
Wulf soon recovered though cut to the bone.

2980 Then his helpful blood-brother Hygelac's thane
struck with his sword to save his kinsman
swung his treasure-blade sliced to the grayhead
through the king's helmet—he crumbled then
Swedefolk's guardian slipped down from life.
No lack of blade-friends broke through the shieldwall
bound Wulf in wrappings when warfare allowed them
when they ruled the field in the falling of light.
Then Eofor stripped there the slain warrior-king
took from Ongentheow his iron corselet
hilted treasure-sword tall mask-helmet
bright war-trappings bore them to Hygelac
who kept all of it clearly promised him

2990 ample rewards then afterwards gave them.
The lord of the Geats great Hrethel's son
called to the gift-throne those good thane-brothers
gave Wulf and Eofor wondrous treasure-gifts
gave each to hold a hundred thousand
of land and goldrings—no good hall-thane
could envy that treasure earned with heartstrength—
and to Eofor gave his only daughter
a princess for valor and a pledge of favor.
For that we will pay those proud survivors
3000 for slaughter of kin killed in their homeland
when young Swede-warriors strike once again
learn that Beowulf our beloved warleader
lies lifeless now his last breath-moment
vanished into time a tale for mead-benches
songs for a king who crushed hell-monsters
stepped up to a throne served his people there
held high his promise. Now haste will be best
that we go to find him guide him at last
from that fire-black field where he fell deathwards
3010 to his final bedrest. Those fine gold-treasures
will melt with his heart that mighty dragon-hoard
shall all go with him grimly purchased
with his own lifeblood—for the last time now
he has paid for goldrings. Pyre-flames shall eat them
flame-roof shall thatch them no thane shall wear them
treasures so dear no dressed hall-maidens
shall wear on their bosoms wound-gold necklaces
but grief will adorn them of gold-love bereft
as they wander in exile through alien domains
3020 now that our lord has laid down his laughter
songs and hall-joys. Now spears will be lifted
grim and morning-cold gripped in anguish
with frost-numbing hands. No harp's sweet sounding
will waken bench-warriors but the black-gleaming raven
circling with fate will say many things
describe to the eagle ample corpse-banquets
how he shared with the wolf wondrous slaughter-meals.”
So that grim messenger gave his report
his unfrivolous news nor did he lie much
3030 in words or warnings. Warriors all rose
uneagerly shuffled under Earnanaes
lagging with sorrow to look upon death.
They found on the sand their soulless gift-lord
still and wordless there who served and ruled them
for fifty winters—the final life-day
had come for the good one—the Geats' hall-master
dear warrior-king died a wonder-death.
There they discovered that cooling fire-snake
stretched upon the earth, seething no more
3040 with foul flame-death flying no longer
with burning bellows, blackened with death.
Fifty long feet was his full length-measure
stretched on the fire-field. He flew in hate-joy

seared through the nights then soared at daybreak
to his grayrock den—now death stilled him
ended his slumber in that stony barrow.

By him were heaped bracelets and gem-cups
jeweled gold-dishes great treasure-swords
darkened with rust from their deep earth-home
a thousand winters walled against light.

Those ancient heirlooms earned much curse-power
old gold-treasure gripped in a spell—
no one might touch them those nameless stone-riches

no good or bad man unless God himself
the great Glory-King might give to someone
to open that hoard that heap of treasures,
a certain warrior as seemed meet to him.
They found no happiness who first buried there
wealth in the ground—again it was hidden
by an only survivor till an angered serpent
singed for a cup till swords cooled him
sent him deathwards. Strange are the ways
how the king of a country will come to the end
of his loaned life-span when at last he vanishes
gone from the meadhall his gold and his kin.
So it was with Beowulf when he bore his shield
to that roaring night-flyer. He could not foretell
how his great throne-days would gutter to darkness.

Those ancient sorcerers swore a greed-spell
baneful warriors who buried their treasure
so that all plunderers would be punished with misery
confined in an idol-grove fast in hell-bonds
scourged with torture who tread on that ground—
unless for gold-need he was granted in fee
the gold-owner's favor with full pardon.

Wiglaf spoke then son of Weohstan:

“Oft shall warriors through the will of one
come to heartgrief heavy mind-sorrow.

Our eldest wisemen could not win with speech
convince with their words the ward of our kingdom
to give to destiny that goldhoard's keeper
leave him coiled there where he long had slumbered
wrapped in that barrow till the world's end-day.

He held to his name—the hoard is opened
grimly purchased—too great was that fate
that brought our hall-king to that baleful place.

I stepped inside there saw all around me
the wealth of that hoard walled by cliffrock—

the price for that entrance was paid heavily
by monster and man. From that mound I gathered
grabbed with my hands a great treasure-pile
bright gold and gemstones bore them out then
to my suffering king. Still quick I found him
proud of his winnings wavering in thought.
Old and weakening he offered you greetings
asked that you build in honor of his deeds
over the balefire an arching barrow-mound

high above the sea hailing his name there
greatest of warriors through this wide earthyard
landlord of our hearts homestead and glory.

Now comes the time to tame this gold-curse
open and plunder that ancient treasure-pile
wonders under wall-stone—the way is clear now,
come to gaze at it curious jewel-cups
rings and broad-gold. Let the bier be lifted
raised and flame-ready for ritual of death.

We will fetch our hall-lord to that final gift-throne
our beloved people-king where he long shall rest
fast in the Wielder's wonderful embrace.”

He sent word then that son of Weohstan
man of command now to many a homestead
Geats from everywhere to gather up bale-wood
fetch from afar funeral branch-logs
for that final departure: “Now the fire shall rise
dark flames roaring with our dear gift-lord
who held against war-hail hard iron-showers
when storms of arrows angrily impelled
shot over shieldwall when shafts of ash-wood
straight with feather-gear followed the arrowheads.”

Then that young warrior Weohstan's offspring
picked from his men proud warrior-thanes
seven of his best strong Geat-champions
went one of eight under that rock-roof
best of shield-bearers—one bore in his hand
a pitch-bright pinetorch pushed back the darkness.
There was no dawdling by that dragon's greed-hoard
when they found unguarded such gold and gemstones
wondrous treasures waiting in that hall

lying about them—little did they wait
but hurried to gather haul to daylight
those dark wonderworks. The dragon they shoved
over the cliffwall into cold wave-water
let the sea mellow that miser of wealth.

Then a wagon was loaded with wound goldrings
numberless bracelets borne beside the warrior
whose heart paid for them to Hronesnaes point.
They raised skyward ready for their king
a pyre on that point for their proud warleader
hung it with helmets hard shield-bosses

bright mesh-corselets as he bade them do.
They laid in the middle their beloved gift-friend
lifted with heartgrief the helm of their land.
On the cliff they kindled a king's balefire
wavering death-flames—woodsmoke mounted
rose up darkly over roaring pitch-flames
wailing to the sky. The wind lay low
till that fire had broken the body's flesh-cover
conquering that heart. With heavy memories
they mourned their mind-care their manlord's going.

By the embers of grief an old Geat-woman
with bound mourning-hair bowed down by years

sang a sorrow-song said to the heavens
that she dreaded from then days of misery
dark war-slaughter wailing and death-tears
heart-weary wandering. Heaven took the smoke.
Then that king's followers formed a mound there
a huge barrow-grave high and broad-based
sighted from afar by foam-borne sailors.
They timbered on top in ten workdays

3160 a towering beacon on that balefire's leavings
wrapped it with a wall as worthiest craftsmen
cleverest artisans could cause to be built.

In that barrow they placed bracelets and gems
ancient smith-work of old nameless ones
brought from the rock-den—each beaker and dish
went back to the earth bright gold and meadcups
stored once again where they still lie waiting
as useless to man as they ever had been.

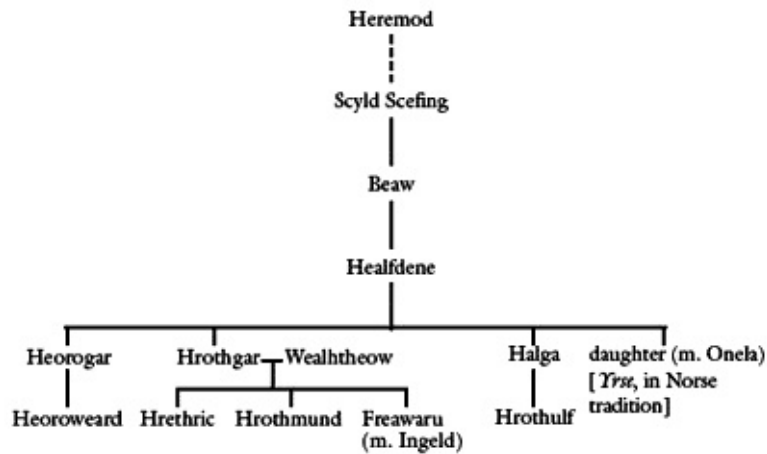
3170 Around the barrow-base rode the lost ones
twelve good spearmen circled the mound
mourned their hall-lord hailed their good king
spoke of his courage sang their word-songs
praised his earlship and his proud throne-years
as good men should when their shieldman has gone.

A good wine-lord needs words of praise
love from his people when he leaves this earth
when breath is borne from his body at last.
So the Geats went grieving gathered by the mound.
Hearth-companions praised their lost one
3180 named him the ablest of all world-kings
mildest of men and most compassionate
most lithe to his people most loving of praise.

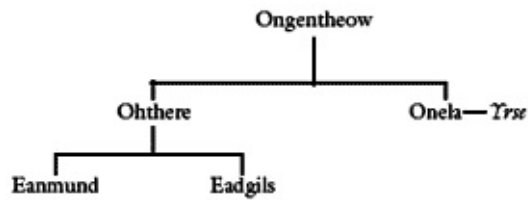
Genealogies



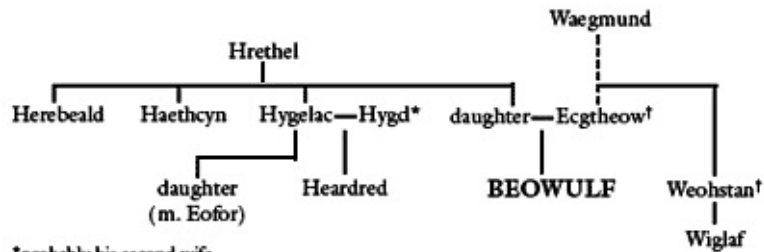
THE DANES



THE SWEDES



THE GEATS AND THE WAEGMUNDINGS



*probably his second wife
 †probably of different generations

Selected Proper Names



Members of the royal families, other important names, and names appearing more than once

AESCHERE: Hrothgar's beloved counselor, carried away by Grendel's mother.

BEAW: Son of Scyld Scefing; father of Healfdene.

BEOWULF: Hero of the poem; both a Waegmunding and a Geat by birth (see genealogies).

BRECA: Beowulf's companion in a daring youthful swimming contest described by both Unferth and Beowulf.

CAIN: Biblical son of Adam and slayer of his brother, Abel; begetter of monsters.

DAEGHREFN: A warrior of the Hugas killed by Beowulf during Hygelac's fatal expedition to the Rhine; Beowulf apparently took his sword, Naegling, and used it until his death day.

EADGILS: Swedish prince, son of Ohthere; later Swedish king.

EANMUND: Brother of Eadgils; slain by Wiglaf's father, Weohstan, who served Eanmund's uncle, Onela, for a time.

ECGLAF: Father of Unferth.

ECGTHEOW: Beowulf's father, a Waegmunding who married Hygelac's sister.

EOFOR: Geatish warrior; slayer of Ongentheow; brother of Wulf.

FINN: Frisian king, married to the Danish princess Hildeburh; initiated the Battle of Finnsburuh when Hildeburh's brother Hnaef came to his court for a visit; later killed by Hengest.

FITELA: In *Beowulf*, nephew of Sigemund the dragon slayer.

FRANKS: Prominent West Germanic tribe.

FREAWARU: Hrothgar's daughter; betrothed to Ingeld, prince of the Heathobards.

FRISIANS: Prominent West Germanic tribe.

FRODA: King of the Heathobards; father of Ingeld.

GRENDL: Anthropomorphic monster who ravaged Heorot for twelve years; killed by Beowulf and avenged by Grendel's Mother, also killed by Beowulf. Both were descendants of Cain by way of Noah's son Ham, according to early medieval tradition.

HAERETH: Father of Hygd.

HAETHCYN: Elder brother of Hygelac; accidentally killed his brother Herebeald with an arrow, causing his father, Hrethel, to die of grief.

HALGA: Younger brother of Hrothgar; father of Hrothulf; dead before Beowulf's arrival at Heorot.

HEALFDENE: Father of Hrothgar; son of Beaw.

HEARDRED: Son of Hygelac; a young boy when Hygelac was killed, became king of the Geats under Beowulf's protection; was later killed for harboring Swedish fugitives Eanmund and Eadgils.

HEATHOBARDS: Germanic tribe to which Ingeld belonged.

HEMMING: Kinsman of Offa.

HENGEST: Leader of the Danes after Hnaef's death at the Battle of Finnsburuh.

HEOROGAR: Elder brother of Hrothgar; dead before Beowulf's arrival at Heorot.

HEOROT: Splendid meadhall built by Hrothgar and ravaged by Grendel.

HEOROWEARD: Son of Hrothgar's elder brother, Heorogar.

HEREBEALD: Eldest son of Hrethel; older brother of Hygelac; accidentally killed by Haethcyn, his younger brother.

HEREMOD: Early Danish king who turned against his people and died without an heir, leaving the Danes kingless until the arrival of Scyld Scefing.

HETWARE: Frankish people on the lower Rhine; engaged in battle against Hygelac.

HNAEF: Hildeburh's brother, slain by his brother-in-law Finn.

HOC: Danish king; father of Hnaef and Hildeburh.

HONDSCIOH: Geatish warrior devoured by Grendel in Heorot.

HREFNAWUDU/HREFNESHOLT: (alternate names meaning "Ravenswood"); forest in Sweden, scene of a Geat-Swede battle.

HREOSNABEORH: Hill in Götland; scene of a Geat-Swede battle.

HRETHEL: Geatish king; father of Hygelac.

HRETHRIC: Young son of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow.

HRONESNAES: Headland in Götland; site of Beowulf's barrow.

HROTHGAR: Danish king; builder of Heorot.

HROTHMUND: Young son of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow.

HROTHULF: Son of Halga.

HRUNTING: Unferth's sword, loaned to Beowulf for his fight with Grendel's mother.

HUGAS: A Frankish people.

HYGD: Wife of Hygelac.

HYGELAC: King of the Geats; uncle of Beowulf.

INGELD: Heathobard prince; according to Beowulf, betrothed to Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru.

NAEGLING: Beowulf's sword in later life; probably taken from Daeghrefn.

OFFA: King of the Continental Angles in the fourth century; king of Mercia (English Midlands) in the eighth century.

OHTHERE: Son of Ongentheow.

ONELA: Son of Ongentheow; usurper of Swedish throne.

ONGENTHEOW: Swedish king; killed by Wulf and Eofor in battle.

SCYLD SCEFING: Legendary Danish king who arrived mysteriously as a child in a drifting boat and began a new dynasty, apparently many years after the death of Heremod.

SIGEMUND: In *Beowulf*, son of Wael and a famous dragon slayer.

UNFERTH: Hrothgar's *thyle*; challenger of Beowulf in a duel of words; a difficult character to understand (see my comments in the translation following line 498.)

WAEGMUNDINGS: Family to which Ecgtheow, Beowulf, Weohstan, and Wiglaf belong.

WAELES: In *Beowulf*, father of Sigemund (cf. Völsungs in Norse tradition).

WEALHTHEOW: Hrothgar's queen.

WELAND: Legendary Germanic smith.

WEOHSTAN: Wiglaf's father, a Waegmunding who served the Swedish king Onela for a time and killed Eanmund, Onela's nephew.

WIGLAF: Weohstan's son; young warrior who helps Beowulf kill the dragon; Beowulf's kinsman (a Waegmunding) and successor.

WULF: Eofor's brother, who badly wounded Ongentheow before Eofor killed him.

WULFGAR: Hrothgar's herald, who welcomed Beowulf and his men to Heorot.

YRSE: Name of Hrothgar's sister; not found in *Beowulf*; suggested by Kemp Malone to fill an obvious lacuna in the manuscript.

Suggested Readings



1. GENERAL

- Beowulf and Its Analogues*, edited and translated by G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson, including “Archaeology and *Beowulf*” by Hilda Ellis Davidson (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1968). Exhaustive collection of just what the title indicates, including a prose translation of the poem by the editors. Useful information on all families and tribes in *Beowulf* as well as the monsters; enlightening essay on pertinent archaeological finds with excellent photographs.
- Beowulf: Reproduced in Facsimile*, etc., with transliteration and notes by Julius Zupitza; second edition by Norman Davis with improved reproduction, published for the Early English Text Society (Oxford University Press, 1959). For the specialist or adventurous amateur; reading a facsimile of the manuscript is a wonderful experience for anyone with a basic knowledge of Old English.
- Adrien Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf*, Medium Aevum Monograph V (Basil Blackwell, 1965). A very perceptive discussion of the “digressions” in *Beowulf*, primarily dealing with their artistic justification.
- Arthur G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (University of California Press, 1959). A marvelous, affectionate examination of virtually all aspects of the poem by a fine scholar; required reading for students of *Beowulf*.
- R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*, third edition by C. L. Wrenn (Cambridge University Press, 1958). Originally published in 1921, this is the *Beowulf* student’s bible, a vast accumulation of learning by two fine scholars examining historical and nonhistorical elements as well as the origin, date, and structure of the poem, with copious documentation. Nicely complemented by Brodeur’s book.
- Edward B. Irving Jr., *An Introduction to Beowulf* (Prentice-Hall, 1969). One hundred pages introducing the beginner to the background and offering a “critical run-through” of the poem.
- Edward B. Irving Jr., *A Reading of Beowulf* (Yale University Press, 1968). An engrossing presentation of one well-informed scholar’s reaction to the poem; readable and stimulating.
- Kenneth Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford University Press, 1965). An examination of the poem’s structure as it would have been perceived by an Anglo-Saxon audience a thousand years ago, justifying the poem’s effective diversity of mood; followed by other observations and notes by this deeply learned and meditative scholar. An interesting complement to Whitelock’s *Audience* (see below), some features of which Sisam discusses.
- J. R. R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” from *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 22 (Oxford University Press, 1936). Also available in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, edited by Lewis E. Nicholson (University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), and *The Beowulf Poet*,

edited by Donald K. Fry (Prentice-Hall, 1968). See the beginning of my introduction for the importance of this delightful, witty lecture.

Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford University Press, 1951). A collection of three lectures by a great scholar, always keeping in mind Anglo-Saxon contemporaries of the *Beowulf* poet and using things known to and experienced by them to explain the poet's methods of composition; includes an intelligent discussion of the possible dates of the poem's composition. Like Sisam's book (see above), which it usefully complements, recommended for its brevity and wisdom.

2. EDITIONS

Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, edited by Frederick Klaeber, third edition, Houghton Mifflin, 1994. Even for those not well trained in Old English, this edition is worth studying if only for its fine introductory material and exhaustive explanatory notes. A fourth edition with three editors is now (2003) in preparation.

A completely new and excellent edition of *Beowulf* was published by Blackwell in 1998, sensibly printed in quality paperback with a striking cover. This edition, by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, two of the best *Beowulf* scholars ever, is quite different from Klaeber's and takes advantage of a half-century of scholarship since Klaeber's third edition with supplements in 1950. I recommend that anyone tackling *Beowulf* alone should work through both of these editions. I also recommend the bibliographical section of this edition as an update and addition to my suggested readings.

3. ANGLO-SAXON HISTORY

Frank M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, third edition, completed by Doris Mary Stenton (Oxford University Press, 1971). The greatest of all histories of Anglo-Saxon England, some seven hundred pages of profound erudition with an excellent foldout map. Not for the beginner.

Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society*, vol. 2 in the Pelican History of England (Penguin Books, 1952). In less than 250 pages this superb scholar has examined every aspect of Anglo-Saxon civilization, working consistently with primary sources and setting forth in captivating detail and graceful prose the evidence for her conclusions. This is *the* book for nonspecialist readers.

4. OLD ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

It is possible for an interested and disciplined reader to learn Old English well enough to move on to a good edition of *Beowulf* without benefit of a teacher. Readers unable or unwilling to attend a class in Old English should obtain a copy of *A Guide to Old English*, by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson (Blackwell, Sixth Edition, 2001) or the third edition of *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader*, edited by Frederick C. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler (now, incredibly, out of print,

but check with the Library of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, for print-on-demand service). Either of these excellent guides will lead you through Old English grammar and into a few good readings as well.

About the Author



FREDERICK REBSAMEN was born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas. He received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Arkansas in 1949 and 1950 and his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1962. From 1952 to 1954 he served in the U.S. Army as a liaison interpreter with the French Army Transportation Corps. He studied French language and literature at the University of Paris and also studied in Germany, Italy, and Spain between 1954 and 1956. From 1958 to 1978 he was Professor of English at the University of Arizona, Tucson. His stories and poems have appeared in literary magazines, and in 1971 he published a prose version of *Beowulf* that included information and explanations as part of the text. Rebsamen is married and lives in Tucson, Arizona.

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ISBN: 978-0-06-057378-2
ISBN-10: 0-06-057378-3

EPub Edition JUNE 2013 ISBN 9780062303912

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