‘Beowulf’ is an epic poem that was composed between 700-900 AD. It is written in the language used by the Anglo Saxons (commonly referred to as Old English) and the action takes place in Sweden and Denmark.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Beowulf** | **Ecgtheow** | **King Hygelac** | **Hygd** | **King Hrethel** |
| Protagonist | Father of Beowulf | Uncle of Beowulf | Wife of Hygelac | Father of Hygelac |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | Beowulf fights Grendel | |
|  |  | Beowulf fights Grendel’s mother | |
|  |  | Beowulf fights the dragon | |
|  |  | Beowulf’s funeral | |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **King Hrothgar** | **Halfdane** | **Wealhtheow** | **Hrethric** | |  |
| King of Danes | Father of Hrothgar | Wife of Hrothgar | Son of Hrothgar | |  |
|  |  |  |  | |  |
|  |  | | The value of ancestry and reputation | |
|  |  | | The enactment of the heroic code | |
|  |  | | The nature of kingship and hierarchy | |
|  |  | | The conflict between good and evil | |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Grendel** | **Grendel’s Mother** | **Dragon** |  |  |
| Monster | Mother of Grendel | Guardian of Hoard |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | Protagonist | Warrior |
|  |  | Antagonist | Kingship |
|  |  | Archetype | Hospitality |
|  |  | Reputation | Culture |
|  |  |  | Legend | Allusion |
|  |  |  | Mythology | Metaphor |
| Poem translated by Seamus Heaney | | | Revenge | Foreshadowing |

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by

And the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.

We have heard of those princes’ heroic campaigns.

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,

A former king of the Danes; a ‘good’ king and father to Beow

A wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.

This terror of the hall-troops had come far.

A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on

As his powers waxed and his worth was proved.

In the end each clan on the outlying coasts

10 Beyond the whale-road had to yield to him

And begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield, 

A cub in the yard, a comfort sent

By God to that nation. He knew what they had tholed,

The long times and troubles they’d come through

Without a leader; so the Lord of Life,

The glorious Almighty, made this man renowned.

Shield had fathered a famous son:

Beow’s name was known through the north.

20 And a young prince must be prudent like that,

Giving freely while his father lives

So that afterwards in age when fighting starts

Steadfast companions will stand beside him

And hold the line. Behaviour that’s admired

Is the path to power among people everywhere.

Shield was still thriving when his time came

And he crossed over into the Lord’s keeping.

His warrior band did what he bade them

When he laid down the law among the Danes:

20 They shouldered him out to the sea’s flood,

The chief they revered who had long ruled them.

A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbour,

Ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.

They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,

Laid out by the mast, amidships,

The great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures

Were piled upon him, and precious gear.

I never heard before of a ship so well furbished

With battle tackle, bladed weapons

And coats of mail. The massed treasure

40 Was loaded on top of him: it would travel far

On out into the ocean’s sway.

They decked his body no less bountifully

With offerings than those first ones did

Who cast him away when he was a child

And launched him alone out over the waves.

And they set a gold standard up

High above his head and let him drift

To wind and tide, bewailing him

50 And mourning their loss. No man can tell,

No wise man in hall or weathered veteran

Knows for certain who salvaged that load.

Then it fell to Beow to keep the forts.

The son of Shield Sheafson; the next king of the Danes

He was well regarded and ruled the Danes

For a long time after his father took leave

Of his life on earth. And then his heir,

The great Halfdane, held sway

The son of Beow; the next king of the Danes (the third so far)

For as long as he lived, their elder and warlord.

He was four times a father, this fighter prince:

60 One by one they entered the world,

Heorogar, Hrothgar, the good Halga

And a daughter, I have heard, who was Onela’s queen,

A balm in bed to the battle-scarred Swede.

The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar.

The son of Halfdane; the next king of the Danes (the fourth!)

Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,

Young followers, a force that grew

To be a mighty army. So his mind turned

To hall-building: he handed down orders

For men to work on a great mead-hall

70 Meant to be a wonder of the world forever;

It would be his throne-room and there he would dispense

His God-given goods to young and old –

But not the common land or people’s lives.

Far and wide through the world, I have heard,

Orders for work to adorn that wall stead

Were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there,

Finished and ready, in full view,

A ‘mead hall’ (not a person); a place for feasting

The hall of halls. Heorot was the name

He had settled on it, whose utterance was law.

80 Nor did he renege, but doled out rings

And torques at the table. The hall towered,

Its gables wide and high and awaiting

A barbarous burning. That doom abided,

But in time it would come: the killer instinct

Unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.

Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,

Nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him

To hear the din of the loud banquet

Every day in the hall, the harp being struck

90 And the clear song of a skilled poet

Telling with mastery of man’s beginnings,

How the Almighty had made the earth

A gleaming plain girdled with waters;

In His splendour He set the sun and moon

To be earth’s lamplight, lanterns for men,

And filled the broad lap of the world

With branches and leaves; and quickened life

In every other thing that moved.

So times were pleasant for the people there

100 Until finally one, a fiend out of Hell,

Began to work his evil in the world.

Grendel was the name of this grim demon

A monstrous demon; an embittered, lonely outcast

Haunting the marches, marauding round the heath

And the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time

In misery among the banished monsters,

Cain’s clan, whom the creator had outlawed

A biblical reference; Cain murdered his brother Abel

And condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel

The Eternal Lord had exacted a price:

Cain got no good from committing that murder

110 Because the Almighty made him anathema

And out of the curse of his exile there sprang

Ogres and elves and evil phantoms

And the giants too who strove with God

Time and again until He gave them their final reward.

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out

For the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes

Were settling into it after their drink,

And there he came upon them, a company of the best

Asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain

And human sorrow. Suddenly then

120 The God-cursed brute was creating havoc:

Greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men

From their resting places and rushed to his lair,

Flushed up and inflamed from the raid,

Blundering back with the butchered corpses.

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke

Grendel’s powers of destruction were plain:

Their wassail was over, they wept to heaven

And mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,

130 The storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,

Humiliated by the loss of his guard,

Bewildered and stunned, staring aghast

And the demon’s trail, in deep distress.

He was numb with grief, but got no respite

For one night later the merciless

Grendel Struck again with more gruesome murders.

Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.

It was easy then to meet with a man

Shifting himself to a safer distance

140 To bed in the bothies, for who could be blind

To the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness

Of that hall-watcher’s hate? Whoever escaped

Kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,

One against all, until the greatest house

In the world stood empty, a deserted wall stead.

For twelve winters, seasons of woe,

The lord of the Shieldings suffered under

His load of sorrow; and so, before long,

150 The news was known over the whole world.

Sad lays were sung about the beset king,

The vicious raids of Grendel,

His long and unrelenting feud,

Nothing but war; how he would never

Parley or make peace with any Dane

Nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.

No counsellor could ever expect

Fair reparation from those rabid hands.

All were endangered; young and old

160 Were hunted down by that dark death-shadow

Who lurked and swooped in the long nights

On the misty moors; nobody knows

Where these reavers from Hell roam on their errands.

So Grendel waged his lonely war,

Inflicting constant cruelties on the people,

Grendel occupies the mead hall; Hrothgar is unable to stop him

Atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot,

Haunted the glittering hall after dark,

But the throne itself, the treasure-seat,

He was kept from approaching; he was the Lord’s outcast.

170 These were hard times, heart-breaking

For the prince of the Shieldings; powerful counsellors,

The highest in the land, would lend advice,

Plotting how best the bold defenders

Might resist and beat off sudden attacks.

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed

Offering to idols, swore oaths

That the killer of souls might come to their aid

And save the people. That was their way,

Their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts

180 They remembered Hell. The Almighty Judge

Of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,

Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,

Was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he

Who in time of trouble had to thrust his soul

In the fire’s embrace, forfeiting help;

He has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he

Who after death can approach the Lord

And find friendship in the Father’s embrace.

So that troubled time continued, woe

190 That never stopped, steady affliction

For Halfdane’s son, too hard an ordeal.

There was panic after dark, people endured

Raids in the night, riven by terror.

Hygelac is the king of the Geats; Beowulf is his ‘thane’ and nephew

When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac’s thane

Was on home ground, over in Geatland.

Geatland is modern-day Sweden; it is where the ‘Geats’ live

There was no one else like him alive.

In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,

High-born and powerful. He ordered a boat

That would ply the waves. He announced his plan:

200 To sail the swan’s roads and search out that king,

The famous prince who needed defenders.

Nobody tried to keep him from going,

No elder denied him, dear as he was to them.

Instead, they inspected omens and spurred

His ambition to go, whilst he moved about

Like the leader he was, enlisting men,

The best he could find; with fourteen others

The warrior boarded the boat as captain,

A canny pilot along coast and currents.

210 Time went by, the boat was on water,

In close under the cliffs.

Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,

Sand churned in surf, shining war-gear

In the vessel’s hold, then heaved out,

Away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.

Over the waves, with the wind behind her

And foam at her neck, she flew like a bird

Until her curved prow had covered the distance

220 And on the following day, at the due hour,

Those seafarers sighted land,

Sunlit cliffs, sheer crags

And looming headlands, the landfall they sought.

It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted

Over the side, out on to the sand,

And moored their ship. There was a clash of mail

And a thresh of gear. They thanked God

For that easy crossing on a calm sea.

When the watchman on the wall, the Shieldings’ lookout

230 Whose job it was to guard the sea-cliffs,

Saw shields glittering on the gangplank

And battle-equipment being unloaded

He had to find out who and what

The arrivals were. So he rode to the shore,

This horseman of Hrothgar’s, and challenged them

Hrothgar’s men see Beowulf and his men; they are suspicious

In formal terms, flourishing his spear:

“What kind of men are you who arrive

Rigged out for combat in coats of mail,

Sailing here over the sea lanes

240 In your steep-hulled boat? I have been stationed

As lookout on this coast for a long time.

My job is to watch the waves for raiders,

And danger to the Danish shore.

Never before has a force under arms

Disembarked so openly – not bothering to ask

If the sentries allowed them safe passage

Or the clan had consented. Nor have I seen

A mightier man-at-arms on this earth

Than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken,

250 He is truly noble. This is no mere

Hanger-on in a hero’s armour.

So now, before you fare inland

As interlopers, I have to be informed

About who you are and where you hail from.

Outsiders from across the water,

I say it again: the sooner you tell

Where you came from and why, the better.”

The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard;

The distinguished one delivered this answer:

260 “We belong by birth to the Geat people

And owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.

In my day, my father was a famous man,

A noble warrior named Ecgtheow.

Father of Beowulf; the brother-in-law of Hygelac

He outlasted many a long winter

And went on his way. All over the world

Wise men in council continue to remember him.

We come in good faith to find your lord

And nation’s shield, the son of Halfdane.

Give us the right to advise and direction.

270 We have arrived here on a great errand

To the lord of the Danes, and I believe therefore

There should be nothing hidden or withheld between us.

So tell us if what we have heard is true

About this threat, whatever it is,

This danger abroad in the dark nights,

This corpse-maker mongering death

In the Shieldings’ country. I come to proffer

My wholehearted help and counsel.

I can show the wise Hrothgar a way

280 To defeat his enemy and find respite –

If any respite is to reach him, ever.

I can calm the turmoil and terror in his mind.

Otherwise, he must endure woes

And live with grief for as long as his hall

Stands at the horizon, on its high ground.”

Undaunted, sitting astride his horse,

The coast-guard answered, “Anyone with gumption

And a sharp mind will take the measure

Of two things: what’s said and what’s done.

290 I believe what you have told me: that you are a troop

Loyal to our king. So come ahead

The watchman who challenged Beowulf allows them to proceed

With your arms and your gear, and I will guide you.

What’s more, I’ll order my own comrades

On their word of honour to watch your boat

Down there on the strand – keep her safe

In her fresh tar, until the time comes

For her curved prow to preen on the waves

And bear this hero back to Geatland.

May one so valiant and venturesome

300 Come unharmed through the clash of battle.”

So they went on their way. The ship rode the water,

Broad-beamed, bound by its hawser

And anchored fast. Boar-shapes flashed

Above their cheek-guards, the brightly forged

Work of goldsmiths, watching over

Those stern-faced men. They marched in step,

Hurrying on till the timbered hall

Rose before them, radiant with gold.

Nobody on earth knew of another

310 Building like it. Majesty lodged there,

And its light shone over many lands.

So their gallant escort guided them

To that dazzling stronghold and indicated

The shortest way to it; then the noble warrior

Wheeled on his horse and spoke these words:

“It is time for me to go. May the Almighty

Father keep you and in His kindness

Watch over your exploits. I’m away to the sea,

Back on alert against enemy raiders.”

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320 It was a paved track, a path that kept them

In marching order. Their mail-shirts glinted,

Hard and hand-linked; the high-gloss iron

Of their armour rang. So they duly arrived

In their grim war-graith and gear at the hall,

And, weary from the sea, stacked wide shields

Of the toughest hardwood against the wall,

Then collapsed on the benches; battle-dress

And weapons clashed. They collected their spears

In a seafarer’s stook, a stand of greyish

330 Tapering ash. And the troops themselves

Were as good as their weapons. Then a proud warrior

Questioned the men concerning their origins:

“Where do you come from, carrying these

Decorated shields and shirts of mail,

These cheek-hinged helmets and javelins?

I am Hrothgar’s herald and officer.

I have never seen so impressive or large

An assembly of strangers. Stoutness of heart,

Bravery not banishment, must have brought you to Hrothgar.”

340 The man whose name was known for courage,

The Geat leader, resolute in his helmet,

Answered in return: “We are retainers

From Hygelac’s band. Beowulf is my name.

If your lord and master, the most renowned

Son of Halfdane, will hear me out

The son of Halfdane is Hrothgar; the (fourth) king of the Danes

And graciously allow me to greet him in person,

I am ready and willing to report my errand.”

Wulfgar replied, a Wendel chief

Renowned as a warrior, well known for his wisdom

350 And the temper of his mind: “I will take this message,

In accordance with your wish, to our noble king,

Our dear lord, friend of the Danes,

The giver of rings. I will go and ask him

About your coming here, then hurry back

With whatever reply it pleases him to give.”

With that he turned to where Hrothgar sat,

An old man among retainers;

The valiant follower stood four-square

In front of his king: he knew the courtesies.

360 Wulfgar addressed his dear lord:

“People from Geatland have put ashore.

They have sailed far over the wide sea.

They call the chief in charge of their band

By the name of Beowulf. They beg, my lord,

An audience with you, exchange of words

And formal greeting. Most gracious Hrothgar,

Do not refuse them, but grant them a reply.

From their arms and appointment, they appear well-born

And worthy of respect, especially the one

370 Who has led them this far: he is formidable indeed.”

Hrothgar, protector of Shieldings, replied:

“I used to know him when I was a young boy.

His father before him was called Ecgtheow.

Hrethel the Greath gave Ecgtheow

Ecgtheow is Beowulf’s father; he is Hrethel’s brother-in-law

His daughter in marriage. This man is their son,

Here to follow up an old friendship.

A crew of seamen who sailed for me once

With a gift-cargo across to Geatland

Returned with marvellous tales about him:

380 A thane, they declared, with the strength of thirty

In the grip of each hand. Now Holy God

Has, in His Goodness, guided him here

To the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel.

This is my hope; and for his heroism

I will recompense him with a rich treasure.

Go immediately, bid him and the Geats

He has is attendance to assemble and enter.

Say, moreover, when you speak to them,

That they are welcome in Denmark.”

390 At the door of the hall, Wulfgar duly delivered the message:

“My lord, the conquering king of the Danes,

Bids me announce that he knows your ancestry;

Also that he welcomes you here to Heorot

And salutes your arrival from across the sea.

You are free now to move forward

Beowulf is eventually granted permission to speak to Hrothgar

To meet Hrothgar, in helmets and armour,

But shields must stay here and spears be stacked

Until the outcome of the audience is clear.”

The hero arose, surrounded closely

400 By his powerful thanes. A party remained

Under orders to keep watch on the arms;

The rest proceeded, lead by their prince

Under Heorot’s roof. And standing on the hearth

In webbed links that the smith had woven,

The fine-forged mesh of his gleaming mail shirt,

Resolute in his helmet, Beowulf spoke:

“Greetings to Hrothgar. I am Hygelac’s kinsman,

One of his hall-troop. When I was younger,

I had great triumphs. Then news of Grendel,

410 Hard to ignore, reached me at home:

Sailors brought stories of the plight you suffer

In this legendary hall, how it lies deserted,

Empty and useless once the evening light

Hides itself under Heaven’s dome.

So every elder and experience councilman

Among my people supported my resolve

To come here to you, King Hrothgar,

Because all knew of my awesome strength.

They had seen me boltered in the blood of enemies

420 When I battled and bound five beasts,

Raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea

Slaughtered sea-brutes. I have suffered extremes

And avenged the Geats (their enemies brought it

Upon themselves, I devastated them).

Now I mean to be a match for Grendel,

Settle the outcome in a single combat.

And so, my request, O king of Bright-Danes,

Dear prince pf the Shieldings, friend of the people

And their ring of defence, my one request

430 Is that you won’t refuse me, who have come this far,

The privilege of purifying Heorot,

With my own men to help me, and nobody else.

I have heard moreover that the monster scorns

In his reckless way to use weapons;

Therefore, to heighten Hygelac’s fame

And gladden his heart, I hereby renounce

Sword and the shelter of the broad shield,

The heavy war-board: hand-to-hand

Is how it will be, a life-and-death

440 Fight with the fiend. Whichever one death fells

Must deem it a just judgment by God.

If Grendel wins, it will be a gruesome day;

He will glut himself on the Geats in the war-hall,

Swoop without fear on that flower of manhood

As on others before. Then my face won’t be there

To be covered in death; he will carry me away

As he goes to ground, gorged and bloodied;

He will run gloating with my raw corpse

And feed on it alone, in a cruel frenzy,

450 Fouling his moor-nest. No need then

To lament for long or lay out my body:

If the battle takes me, send back

This breast-webbing that Weland fashioned

Weland is a blacksmith; he made Beowulf’s chainmal

And Hrethel gave me, to Hygelac.

Fate goes ever as fate must.”

Hrothgar, the helmet of the Shieldings, spoke:

“Beowulf, my friend, you have travelled here

To favour us with help and fight for us.

There was a feud one time, begun by your father.

460 With his own hands he had killed Heatholaf,

Heatholaf was killed by Ecgtheow; Hrothgar mediated to avoid war

Who was a Wulfing; so war was looming

And his people, in fear of it, forced him to leave.

He came away then over rolling waves

To the South Danes here, the sons of honour.

I was then in the full flush of kingship,

Establishing my sway over all the rich strongholds

Of this heroic land. Heorogar,

My older brother and the better man,

Also a son of Halfdane’s, had died.

470 Finally I healed the feud by paying:

I shipped a treasure-trove to the Wulfings

And Ecgtheow acknowledged me with oaths of allegiance.

Ecgtheow pledged his loyalty to Hrothgar for keeping the peace

“It bothers me to have to burden anyone

With all the grief Grendel has caused

And the havoc he has wreaked upon us in Heorot,

The mead hall where Grendel first attached Hrothgar’s men

Our humiliations. My household-guard

Are on the wane, fate sweeps them away

Into Grendel’s clutches – but God can easily

Halt these raids and harrowing attacks!

480 “Time and again, when the goblets passed

And seasoned fighters got flushed with beer

They would pledge themselves to protect Heorot

And wait for Grendel with whetted swords.

But when dawn broke and day crept in

Over each empty, blood-spattered bench,

The floor of the mead-hall where they had feasted

Would be slick with slaughter. And so they died,

Faithful retainers, and my following dwindled.

Now take your place at the table, relish

490 The triumph of heroes to your heart’s content.”

Then a bench was cleared in that banquet hall

So the Geats could have room to be together

And the party sat, proud in their bearing,

Strong and stalwart. An attendant stood by

With a decorated pitcher, pouring bright

Helpings of mead. And the minstrel sang,

Filling Heorot with his head-clearing voice,

Gladdening that great rally of Danes and Geats.

From where he crouched at the king’s feet,

Unferth, a son of Ecglaf’s, spoke

A kinsman of Hrothgar; envious of Beowulf’s reputation and exploits

500 Contrary words. Beowulf’s coming,

His sea-braving, made him sick with envy:

He could not brook or abide the fact

That anyone else alive under heaven

Might enjoy greater regard than he did:

“Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca

The man who Unferth claims beat Beowulf in a swimming contest

In a swimming match on the open sea,

Risking the water just to prove you could win?

It was sheer vanity made you venture out

510 On the main deep. And no matter who tried,

Friend or foe, to deflect the pair of you,

Neither would back down: the sea-test obsessed you.

You waded in, embracing water,

Taking its measure, mastering currents,

Riding on the swell. The ocean swayed,

Winter went wild in the waves, but you vied

For seven nights; and then he outswam you,

Came ashore the stronger contender.

He was cast up safe and sound one morning

520 Among the Heathoreams, then made his way

To where he belonged in Bronding country,

Home again, sure of his ground

In strong room and bawn. So Breca made good

His boast upon you and was proved right.

No matter, therefore, how you may have fared

In every bout and battle until now,

This time you’ll be worsted; no one has ever

Outlasted an entire night against Grendel.”

Beowulf, Ecgtheow’s son, replied:

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

About Breca and me. But it was mostly beer

That was doing the talking. The truth is this:

When the going was heavy in those high waves,

I was the strongest swimmer of all.

We’d been children together and we grew up

Daring ourselves to outdo each other,

Boasting and urging each other to risk

Our lives on the sea. And so it turned out.

Each of us swam holding a sword,

A naked, hard-proofed blade for protection 540

Against the whale-beasts. But Breca could never

Move out farther or faster from me

Than I could manage to move from him.

Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on

For five nights, until the long flow

And pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,

Night falling and winds from the North

Drove us apart. The deep boiled up

And its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild.

550 My armour held me to hold out;

My hard-ringed chainmail, hand-forged and linked,

A fine, close-fitting filigree of gold,

Kept me safe when some ocean creature

Pulled me to the bottom. Pinioned fast

And swathed in its grip, I was granted one

Final chance: my sword plunged

And the ordeal was over. Through my own hands

Beowulf claims to have killed the sea monster (and eight others)

The fury of battle had finished off the sea-beast.

“Time and again, foul things attacked me,

560 Lurking and stalking, but I lashed out,

Gave as good as I got with my sword.

My flesh was not for feasting on,

There would be no monsters gnawing and gloating

Over their banquet at the bottom of the sea.

Instead, in the morning, mangled and sleeping

The sleep of the sword, they slopped and floated

Like the ocean’s leavings. From now on

Sailors would the safe, the deep-sea raids

Were over for good. Light came from the East,

570 Bright guarantee of God, and the waves

Went quiet; I could see the headlands

And buffeted cliffs. Often, for undaunted courage,

Fate spares the man it has not already marked.

However it had occurred, my sword had killed

Nine sea monsters. Such night-dangers

And hard ordeals I have never heard of

Nor of a man so desolate in surging waves.

But worn out as I was, I survived,

Came through with my life. The ocean lifted

580 And laid me ashore, I landed safe

On the coast of Finland. Now, I cannot recall any fight you entered, Unferth,

That bears comparison. I don’t boast when I say

That neither you nor Breca ever were much

Celebrated for swordsmanship

Or for facing danger in the battlefield.

You killed your own kith and kin,

So for all your cleverness and quick tongue,

You will suffer damnation in the pits of hell.

590 The fact it, Unferth, if you were truly

As keen or courageous as you claim to be

Grendel would never have got away with

Such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king,

Havoc in Heorot and horrors everywhere.

But he knows he need never be in dread

Of your blade making a mizzle of his blood

Or of vengeance arriving ever from this quarter –

From the Victory-Shieldings, the shoulderers of the spear.

He knows he can trample down you Danes

600 To his heart’s content, humiliate and murder

Without fear of reprisal. But he will find me different.

I will show him how Geats shape to kill

In the heat of battle. Then whoever wants to

May go bravely to morning mead, when morning light,

Scarfed in sun-dazzle, shines forth from the south

And brings another daybreak to the world.”

Then the grey-haired treasure-giver was glad;

Far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes

And keeper of his people counted on Beowulf,

610 On the warrior’s steadfastness and his word.

Beowulf’s story gives great confidence to the other warriors

So the laughter started, the din got louder

And the crowd was happy. Wealhtheow came in,

Hrothgar’s queen, observing the courtesies.

Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted

The men in the hall, then handed the cup

First to Hrothgar, their homeland’s guardian,

Urging him to drink deep and enjoy it,

Because he was dear to them. And he drank it down

Like the warlord he was, with festive cheer.

620 So the Helming woman went on her rounds,

Queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,

Offering the goblet to all ranks,

Treating the household and the assembled troop

Until it was Beowulf’s turn to take it from her hand.

With measured words she welcomed the Geat

And thanked God for granting her wish

That a deliverer she could believe in would arrive

To ease their afflictions. He accepted the cup,

A daunting man, dangerous in action

630 And eager for it always. He addressed Wealhtheow;

Wealhtheow is Hrothgar’s queen; she is graceful and kind

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, said:

“I had a fixed purpose when I put out to sea.

As I sat in the boat with my band of men,

I meant to perform to the uttermost

What your people wanted or perish in the attempt,

In the fiend’s clutches. And I shall fulfil that purpose,

Prove myself with a proud deed

Or meet my death here in the mead-hall.”

This formal boast by Beowulf the Geat

640 Pleased the lady well and she went to sit

By Hrothgar, regal and arrayed with gold.

Then it was like old times in the echoing hall,

Proud talk and the people happy,

Loud and excited; until soon enough

Halfdane’s heir had to be away

To his night’s rest. He realised

That the demon was going to descend on the hall

That he had plotted all day, from dawn-light

Until darkness gathered again over the world

650 And stealthy night-shades came stealing forth

Under the cloud-murk. The company stood

As the two leaders took leave of each other:

Hrothgar wished Beowulf health and good luck,

Named him hall-warden and announced as follows:

The ‘hall-warden’ is in charge of Heorot; a great honour

“Never, since my hand could hold a shield

Have I entrusted or given control

Of the Dane’s hall to anyone but you.

Ward and guard it, for it is the greatest of houses.

Be on your mettle now, keep in mind your fame,

660 Beware of the enemy. There’s nothing you wish for

That won’t be yours if you win through alive.”

Hrothgar departed then with his house-guard.

The lord of the Shieldings, their shelter in war,

Left the mead-hall to lie with Wealhtheow,

His queen and bedmate. The King of Glory

(As people learned) had posted a lookout

Who was a match for Grendel, a guard against monsters,

Special protection to the Danish prince.

And the Geat placed complete trust

670 In his strength of limb and the Lord’s favour.

He began to remove his iron breast-mail,

Took off the helmet and handed his attendant

The patterned sword, a smith’s masterpiece,

Ordering him to keep the equipment guarded.

And before he bedded down, Beowulf,

That prince of goodness, proudly asserted:

“When it comes to fighting, I count myself

As dangerous any day as Grendel.

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

680 To mow him down, easily as I might.

He has no ideas of the arts of war,

Of shield or sword-play, though he does possess

A wild strength. No weapons, therefore,

For either this night: unarmed he shall face me

If face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord

In His wisdom grant victory

To whichever side He sees fit.”

Then down the brave man lay with his bolster

Under his head and his whole company

690 Of sea-rovers at rest beside him.

None of them expected he would ever see

His homeland again or get back

To his native place and the people who reared him.

They knew too well the way it was before,

How often the Danes had fallen prey

To death in the mead-hall. But the Lord was weaving

A victory on his war-loom for the Weather-Geats.

Through the strength of one they all prevailed;

They would crush their enemy and come through

700 In triumph and gladness. The truth is clear:

Almighty God rules over mankind

And always has. Then out of the night

Came the shadow-stalker, stealthy and swift;

The hall-guards were slack, asleep at their posts,

All except one; it was widely understood

That as long as God disallowed it,

The fiend could not bear them to his shadow-bourne.

One man, however, was in a fighting mood,

Awake and on edge, spoiling for action.

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

710 In off the moors, down through the mist-bands

God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.

Grendel approaches Heorot and prepares to attack the men

The bane of the race of men roamed forth,

Hunting for a prey in the high hall.

Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it

Until it shone above him, a sheer keep

Of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time

He had scouted the ground of Hrothgar’s dwelling –

Although never in his life, before or since,

Did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.

720 Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead

And arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door

Turned in its hinge when his hand touched it.

Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open

The mouth of the building, maddening for blood,

Pacing the length of the patterned floor

With his loathsome tread, while a baleful light,

Flame more than light, flared from his eyes.

He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping,

A ranked company of kinsmen and warriors

730 Quartered together. And his glee was demonic,

Picturing the mayhem: before morning

He would rip life from limp and devour them,

Feed on their flesh: but his fate that night

Was due to change, his days of ravening

Had come to an end. Mighty and canny,

Hygelac’s kinsman was keenly watching

For the first move the monster would make.

Nor did the creature keep him waiting

But struck suddenly and started in;

740 He grabbed and mauled a man on his bench,

Bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood

And gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body

Utterly lifeless, eaten up Hand and foot.

Venturing closer, his talon was raised to attack Beowulf

Where he lay on the bed; he was bearing in

With open claw when the alert hero’s

Comeback and armlock forestalled him utterly.

The captain of evil discovered himself

Beowulf seizes Grendel’s arm; Grendel is shocked at his strength

750 In a handgrip harder than anything

He had ever encountered in any man

On the face of the earth. Every bone in his body

Quailed and coiled, but he could not escape.

He was desperate to flee to his den and hide

With the devil’s litter, for in all his days

He had never been clamped or cornered like this.

Then Hygelac’s trusty retainer recalled

His bedtime speech, sprang to his feet

And got a firm hold. Fingers were bursting,

760 The monster back-tracking, the man overpowering.

The dread of the land was desperate to escape,

To take a roundabout road and flee

To his lair in the fens. The latching power

In his fingers weakened; it was the worst trip

The terror-monger had taken to Heorot.

And now the timber trembled and sang,

A hall-session that harrowed every Dane

Inside the stockade: stumbling in fury,

The two contenders crashed through the building.

770 The hall clattered and hammered, but somehow

Survived the onslaught and kept standing:

It was handsomely structured, a sturdy frame

Braced with the best of blacksmith’s work

Inside and out. The story goes

That as the pair struggled, mead benches were smashed

And sprung off the floor, gold fittings and all.

Before then, no Shielding elder would believe

There was any power or person on earth

Capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall

780 Unless the burning embrace of fire

Engulf it in flame. Then an extraordinary

Wail arose, and bewildering fear

Came over the Danes. Everyone felt it

Who heard that cry as it echoed off the wall,

A God-cursed scream and strain of catastrophe,

The howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf

Keening his wound. He was overwhelmed,

Manacled tight by the man who of all men

Was foremost and strongest in the days of this life.

790 But the earl troop’s leader was not inclined

To allow his caller to depart alive:

He did not consider that life of much account

To anyone anywhere. Time and again,

Beowulf’s warriors worked to defend

Their lord’s life, laying about them

As best they could with their ancestral blades.

Stalwart in action, they kept striking out

On every side, seeking to cut

Straight to the soul. When they joined the struggle

800 There was something they could have not known at the time,

That not blade on earth, no blacksmith’s art

The weapons of the soldiers seem unable to harm Grendel

Could ever damage their demon opponent.

He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge

Of every weapon. But his going away

Out of the world and the days of his life

Would be agony to him, and his alien spirit

Would travel far into fiends’ keeping.

Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men

With pain and affliction in former times

810 And had given offense also to God

Found that his bodily powers had failed him.

Hygelac’s kinsman kept him helplessly

Locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived

He was hateful to the other. The monster’s whole

Body was in pain, a tremendous wound

Appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split

And the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted

The glory of winning; Grendel was driven

Beowulf rips-off Grendel’s arm; Beowulf is victorious

Under the fen banks, fatally hurt,

820 To his desolate lair. His days were numbered,

The end of his life was coming over him,

He knew it for certain; and one bloody clash

Had fulfilled the dearest wishes of the Danes.

The man who had lately landed among them,

Proud and sure, had purged the hall,

Kept it from harm; he was happy with his night-work

And the courage he had shown. The Geat captain

Had boldly fulfilled his boast to the Danes:

He had healed and relieved a huge distress,

830 Unremitting humiliations,

The hard fate they’d been forced to undergo,

No small affliction. Clear proof of this

Could be seen in the hand the hero displayed

High up near the roof: the whole of Grendel’s

Shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.

Then morning came and many a warrior

Gathered, as I have heard, around the gift-hall,

Clan-chiefs flocking from far and near

Down wide-ranging roads, wondering greatly

840 At the monster’s footprint. His fatal departure

Was regretted by no one who witnessed his trail,

The ignominious marks of his flight

Where he’d sulked away, exhausted in spirit

And beaten in battle, bloodying the path,

Hauling his doom to the demons’ mere.

The bloodshot water wallowed and surged,

There were loathsome up throws and over turnings

Of waves and gore and would-slurry.

With his death upon him, he had dived deep

850 Into his marsh den, drowned out his life

Grendel retreats to his ‘den’ and eventually dies from his wounds

And his heathen soul: hell claimed him there.

Then away they rode, the old retainers

With many a young man following after,

A troop on horseback, in high spirits

On their bay steeds. Beowulf’s doings

Were praised over and over again.

Nowhere, they said, north or south

Between the two seas or under the tall sky

On the broad earth was there anyone better

860 To raise a shield or to rule a kingdom

Yet there was no laying of blame on their lord,

The noble Hrothgar; he was a good king.

At times the war-band broke into a gallop,

Letting their chestnut horses race

Wherever they found the going good

On those well-known tracks. Meanwhile, a thane

Of the king’s household, a carrier of tales,

A traditional singer deeply schooled

In the lore of the past, linked a new theme

870 To a strict metre. The man started

To recite with skill, rehearsing Beowulf’s

Triumphs and feats in well-fashioned lines,

Entwining his words. He told what he’d heard

Repeated in songs of Sigemund’s exploits,

All of those many feats and marvels,

The struggles and wanderings of Wael’s son,

Things unknown to anyone,

Except Fitela, feuds and foul doings

Confided from uncle to nephew when he felt

880 The urge to speak of them: always had they been

Partners in the fight, friends in need.

They killed giants, their conquering swords

Had brought them down. After his death

Sigemund was a great warrior; he is compared to Beowulf

Sigemund’s glory grew and grew

Because of his courage when he killed the dragon,

The guardian of the hoard. Under grey stone

He had dared to enter all by himself

To face the worst without Fitela.

But it came to pass that his sword plunged

890 Right through those radiant scales

And drove into the wall. The dragon died of it.

His daring had given him total possession

Of the treasure hoard, his to dispose of

However he liked. He loaded a boat:

Wael’s son weighted her hold

With dazzling spoils. The hot dragon melted.

…

Meanwhile, the Dane kept racing their mounts

Down sandy lanes. The light of day

Broke and kept brightening. Bands of retainers

Galloped in excitement to the gabled hall

To see the marvel; and the king himself,

920 Guardian of the ring-hoard, goodness in person,

Walked in majesty from the women’s quarters

With a numerous train, attended by his queen

And her crowd of maidens, across the mead-hall.

When Hrothgar arrived at the hall, he spoke,

Standing on the steps, under the steep eaves,

Gazing at the roofwork and Grendel’s talon:

“First and foremost, let the Almighty Father

Be thanked for this sight. I suffered a long

Harrowing by Grendel. But the Heavenly Shepherd

930 Can work his wonders always and everywhere.

Not long since, it seemed I would never

Be granted the slightest solace or relief

From any of my burdens: the best of houses

Glittered and reeked and ran with blood.

This one worry outweighed all others –

A constant distress to counsellors entrusted

With defending the people’s forts from assault

By monsters and demons. But now a man,

With the Lord’s assistance, has accomplished something

940 None of us could manage before now

For all our efforts. Whoever she was

Who brought forth this flower of manhood,

If she is still alive, that woman can say

That in her labour the Lord of Ages

Bestowed a grace on her. So now,

Beowulf, adopt you in my heart as a dear son.

Nourish and maintain this new connection,

You noblest of men; there’ll be nothing you want for,

Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, praises Beowulf for his victory

No worldly good that won’t be yours.

I have often honoured smaller achievements,

Recognised warriors not nearly as worthy,

Lavished rewards on the less deserving.

But you have made yourself immortal

By your glorious action. May the Lord of Ages

Continue to keep and requite you well.”

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

“We have gone through a glorious endeavour

And been much favoured in this fight we dared

Against the unknown. Nevertheless,

960 If you could have seen the monster himself

Where he lay beaten, I would have been better pleased.

My plan was to pounce, pin him down

In a tight grip and grapple him to death –

Have him panting for life, powerless and clasped

In my bare hands, his body in thrall.

But I couldn’t stop him from slipping my hold.

The Lord allowed it, my lock on him

Wasn’t strong enough, he struggled fiercely

And broke and ran. Yet he bought his freedom

970 At a high price, for he left his hand

And arm and shoulder to show he had been here,

A cold comfort for having come among us.

And now he won’t be long for this world.

He has done his worst but the wound will end him.

He is hasped and hooped and hirpling with pain,

Limped and looped in it. Like a man outlawed

For wickedness, he mush await

The mighty judgment of God in majesty.”

There was less tampering and big talk then

980 From Unferth the boaster, less of his blather

Unferth was the man who initially questioned Beowulf’s prowess

As the hall-thanes eyed the awful proof

Of the hero’s prowess, the splayed hand

Up under the eaves. Every nail,

Claw-scale and spur, every spike

And welt on the hand of that heathen brute

Was like barbed steel. Everybody said

There was no honed iron hard enough

To pierce him through, no time-proofed blade

That could cut his brutal, blood-caked claw.

990 Then the order was given for all hands

To help refurbish Heorot immediately:

Men and women thronging the wine-hall,

Getting it ready. Gold thread shone

In the wall-hangings, woven scenes

That attracted and held the eye’s attention.

But iron-braced as the inside of it had been,

The bright room lay in ruins now.

The very doors had been dragged from their hinges.

Only the roof remained unscathed

1000 By the time the guilt-fouled fiend turned tail

In despair of his life. But death is not easily

Escaped from by anyone:

All of us with souls, earth-dwellers

And children of men, must make our way

To a destination already ordained

Where the body, after the banqueting,

Sleeps on its deathbed. Then the due time arrived

For Halfdane’s son to proceed to the hall.

The king himself would sit down to feast.

1010 No group ever gathered in greater numbers

Or better order around their ring-giver.

The benches filled with famous men

Who fell to with relish; round upon round

Of mead was passed; those powerful kinsmen,

Hrothgar and Hrothulf, were in high spirits

In the raftered hall. Inside Heorot

Hrothulf is the nephew of Hrothgar

There was nothing but friendship. The Shielding nation

Was not yet familiar with feud and betrayal.

Then Halfdane’s son presented Beowulf

1020 With gold standards as a victory gift,

An embroidered banner; also breast-mail

And a helmet; and a sword carried high,

That was both precious object and a token of honour.

So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease;

Beowulf is rewarded for killing Grendel with many lavish gifts

It was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts

In front of the hall-troops. There haven’t been many

Moments, I am sure, when men have exchanged

Four such treasures at so friendly a sitting.

An embossed ring, a band lapped with wire

1030 Arched over the helmet: head-protection

To keep the keen-ground cutting edge

From damaging it when danger threatened

And the man was battling behind his shield.

Next the king ordered eight horses

With gold bridles to be brought through the yard

Into the hall. The harness of one

Included a saddle of sumptuous design,

The battle-seat where the son of Halfdane

Rode when he wished to join the sword-play:

1040 Wherever the killing and carnage were the worst,

He would be to the fore, fighting hard.

The Danish prince, descendent of Ing,

Handed over both the arms and the horses,

Urging Beowulf to use them well.

And so their leader, the lord and guard

Of coffer and strong room, with customary grace

Bestowed upon Beowulf both sets of gifts.

A fair witness can see how well each one behaved.

The chieftain went on to reward the others:

Beowulf’s men are also rewarded; fourteen sailed across with him

1050 Each man on the bench who had sailed with Beowulf

And risked the voyage received a bounty,

Some treasured possession. And compensation,

A price in gold, was settled for the Geat

Grendel had killed cruelly earlier –

As he would have killed more, had not mindful God

And one man’s daring prevented that doom.

Past and present, God’s will prevails.

Hence, understanding is always best

And a prudent mind. Whoever remains

1060 For long here in this earthly life

Will enjoy and endure more than enough.

They sang then and played to please the hero,

Words and music for their warrior prince,

Harp tunes and tales of adventure:

There were high times on the hall benches

And the king’s poet performed his part

With the saga of Finn and his sons, unfolding

The tale of the fierce attack in Friesland

Where Hnaef, king of the Danes, met death.

…

The poet had performed, a pleasant murmur

1160 Started on the benches, stewards did the rounds

With wine in splendid jugs, and Wilhtheow came to sit

In her gold crown between two good men,

Uncle and nephew, each of whom

Still trusted the other; and the forthright Unferth,

Admired by all for his mind and courage

Although under a cloud for killing his brothers,

Reclined near the king. The queen spoke:

“Enjoy this drink, my most generous lord;

Raise up your goblet, entertain the Geats

1170 Duly and gently, discourse with them,

Be open-handed, happy and fond.

Relish their company, but recollect as well

All of the boons that have been bestowed upon you.

The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed

And now the word is that you want to adopt

This warrior as a son. So, while you may,

Bask in your fortune, then bequeath

Kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,

Before your decease. I am certain of Hrothulf.

He is noble and will use the young ones well.

1180 He will not let you down. Should you die before him,

He will treat our children truly and fairly.

He will honour, I am sure, our two sons,

Repay them in kind when he recollects

All the good things we gave him once,

The favour and respect he found in childhood.”

She turned then to the bench where her boys sat,

Hrethric and Hrothmond, with other nobles’ sons,

The children of Hrothgar and Queen Wealhtheow

All the youth together; and that good man,

1190 Beowulf the Geat, sat between the brothers.

The cup was carried to him, kind words

Spoken in welcome and wealth of wrought gold

Graciously bestowed; two arm bangles,

A mail shirt and rings, and the most resplendent

Torque of gold I have ever heard tell of

Anywhere on earth or under heaven.

There was no hoard like it since Hama snatched

The Brosings’ neck-chain and bore it away

With its gems and settings to his shinning fort,

1200 Away from Eormenric’s wiles and hatred,

And thereby ensured his eternal reward.

Hygelac the Geat, grandson of Swerting,

Wore this neck-ring on his last raid;

At bay under his banner, he defended the booty,

Treasure he had won. Fate swept him away

Because of his proud need to provoke

A feud with the Frisians. He fell beneath his shield,

In the same gem-crusted, kingly gear

He had worn when he crossed the frothing wave-vat.

1210 So the dead king fell into Frankish hands.

Hey took his breast-mail, also his neck-torque,

And punier warriors plundered the slain

When the carnage ended; Geat corpses

Covered the field. Applause filled the hall.

Then Wealhtheow pronounce in the presence of the company:

“Take delight in this torque, dear Beowulf,

A ‘torque’ is a piece of armour designed for neck protection

Wear it for luck and also wear this mail

From our people’s armory: may you prosper in them!

Be acclaimed or strength, for kindly guidance

1220 To these two boys, and your bounty will be sure.

You have won renown: you are known to all men

Far and near, now and forever.

Your sway is wide and the wind’s home,

As the sea around cliffs. So, my prince,

I wish you a lifetime’s luck and blessings

To enjoy this treasure. Treat my sons

With tender care, be strong and kind.

Here each comrade is true to the other,

Loyal to lord, loving in spirit.

1230 The thanes have one purpose, the people are ready:

Having drunk and pledged, the ranks do as I bid.”

She moved then to her place. Men were drinking wine

At that rare feast; how could they know fate,

The grim shape of things to come,

The threat looming over many thanes

As night approached and king Hrothgar prepared

To retire to his quarters. Retainers in great numbers

Were posted on guard as so often in the past.

Benches were pushed back, bedding gear and bolsters

1240 Spread across the floor, and one man

Lay down to his rest, already marked for death.

At their heads they placed their polished timber

Battle-shields; and on the bench above them,

Each man’s kit was kept to hand:

A towering war-helmet, webbed mail-shirt

And great-shafted spear. It was their habit

Always and everywhere to be ready for action,

At home or in the camp, in whatever case

And at whatever time the need arose

1250 To rally round their lord. They were a right people.

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

They went to sleep. And one paid dearly

For his night’s ease, as had happened to them often,

Ever since Grendel occupied the gold-hall,

Committing evil until the end came,

Death after his crimes. Then it became clear,

Obvious to everyone once the fight was over,

That an avenger lurked and was still alive,

Grimly biding time. Grendel’s mother,

Grendel’s mother (like Grendel) is a demonic, monstrous creature

Monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.

1260 She had been forced down into fearful waters,

The cold depths, after Cain had killed

His father’s son, felled his own

Brother with the sword. Banished an outlaw,

Marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds,

Shunning company and joy. And from Cain there sprang

Misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel,

The banished and accursed, due to come to grips

With that watcher in Heorot waiting to do battle.

The monster wrenched and wrestled with him

1270 But Beowulf was mindful of his mighty strength,

The wondrous gifts God had showered on him:

He relied for help on the Lord of All,

On His care and favour. So he overcame the foe,

Brought down the hell-brute. Broken and bowed,

Outcast from all sweetness, the enemy of mankind

Made for his death-den. But now his mother

Had sallied forth on a savage journey,

Grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.

She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall,

1280 Danes lay asleep, earls who would soon endure

A great reversal once Grendel’s mother

Attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less

Only by as much as an Amazon warrior’s

In less than an armoured man’s

When the hefted sword, its hammered edge

And gleaming blade slathered in blood,

Razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet.

Then in the hall, hard-honed swords

Were grabbed from the bench, many a broad shield

1290 Lifted and braced; there was little thought of helmets

Or woven mail when they woke in terror.

The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out,

In mortal terror the moment she was found.

She had pounced and taken one of the retainers

In a tight hold, then headed for the fen.

A fen is an area of low marshland; it is where Grendel’s mother lives

To Hrothgar, this man was the most beloved

Of the friends he trusted between the two seas.

She had done away with a great warrior,

Ambushed him at rest. Beowulf was elsewhere.

1300 Earlier, after the reward of the treasure,

The Geat had been given another lodging.

There was an uproar in Heorot. She had snatched their trophy,

The ‘trophy’ is Grendel’s arm; Grendel’s mother takes it away

Grendel’s bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow

To the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard,

Both parties having to pay

With the lives of friends. And the old lord,

The grey-haired warrior, was heartsore and weary

When he heard the news: his highest-placed advisor,

His dearest companion, was dead and gone.

1310 Beowulf was quickly brought to the chamber:

The winner of fights, the arch-warrior,

Came first-footing in with his fellow troops

To where the king in his wisdom waited,

Still wondering whether Almighty God

Would even turn the tide of his misfortunes.

So Beowulf entered with his band in attendance

And the wooden floor-boards banged and rang

As he advanced, hurrying to address

The prince of the Ingwins, asking if he’d rested

An alternative name for the Danes

1320 Since the urgent summons had come as a surprise.

Then Hrothgar, the Shieldings’ helmet, spoke:

“Rest? What is rest? Sorrow has returned.

Alas for the Danes! Aeschere is dead.

The name of the man ‘taken’ by Grendel’s mother

He was Yrmenlaf’s elder brother

And a soul mate to me, a true mentor,

My right-hand man when the ranks clashed

And our boar-crests had to take a battering

In the line of action. Aechere was everything

The world admires in a wise man and a friend.

1330 Then this roaming killer came in a fury

And slaughtered him in Heorot. Where she is hiding,

Glutting on the corpse and glorying in her escape,

I cannot tell; she has taken up the feud

Because of last night, when you killed Grendel,

Wrestled and racked him in ruinous combat

Since for too long he had terrorised us

With his predations. He died in battle,

Paid with his life; and now this powerful

Other one arrives, this force for evil

1340 Driven to avenge her kinsman’s death.

Or so it seems to thanes in their grief,

In the anguish every thane endures

At the loss of a ring-giver, now that the hand

That bestowed so richly has been stilled in death.

“I have heard it said by my people in hall,

Counsellors who live in the upland country,

That they have seen two such creatures

Prowling the moors, huge marauders

From some other world. One of these things,

1350 As far as anyone ever can discern,

Looks like a woman; the other, warped

In the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale

Bigger than any man, an unnatural birth

Called Grendel by country people

In former days. They are fatherless creatures,

And their whole ancestry is hidden in a past

Of demons and ghosts. They dwell apart

Among wolves on hills, on windswept crags

And treacherous keshes, where cold streams

1360 Pour down the mountain and disappear

Under mist and moorland. A few miles from here

A frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch

Above a mere; the overhanging bank

A ‘mere’ is a shallow lake; the location of Grendel’s mother’s lair

Is a maze of tree roots mirrored in its surface.

At night there, something uncanny happens:

The water burns. And the mere bottom

Has never been sounded by the sons of men.

On its bank, the heather-stepper halts:

The hart in flight from pursuing hounds

1370 Will turn to face them with firm-set horns

And die in the wood rather than dive

Beneath its surface. That is no good place.

When the wind blows up and stormy weather

Makes clouds scud and the skies weep,

Out of its depths a dirty surge

Is pitched towards the heavens. Now help depends

Again on you and you alone.

The gap of danger where the demon waits

Is still unknown to you. Seek it if you dare.

1380 I will compensate you for settling the feud

As I did last time with lavish wealth,

Coffers of coiled gold, if you come back.”

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

“Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better

To avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.

For every one of us, living in this world

Means waiting for our end. Let whoever can

Win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,

That will be his best and only bulwark.

1390 So arise, my lord, and let us immediately

Set forth on the trail of this troll-dam.

I guarantee you: she will not get away,

Not to dens underground nor upland groves

Nor the ocean floor. She’ll have nowhere to flee to.

Endure your troubles today. Bear up

And be the man I expect you to be.”

With that the old lord sprung to his feet

And praised God for Beowulf’s pledge.

Then a bit and halter were brought for his horse

1400 With the plaited mane. The wise king mounted

The royal saddle and rode out in style

With a force of shield-bearers. The forest paths

Were marked all over with the monster’s tracks,

Beowulf leads the search for Grendel’s mother

Her trail on the ground wherever she had gone

Across the dark moors, dragging away

The body of that thane, Hrothgar’s best

Counsellor and overseer of the country.

So the noble prince proceeded undismayed

Up fells and screes, along narrow footpaths

1410 And ways where they were forced into single file,

Ledges on cliffs above lairs of water-monsters.

He went in front with a few men,

Good judges of the lie of the land,

And suddenly discovered the dismal wood,

Mountain trees growing out at an angle

Above grey stones: the bloodshot water

Surged underneath. It was a sore blow

To all of the Danes, friends of the Shieldings,

A hurt to each and every one

Of that noble company when they came upon

Aechere’s head at the foot of the cliff.

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Everybody gazed as the hot gore

Kept wallowing up and an urgent war-horn

Repeated its notes: the whole party

Sat down to watch. The water was infested

The mere has magical qualities and is full of monsters

With all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-dragons

And monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,

Serpents and wild things such as those that often

Surface at dawn to roam the sail-road

1430 And doom the voyage. Down they plunged,

Lashing in anger at the loud call

Of the battle bugle. An arrow from the bow

Of the Geat chief got one of them

As he surged to the surface: the seasoned shaft

Stuck deep in his flank and his freedom in the water

Got less and less. It was his last swim.

He was swiftly overwhelmed in the shallows,

Prodded by barbed boar-spears,

Cornered, beaten, pulled up on the bank,

1440 A strange lake-birth, a loathsome catch

Men gazed at in awe. Beowulf got ready,

Donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;

His mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail

Would soon meet with the menace under water.

It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:

No enemy’s clasp could crush him in it,

No vicious arm lock choke his life out.

To guard his head he had a glittering helmet

That was due to be muddied on the mere bottom

1450 And blurred in the up swirl. It was of beaten gold,

Princely headgear hooped and hasped

By a weapon-smith who had worked wonders

In days gone by and adorned it with boar-shapes;

Since then it had resisted every sword.

And another item lent by Unferth

At that moment was of no small importance:

The brehon handed him a hilted weapon,

A rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.

The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns

1460 Had been tempered in blood. It had never failed

The hand of anyone who had hefted it in battle,

Anyone who had fought and faced the worst

In the gap of danger. This was not the first time

It had been called to perform heroic feats.

When he lent that blade to the better swordsman,

The man who initially questioned Beowulf’s prowess

Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf,

Could hardly have remember the ranting speech

He had made in his cups. He was not man enough

To face the turmoil of a fight under water

1470 And the risk to his life. So there he lost

Fame and repute. It was different for the other

Rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

“Wisest of kings, now that I have come

To the point of action, I ask you to recall

What we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane

And gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall

And suffer death while serving your cause,

Would act like a father to me afterwards.

1480 If this combat kills me, take care

Of my young company, my comrades in arms.

And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar,

To send Hygelac the treasures I received.

Let the lord of the Geats gaze on that gold,

Let Hrethel’s son take note of it and see

That I found a ring-giver of rare magnificence

And enjoyed the good of his generosity.

And Unferth is to have what I inherited:

To that far-famed man I bequeath my own

1490 Sharp-horned, wave-sheened wonder blade.

With Hrunting I shall gain glory or die.

After these words, the prince of the Weather-Geats

Was impatient to be away and plunged suddenly:

Without more ado, he dived into the heaving

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

Before he could see the solid bottom.

Quickly the one who haunted those waters,

Who had scavenged and gone her gluttonous rounds

For a hundred seasons, sensed a human

1500 Observing her outlandish lair from above.

So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him

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

Remained unscathed: the mesh of the chainmail

Saved him on the outside. Her savage talons

Failed to rip the web of his war shirt.

Then once she touched bottom, the wolfish swimmer

Carried the ring-mailed prince to her court

So that for all his courage he could never use

The weapons he carried; and a bewildering horde

1510 Came at him from the depths, droves of sea-beasts

Who attacked with tusks and tore at his chainmail

In a ghastly onslaught. The gallant man

Could see he had entered some hellish turn-hole

And yet the water did not work against him

Because the hall-roofing held off

The force of the current; then he saw firelight,

A gleam and flare-up, a glimmer of brightness.

The hero observed that swamp-thing from hell,

The tarn-hag in all her terrible strength,

1520 Then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm:

The decorated blade came down ringing

The sword (Hrunting) is unable to hurt Grendel’s mother

And singing on her head. But he soon found

His battle-torch extinguished: the shinning blade

Refused to bite. It spared her and failed

The man in his need. It had gone through many

Hand-to-hand fights, had hewed the armour

And helmets of the doomed, but here at last

The fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.

Hygelac’s kinsman kept thinking about

1530 His name and fame: he never lost heart.

Then, in fury, he flung his sword away.

The keen, inlaid, worm-looped-patterned steel

Was hurled to the ground: he would have to rely

On the might of his arm. So must a man do

Who intends to gain enduring glory

In a combat. Life doesn’t cost him thought.

Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to his fight

With Grendel’s mother, gripped her shoulder

And laid about him in a battle frenzy:

1540 He pitched his killer opponent to the floor

But she rose quickly and retaliated,

Grappled him tightly in her grim embrace.

The sure-footed fight fell daunted,

The strongest of warriors stumbled and fell.

So she pounced upon him and pulled out

A broad, whetted knife: now she could avenge

Her only child. But the mesh of chainmail

On Beowulf’s shoulder shielded his life,

Turned the edge and tip of the blade.

1550 The son of Ecgtheow would surely have perished

And the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth

Had the strong links and locks of his war-gear

Not helped to save him: Holy God

Decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,

The Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance

Once Beowulf got back up on his feet.

Then he saw a blade that boded well,

A sword in her armoury, an ancient heirloom

Beowulf uses a sword made for giants to attack Grendel’s mother

From the days of the giants, an ideal weapon,

1560 One that any warrior would envy,

But so huge and heavy in itself

Only Beowulf could wield it in battle.

So the Shieldings’ hero, hard-pressed and enraged,

Took a firm hold of the hilt and swung

The blade in an arc, a resolute blow

That bit into her neck bone

And severed it entirely, toppling the doomed

House of her flesh; she fell to the floor.

The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated.

1570 A light appeared and the place brightened

The way the sky does when heaven’s candle

Is shining clearly. He inspected the vault:

With sword held high, its hilt raised

To guard and threaten, Hygelac’s thane

Scouted by the wall in Grendel’s wake.

Now the weapon was to prove its worth.

The warrior determined to take revenge

For every gross act Grendel had committed –

And not only for that one occasion

1580 When he’d come to slaughter the sleeping troops,

Fifteen of Hrothgar’s house-guards

Surprised on their benches and ruthlessly devoured,

And as many again carried away,

A brutal plunderer. Beowulf in his fury

Now settled that score: he saw the monster

In his resting place, war-weary and wrecked,

A lifeless corpse, a casualty

Of the battle in Heorot. The body gaped

The corpse of Grendel; Beowulf cuts-off the monster’s head

At the stroke dealt to it after death:

1590 Beowulf cut the corpse’s head off.

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Immediately the counsellors keeping a lookout

With Hrothgar, watching the lake water,

Saw a heave-up and surge of waves

And blood in the backwash. They bowed gray heads,

Spoke in their sage, experienced way

About the good warrior, how they never again

Expected to see that prince returning

In triumph to their king. It was clear to many

That the wolf of the deep had destroyed him forever.

1600 The ninth hour of the day arrived.

The brave Shieldings abandoned their cliff-top

And the king went home; but sick at heart,

Staring at the mere, the strangers held on.

They wished, without hope, to behold their lord, Beowulf himself.

Meanwhile, the sword began to wilt into gory icicles,

The blood of Grendel melts the sword, but the hilt remains intact

To slather and thaw. It was a wonderful thing,

The way it all melted as ice melts

When the father eases the fetters off the frost

1610 And unravels the water-ropes. He who wields power

Over time and tide: He is the true Lord.

The Geat captain saw treasure in abundance

But carried no spoils from those quarters

Except for the head and the inlaid hilt

Embossed with jewels; its blade had melted

And the scrollwork on it burnt, so scalding was the blood

Of the poisonous fiend who had perished there.

Then away he swan, the one who had survived

The fall of his enemies, flailing to the surface.

1620 The wide water, the waves and pools

Were no longer infested once the wandering fiend

Let go of her life and this unreliable world.

The seafarers’ leader made for land,

Resolutely swimming, delighted with his prize,

The mighty load he was lugging to the surface.

His thanes advanced in a troop to meet him,

Thanking God and taking great delight

In seeing their prince back safe and sound.

Quickly the hero’s helmet and mail-shirt

1630 Were loosed and unlaced. The lake settled,

Clouds darkened above the bloodshot depths.

With high hearts they headed away

Along footpath and trails through the fields,

Roads that they knew, each of them wrestling

With the head they were carrying from the lakeside cliff,

Men kingly in their courage and capable

Of difficult work. It was a task for four

To hoist Grendel’s head on a spear

And bear it under strain to the bright hall.

1640 But soon enough they neared the place.

Fourteen Geats in fine fettle,

Striding across the outlying ground

In a delighted throng around they leader.

Beowulf’s kinsmen celebrate his victory over Grendel’s mother

In he came then, the thane’s commander,

The arch-warrior, to address Hrothgar:

His courage was proven, his glory was secure.

Grendel’s head was hauled by the hair,

Grendel’s severed head becomes a trophy

Dragged across the floor where people were drinking,

A horror for both queen and company to behold.

1650 They stared in awe. It was an astonishing sight.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

“So, son of Halfdane, prince of the Shieldings,

We are glad to bring this booty from the lake.

It is a token of triumph and we tender it to you.

I barely survived the battle underwater.

It was hard-fought, a desperate affair

That could have gone badly; if God had not helped me,

The outcome would have been quick and fatal.

Although Hrunting is hard-edged,

1660 I could never bring it to bear in battle.

But the Lord of Men allowed me to behold--

For he often helps the unbefriended –

An ancient sword shining on the wall,

A weapon made for giants, there for the wielding.

Then my moment came in the combat and I struck

The dwellers in that den. Next thing the damascened

Sword blade melted; it bloated and it burned

In their rushing blood. I have wrested the hilt

From the enemies’ hand, avenged the evil

1670 Done to the Danes; it is what was due.

And this I pledge, O prince of the Shieldings:

You can sleep secure with your company of troops

In Heorot Hall. Never need you fear

For a single thane of your sept or nation,

Young warriors or old, that laying waste of life

That you and your people endured of yore.”

Then the gold hilt was handed over

To the old lord, a relic from long ago

For the venerable ruler. That rare smith work

1680 Was passed on to the prince of the Danes

When those devils perished; once death removed

That murdering, guilt-steeped, God-cursed fiend,

Eliminating his unholy life

And his mother’s as well, it was willed that the king

Who of all the lavish gift-lords of the north

Was the best regarded between the two seas.

Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt,

Hrothgar praises Beowulf for his victory over Grendel’s mother

That relic of old times. It was engraved all over

And showed how war first came into the world

1690 And the flood destroyed the tribe of giants.

They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord;

The Almighty made the waters rise,

Drowned them in the deluge for retribution.

In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards

There were rune markings correctly incised,

Stating and recording for whom the sword

Had been first made and ornamented

With its scrollwork hilt. Then everyone hushed

As the son of Halfdane spoke his wisdom.

1700 “A protector of his people, pledged to uphold

Truth and justice and to respect tradition,

Is entitled to affirm that this man

Was born to distinction. Beowulf, my friend,

Your fame has gone far and wide,

You are known everywhere. In all things you are even-tempered,

Prudent and resolute. So I stand firm by the promise of friendship

We exchanged before. Forever you will be

Your people’s mainstay and your own warriors’

Helping hand. Heremod was different,

A former Danish ruler who abused his power

1710 The way he behaved to Ecgwala’s sons.

His rise in the world brought little joy

To the Danish people, only death and destruction.

He vented his rage on people he caroused with,

Killed his own comrades, a pariah king

Who cut himself off from his own kind,

Even though God Almighty had made him

Eminent and powerful and marked him from the start

For a happy life. But a change happened,

He grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings

1720 To honour the Danes. He suffered in the end

For having plagued his people for so long:

His life lost happiness. So learn from this

Hrothgar tells Beowulf about Heremod as a cautionary tale

And understand true values. I who tell you

Have wintered into wisdom. It is a great wonder

How Almighty God in his magnificence

Favours our race with rank and scope

And the gift of wisdom; His sway is wide.

Sometimes He allows the mind of a man

Of distinguished birth to follow its bent,

1730 Grants him fulfilment and felicity on earth

And forts to command in his own country.

He permits him to lord it in many lands

Until the man in his unthinkingness

Forgets that it will ever end for him.

He indulges his desires; illness and old age

Mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled

By envy or malice or thought of enemies

With their hate-honed swords. The whole world

Conforms to his will, he is kept from the worst

1740 Until an element of overweening

Enters him and takes hold

While the soul’s guard, its sentry, drowses,

Grown too distracted. A killer stalks him,

An archer who draws a deadly bow.

And then the man is hit in the heart,

The arrow flies beneath his defences,

The devious promptings of the demon start.

His old possessions seem paltry to him now.

He covets and resents; dishonours custom

1750 And bestows no gold; and because of good things

That the Heavenly powers gave him in the past

He ignores the shape of things to come.

Then finally the end arrives

When the body he was lent collapses and falls

Prey to its death; ancestral possessions

And the goods he hoarded and inherited by another

Who lets them go with a liberal hand.

“O flower of warriors, beware of that trap.

Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,

1760 Eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride.

For a brief while your strength is in bloom

But it fades quickly; and soon there will follow

Illness or the sword to lay you low,

Or a sudden fire or surge of water

Or jabbing blade or javelin from the air

Or repellent age. Your piercing eye

Will dim and darken; and death will arrive,

Dear warrior, to sweep you away.

“Just so I ruled the ring-Danes’ country

1770 For fifty years, defended them in wartime

With spear and sword against constant assaults

By many tribes: I came to believe

My enemies had faded from the face of the earth.

Still, what happened was a hard reversal

From bliss to grief. Grendel struck

After lying in wait. He laid waste the land

And from that moment my mind was in dread

Of his depredations. So I praise God

In His heavenly glory that I lived to behold

1780 This head dripping blood and after such harrowing

I can look upon it in triumph at last.

Take your place, then, with pride and pleasure

Hrothgar promises to reward Beowulf with treasure

And move to the feast. Tomorrow morning

Our treasure will be shared and showered upon you.”

The Geat was elated and gladly obeyed

The old man’s biding; he sat on the bench.

And soon all was restored, the same as before.

Happiness came back, the hall was thronged,

And a banquet set forth; black night fell

1790 And covered them in darkness. Then the company rose

For the old campaigner: the grey-haired prince

Was ready for bed. And a need for rest

Came over the brave shield-bearing Geat.

He was a weary sea-farer, far from home,

So immediately a house-guard guided him out,

One whose office entailed looking after

Whatever a thane on the road in those days

Might need or require. It was noble courtesy.

That great heart rested. The hall towered,

1800 Gold-shingled and gabled, and the guest slept in it

Until the black raven with raucous glee

Announced heaven’s joy, and a hurry of brightness

Overran the shadows. Warriors rose quickly,

Impatient to be off: their own country

Was beckoning the nobles; and the bold voyager

Longed to be aboard his distant boat.

Then that stalwart fighter ordered Hrunting

The sword that Beowulf initially used to attack Grendel’s mother

To be brought to Unferth, and bade Unferth

Take the sword and thanked him for lending it.

1810 He said he had found it a friend in battle

And a powerful help; he put no blame

On the blade’s cutting edge. He was a considerate man.

And there the warriors stood in their war-gear,

Eager to go, while their honoured lord

Approached the platform where the other sat.

The undaunted hero addressed Hrothgar.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

“Now we who crossed the wide sea

Have to inform you that we feel a desire

1820 To return to Hygelac. Here we have been welcomed

And thoroughly entertain. You have treated us well.

If there is any favour on earth I can perform

Beyond deeds of arms I have done already,

Anything that would merit your affections more,

I shall act, my lord, with alacrity.

If ever I hear from across the ocean

That people on your borders are threatening battle

As attackers have done from time to time,

I shall land with a thousand thanes at my back

Beowulf and Hrothgar form an alliance; the Geats and Danes

1830 To help your cause. Hygelac may be young

To rule a nation, but this much I know

About the king of the Geats: he will come to my aid

And want to support me by word and action

In your hour of need, when honour dictates

That I raise a hedge of spears around you.

Then if Hrethric should think about traveling

As a king’s son to the court of the Geats,

He will find many friend. Foreign places

Yield more to one who is himself worth meeting.”

1840 Hrothgar spoke and answered him:

“The Lord in his wisdom sent you those words

And they came from the heart. I have never heard

So young a man make truer observations.

You are strong in body and mature in mind,

Impressive in speech. If it should come to pass

That Hrethel’s descendant dies beneath a spear,

If deadly battle or the sword blade or disease

Fells the prince who guards your people

And you are still alive, I firmly believe

1850 The seafaring Geats won’t find a man

Worthier of acclaim as their king and defender

Than you, if only you would undertake

The lordship of your homeland. My liking for you

Deepens with time, dear Beowulf.

What you have done is to draw two peoples,

The Geat nation and us neighbouring Danes,

Into shared peace and a pact of friendship

In spite of hatreds we have harboured in the past.

For as long as I rule this far-flung land

1860 Treasures will change hands and each side will treat

The other with gifts; across the gannet’s bath,

Over the broad sea, whorled prows will bring

Presents and tokens. I know your people

Are beyond reproach in every respect,

Steadfast in the old way with friend or foe.”

Then the earl’s defender furnished the hero

With twelve treasures and told him to set out,

Sail with those gifts safely home

To the people he loved, but to return promptly.

1870 And so the good and grey-haired Dane,

That high-born king, kissed Beowulf

And embraced his neck, then broke down

In sudden tears. Two forebodings

Disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger:

Hrothgar senses that he will never see Beowulf again

Nevermore would they meet each other

Face to face. And such was his affection

That he could not help being overcome:

His fondness for the man was so deep-founded,

It warmed his heart and wound the heartstrings

1880 Tight in his breast. The embrace ended

And Beowulf, glorious in his gold regalia,

Stepped on the green earth. Straining at anchor

And ready for boarding, his boat awaited him.

So they went on their journey, and Hrothgar’s generosity

Was praised repeatedly. He was a peerless king

Until old age sapped his strength and did him

Mortal harm, as it has done so many.

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Down to the waves then, dressed in the web

Of their chainmail and war-shirts the young men marched

1890 In high spirits. The coast-guard spied them,

Thanes setting forth, the same as before.

His salute this time from the top of the cliff

Was far from unmannerly; he galloped to meet them

And as they took ship in their shinning gear,

He said how welcome they would be in Geatland.

Then the broad hull was beached on the sand

To be cargoed with treasure, horses and war-gear.

The curved prow motioned; the mast stood high

Above Hrothgar’s riches in the loaded hold.

1900 The guard who had watched the boat was given

A sword with gold fittings and in future days

That present would make him a respected man

At his place on the mead-bench. Then the keel plunged

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

Right away the mast was rigged with its sea-shawl;

Sail ropes were tightened, timbers drummed

And stiff winds kept the wave-crosser

Skimming ahead; as she heaved forward,

Her foamy neck was fleet and buoyant,

1910 A lapped prow loping over currents,

Until finally the Geats caught sight of coastline

And familiar cliffs. The keel reared up,

Wind lifted it home, it hit on the land.

The harbour guard came hurrying out

To the rolling water: he had watched the offing

Long and hard on the lookout for those friends.

With the anchor cables, he moored their craft

Right where it had beached, in case a backwash

Beowulf returns home and goes to meet the king of the Geats

Might catch the hull and carry it away.

1920 Then he ordered the prince’s treasure-trove

To be carried ashore. It was a short step

From there to where Hrethel’s son and heir,

Hygelac the gold-giver, makes his home

On a secure cliff, in the company of retainers.

The building was magnificent, the king majestic,

Ensconced in his hall; and although Hygd, his queen,

Was young, a few short years at court,

Her mind was thoughtful and her manners sure.

Haereth’s daughter behaved generously

1930 And stinted nothing when she distributed

Bounty to the Geats. Great Queen Modthryth

A legendary queen, known for her cruelty; a foil to Queen Hygd

Perpetrated terrible wrongs.

If any retainer ever made bold

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

Stared at her directly during daylight,

The outcome was sealed: he was bound

In hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured

Until doom was announced – death by the sword,

Slash of blade, blood gush and death qualms

1940 In an evil display. Even a queen

Outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that.

A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent

With loss of life for imagined insults.

But Hemming’s kinsman put a halt to her ways

And drinkers round the table had another tale:

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

Less cruel-minded, after she was married

To the brave Offa, a bride arrayed

A legendary king, known for his bravery; a parallel to King Hygelac

In her gold finery, given away

1950 By a caring father, ferried to her young prince

Over dim seas. In days to come

She would grace the throne and grow famous

For her good deeds and conduct of life,

Her high devotion to the hero king

Who was the best king, it has been said,

Between the two seas or anywhere else

On the face of the earth. Offa was honoured

Far and wide for his generous ways,

His fighting spirit and his far-seeing

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

Garmund’s grandson, kinsman of Hemming,

His warrior’s mainstay and master of the field.

Heroic Beowulf and his band of men

Crossed the wide strand, striding along

The sandy foreshore; the sun shone,

The world’s candle warmed them from the south

As they hastened to where, as they had heard,

The young king, Ongentheow’s killer

And his people’s protector, was dispensing rings

1970 Inside his bawn. Beowulf’s return

Was reported to Hygelac as soon as possible,

News that the captain was now in the enclosure,

His battle-brother back from the fray

Alive and well, walking back to the hall.

Room was quickly made, on the king’s orders,

And the troops filed across the cleared floor.

After Hygelac had offered greetings

To his loyal thane in lofty speech,

He and his kinsman, that hale survivor,

1980 Sat face to face. Haereth’s daughter

Haereth’s daughter is Queen Hygd; wife of Hygelac

Moved about with the mead-jug in her hand,

Taking care of the company, filling the cups

That warriors held out. Then Hygelac began

To put courteous questions to his old comrade

In the high hall. He hankered to know

Every tale the Sea-Geats had to tell.

“How did you fare on your foreign voyage,

Dear Beowulf, when you abruptly decided

To sail away across the salt water

1990 And fight at Heorot? Did you help Hrothgar

Much in the end? Could you ease the prince

Of his well-known troubles? Your undertaking

Cast my spirits down, I dreaded the outcome

Of your expedition and pleaded with you

Long and hard to leave the killer be,

Let the South-Danes settle their own

Blood-feud with Grendel. So God be thanked

I am granted this sight of you, safe and sound.”

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

2000 “What happened, lord Hygelac, is hardly a secret

Any more among men in this world –

Myself and Grendel coming to grips

On the very spot where he visited destruction

On the Victory-Shieldings and violated

Life and limb, loses I avenged

So no earthly offspring of Grendel’s

Need ever boast of that bout before dawn,

No matter know long the last of his evil

Family survives. When I first landed

210 I hastened to the ring-hall and saluted Hrothgar.

The king of the Danes; the man who rewarded Beowulf

Once he had discovered why I had come

The son of Halfdane sent me immediately

To sit with his own sons on the bench.

It was a happy gathering. In my whole life

I have never seen mead enjoyed more

In any hall on earth. Sometimes the queen

Herself appeared, peace-pledge between nations,

To hearten the young ones and hand out

A torque to a warrior, then take her place.

2020 Sometimes Hrothgar’s daughter distributed

Ale to older ranks, in order on the benches:

I heard the company call her Freawaru

The wife of Hrothgar; originally called Wealhtheow

As she made her rounds, presenting men

With the gem-studded bowl, young bride-to-be

To the gracious Ingeld, in her gold-rimmed attire.

The friend of the Shieldings favors her betrothal:

The guardian of the kingdom sees good in it

And hoped this woman will heal old wounds

And grievous feuds. But generally the spear

2030 Is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed,

No matter how admirable the bride may be.

“Think how the Heathobards will be bound to feel,

A Germanic tribe; the king of the Heathobards is Ingeld

Their lord, Ingeld, and his loyal thanes,

When he walks in with that woman to the feast:

Danes are at the table, being entertained,

Honoured guest in glittering regalia,

Burnished ring-mail that was their hosts’ birth right,

Looted when the Heathobards could no longer wield

Their weapons in the shield-clash, when they went down

2040 With their beloved comrades and forfeited their lives.

Then an old spearman will speak while they are drinking,

Having glimpsed some heirloom that brings alive

Memories of the massacre; his mood will darken

And heart-stricken, in the stress of his emotion,

He will begin to test a young-man’s temper

And stir up trouble, starting like this:

“Now, my friend, don’t you recognise

Your father’s sword, his favourite weapon,

Then one he wore when he went out in his war-mask

2050 To face the Danes on that final day?

After Wethergeld died and his men were doomed

The Shieldings quickly took the field,

And now here’s the son of one or other

Of those same killers coming through our hall

Overbearing us, mouthing boasts,

And rigged in armour that by right is yours.”

And so he keeps on, recalling and accusing,

Working things up with bitter words

Until one of the lady’s retainers lies

2060 Spattered in blood, split open

On his father’s account. The killer knows

The lie of the land and escaped with his life.

Then on both sides the oath-bound lords

Will break the peace, a passionate hate

Will build up in Ingeld and love for his bride

Will falter in him as the feud rankles.

Beowulf is sceptical that the marriage will secure peace

I therefore suspect the good faith of the Heathobards,

The truth of their friendship and the trustworthiness

Of their alliance with the Danes. But now, my lord,

2070 I shall carry on with my account of Grendel,

The whole story of everything that happened

In the hand-to-hand fight. After heaven’s gem

Had gone mildly to earth, that maddened spirit,

The terror of those twilights, came to attack us

Where we stood guard, still safe inside the hall.

There deadly violence came down on Handscio

And he fell as fate ordained, the first to perish,

Rigged out for the combat. A comrade from our ranks

Had come to grief in Grendel’s maw:

2080 He ate up the entire body.

There was blood on his teeth, he was bloated and furious,

Beowulf emphasises the ferocity and power of Grendel

All roused up, yet still unready

To leave the hall empty-handed;

Renowned for his might, he matched himself against me,

Wildly reaching. He had this roomy pouch,

A strange accoutrement, intricately strung

And hung at the ready, a rare patchwork

Of devilishly fitting dragon-skins.

I had done him no wrong, yet the raging demon

2090 Wanted to cram me and many another

Into this bag – but it was not to be

Once I got to my feet in a blind fury.

It would take too long to tell how I repaid

The terror of the land for every life he took

And so won credit for you, my king,

And for all your people. And although he got away

To enjoy life’s sweetness for a while longer,

His right hand stayed behind him in Heorot,

Evidence of his miserable overthrow

2100 As he dived into murk on the mere bottom.

“I got lavish rewards from the lord of the Danes

For my part in the battle, beaten gold

And much else, once morning came

And we took our places at the banquet table.

There was singing and excitement: an old reciter,

A carrier of stories, recalled the early days.

At times some hero made the timbered harp

Tremble with sweetness, or related true

And tragic happenings; at times the king

2110 Gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale,

Or a battle-scarred veteran, bowed with age,

Would begin to remember the martial deeds

Of his youth and prime and be overcome

As the past welled up in his wintry heart.

“We were happy there the whole day long

And enjoyed our time until another night

Descended upon us. Then suddenly

The vehement mother avenged her son

And wreaked destruction. Death had robbed her;

2120 Geats had slain Grendel, so his ghastly dam

Struck back and with bare-faced defiance

Laid a man low. Thus life departed

From the sage Auschere, an elder wise in council.

But afterwards, on the morning following,

The Danes could not burn the dead body

Nor lay the remains of the man they loved

On his funeral pyre. She had fled with the corpse

And taken refuge beneath torrents on the mountain.

Beowulf recalls his fight with Grendel’s mother

It was a hard blow for Hrothgar to bear,

2130 Harder than any he had undergone before.

And so the heartsore king beseeched me

In your royal name to take my chances

Underwater, to win glory

And prove my worth. He promised me rewards.

Hence, as is well known, I went to my encounter

With the terror-monger at the bottom of the tarn.

For a while it was hand-to-hand between us,

Then blood went curdling along the currents

And I beheaded Grendel’s mother in the hall

2140 With a mighty sword. I barely managed

To escape with my life; my time had not yet come.

But Halfdane’s heir, the shelter of those earls,

Again endowed me with gifts in abundance.

“Thus the king acted with due custom.

I was paid and recompensed completely,

Given full measure and the freedom to choose

From Hrothgar’s treasures by Hrothgar himself.

These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present

To you as gifts. It is still upon your grace

2150 That all favour depends. I have few kinsman

Who are close, my king, except for your kind self.”

Then he ordered the boar-framed standard to be brought,

The battle-topping helmet, the mail-shirt grey as hoar-frost

And the precious war-sword; and proceeded with his speech.

“When Hrothgar presented this war-gear to me

He instructed, my lord, to give you some account

Of why it signifies his special favour.

He said it had belonged to his older brother,

King Heorogar, who had long kept it,

2160 But that Heorogar had never bequeathed it

To his son Heoroweard, that worthy scion,

Loyal as he was. Enjoy it well.”

I heard four horses were handed over next.

Beowulf bestowed four bay steeds

To go with the armour, swift gallopers,

All alike. So ought a kinsman act,

Instead of plotting and planning in secret

To bring people to grief, or conspiring to arrange

The death of comrades. The warrior king

2170 Was uncle to Beowulf and honoured by his nephew:

Each was concerned for the other’s good.

I heard he presented Hygd with a gorget,

A piece of armour that provides protection for the neck and collar

The priceless torque that the prince’s daughter,

Wealhtheow, had given him; and three horses,

Supple creatures, brilliantly saddled.

The bright necklace would be luminous on Hygd’s breast.

Thus Beowulf bore himself with valour;

He was formidable in battle yet behaved with honour

And took no advantage: never cut down

2180 A comrade who was drunk, kept his temper

And, warrior that he was, watched and controlled

His God-sent strength and his outstanding

Natural powers. He had been poorly regarded

For a long time, was taken by the Geats

For less than he was worth: and their lord too

Had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall.

They firmly believed that he lacked force,

That the prince was a weakling; but presently

Every affront to his deserving was reversed.

2190 The battle-famed king, bulwark of his earls,

Ordered a gold-chased heirloom of Hrethel’s

To be brought in; it was the best example

Of a gem-studded sword in the Geat treasury.

This he laid on Beowulf’s lap

And then rewarded him with land as well,

Seven thousand hides, and a hall and a throne.

Both owned land by birth in that country,

Ancestral ground; but the greater right

And sway were inherited by the higher born.

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

2200 A lot was to happen in later days

In the fury of battle. Hygelac fell

Hygelac, king of the Geats, dies and Beowulf becomes king

And the shelter of Heardred’s shield proved useless

Against the fierce aggression of the Shylfings:

Ruthless swordsmen, seasoned campaigners,

They came against him and his conquering nation,

And with cruel force cut him down

So that afterwards the wide kingdom

Reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well

Beowulf successfully rules the kingdom for fifty years

For fifty winters, grew old and wise

2210 As warden of the land until one began

To dominate the dark, a dragon on the prowl

A new monstrous enemy emerges in the form of an angry dragon

From the steep vaults of a stone-roofed barrow

Where he guarded a hoard; there was a hidden passage,

Unknown to men, but someone managed

To enter by it and interfere

With the heathen trove. He had handled and removed

A gem-studded goblet; it gained him nothing,

The thief steals a single goblet from the dragon’s hoard

Though with a thief’s wiles he had outwitted

The sleeping dragon; that drove him into rage,

2220 As the people of that country would soon discover.

The intruder who broached the dragon’s treasure

And moved him to wrath had never meant to.

It was desperation on the part of a slave

Fleeing the heavy hand of some master,

Guilt-ridden and on the run,

Going to ground. But he soon began

To shake with terror… In shock

The wretch…

… Panicked and ran

2230 Away with the precious…

Metalwork. There were many other

Heirlooms heaped inside the earth-house,

Because long ago, with deliberate care,

Somebody now forgotten

Had buried the riches of a high-born race

The treasures were buried by the last man of ‘a high-born race’

In this ancient cache. Death had come

And taken them all in times gone by

And the only one left to tell their tale,

The last of their line, could look forward to nothing

2240 But the same fate for himself: he foresaw that his joy

In the treasure would be brief. A newly constructed

Barrow stood waiting, on a wide headland

Close to the waves, its entryway secured.

Into it the keeper of the hoard had carried

All the goods and golden ware

Worth preserving. His words were few:

“Now, earth, hold what earls once held

And heroes can no more; it was mined from you first

By honourable men. My own people

2250 Have been ruined in war; one by one

They went down to death, looked their last

On sweet life in the hall. I am left with nobody

To bear a sword or burnish plated goblets,

Put a sheen on the cup. The companies have departed.

The hard helmet, hasped with gold,

Will be stripped of its hoops; and the helmet-shiner

Who should polish the metal of the war-mask sleeps;

The coat of mail that came through all fights,

Through shield-collapse and cut of sword,

2260 Decays with the warrior. Now may webbed mail

Range far and wide on a warlord’s back

Beside his mustered troops. No trembling harp,

No tuned timber, no tumbling hawk

Swerving through the hall, no swift horse

Pawing the courtyard. pillage and slaughter

Have emptied the earth of entire peoples.”

And so he mourned as he moved about the world,

Deserted and alone, lamenting his unhappiness

Day and night, until death’s flood

2270 Brimmed up in his heart. Then an old harrower of the dark

Happened to find the hoard open,

The burning one who hunts out barrows,

The slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky

With streamers of fire. People on the farms

Are in dread of him. He is driven to hunt out

Hoards underground, to guard heathen gold

Through age-long vigils, though to little avail.

For three centuries, this scourge of the people

Had stood guard on that stoutly protected

2280 Underground treasury, until the intruder

Unleashed its fury; he hurried to his lord

With the gold-plated cup and made his plea

To be reinstated. Then the vault was rifled,

The ring-hoard robbed, and the wretched man

Had his request granted. His master gazed

On that find from the past for the first time.

When the dragon awoke, trouble flared again.

The dragon continues to attack the surrounding countryside

He rippled down the rock, writhing with anger

When he saw the footprints of the prowler who had stolen

2290 Too close to his dreaming head.

So may a man not marked by fate

Easily escape exile and woe

By the grace of God. The hoard-guardian

Scorched the ground as he scoured and hunted

For the trespasser who had troubled his sleep.

Hot and savage, he kept circling and circling

The outside of the mound. No man appeared

In that desert waste, but he worked himself up

By imagining battle; then back in he’d go

2300 In search of the cup, only to discover

Signs that someone had stumbled upon

The golden treasures. The guardian of the mound,

The hoard-watcher, waited for the gloaming

With fierce impatience; his pent-up fury

At the loss of the vessel made him long to hit back

And lash out in flames. Then, to his delight,

The day waned and he could wait no longer

Behind the wall, but hurtled forth

In a fiery blaze. The first to suffer

2310 Were the people on the land, but before long

It was their treasure-giver who would come to grief.

The dragon began to belch out flames

And burn bright homesteads; there was a hot glow

That scared everyone, for the vile sky-winger

Would leave nothing alive in his wake.

Everywhere the havoc he wrought was in evidence.

Far and near, the Geat nation

Bore the brunt of his brutal assaults

And virulent hate. Then back to the hoard

2320 He would dart before daybreak, to hide in his den.

He had swinged the land, swathed it in flame,

In fire and burning, and now he felt secure

In the vaults of his burrow; but his trust was unavailing.

Then Beowulf was given bad news,

Beowulf’s ‘throne-room’ becomes a target of the dragon’s fury

A hard truth: his own home,

The best of buildings, had been burnt to a cinder,

The throne-room of the Geats. It threw the hero

Into deep anguish and darkened his mood:

The wise man thought he must have thwarted

2330 Ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord,

Broken His commandment. His mind was in turmoil,

Unaccustomed anxiety and gloom

Confused his brain; the fire-dragon

Had raised the coastal region and reduced

Forts and earthworks to dust and ashes,

So the war-king planned and plotted his revenge.

The warriors’ protector, prince of the hall-troop,

Ordered a marvellous all-iron shield

From his smithy works. He well knew

2340 That linden boards would let him down

And timber burn. After many trials,

He was destined to face the end of his days

In this mortal world; as was the dragon,

For all his leasehold on the treasure.

Yet the prince of the rings was too proud

To line up with a large army

Against the sky-plague. He had scant regard

For the dragon as a threat, no dread at all

Of its courage or strength, for he had kept going

2350 Often in the past, through perils and ordeals

Of every sort, after he had purged

Hrothgar’s hall, triumphed in Heorot

A reference to the defeat of Grendel and Grendel’s mother

And beaten Grendel. He out grappled the monster

And his evil kin. One of his cruellest

Hand-to-hand encounters had happened

When Hygelac, king of the Geats, was killed

In Friesland: the people’s friend and lord,

Hrethel’s son, slaked a sword blade’s

Thirst for blood. But Beowulf’s prodigious

2360 Gifts as a swimmer guaranteed his safety:

He arrived at the shore, shouldering thirty

Battle-dresses, the booty he had won.

There was little for the Hetware to be happy about

As they shielded their faces and fighting on the ground

Began in earnest. With Beowulf against them,

Few could hope to return home.

Across the wide sea, desolate and alone,

The son of Ecgtheow swam back to his people.

There Hygd offered him throne and authority

2370 As lord of the ring-hoard: with Hygelac dead,

She had no belief in her son’s ability

To defend their homeland against foreign invaders.

Yet there was no way the weakened nation

Could get Beowulf to give in and agree

To be elevated over Heardred as his lord

The son of Hygelac; too young to be a good king

Or to undertake the office of kingship.

But he did provide support for the prince,

Honoured and minded him until he matured

As the ruler of Geatland. Then over sea-roads

2380 Exiles arrived, sons of Ohthere.

They had rebelled against the best of all

The sea-kings in Sweden, the one who held sway

In the Shylfing nation, their renowned prince,

Lord of the mead-hall. That marked the end

For Hygelac’s son: his hospitality

Was mortally rewarded with wounds from a sword.

Heardred lay slaughtered and Onela returned

To the land of Sweden, leaving Beowulf

To ascend the throne, to sit in majesty

Beowulf only becomes king after Heardred is killed

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

In days to come, he contrived to avenge

The fall of his prince; he befriended Eadgils

When Eadgils was friendless, aiding his cause

With weapons and warriors over the wide sea,

Sending him men. The feud was settled

On a comfortless campaign when he killed Onela.

And so the son of Ecgtheow had survived

Every extreme, excelling himself

In daring and in danger, until the day arrived

2400 When he had to come face to face with the dragon.

The lord of the Geats took eleven comrades

And went in a rage to reconnoiter.

By then he had discovered the cause of the affliction

Being visited on the people. The precious cup

Had come to him from the hand of the finder,

The one who had started all this strife

And was now added as a thirteenth to their number.

They press-ganged and compelled this poor creature

To be their guide. Against his will

2410 He led them to the earth-vault he alone knew,

An underground barrow near the sea-billows

And heaving waves, heaped inside

With exquisite metalwork. The one who stood guard

Was dangerous and watchful, warden of that trove

Buried under earth: no easy bargain

Would be made in that place by any man.

The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.

He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared

His hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart,

Beowulf senses that it is his fate to die soon

2420 Unsettled yet ready, sensing his own death.

His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain:

It would soon claim his coffered soul,

Part life from limb. Before long

The prince’s spirit would spin free from his body.

…

Then he addressed each dear companion

One final time, those fighters in their helmets,

Resolute and high-born: “I would rather not

Use a weapon if I knew another way

2520 To grapple with the dragon and make good my boast

As I did against Grendel in days gone by.

But I shall be meeting molten venom

In the fire he breaths, so I go forth

In mail-shirt and shield. I won’t shift a foot

When I meet the cave-guard: what occurs on the wall

Between the two of us will turn out as fate,

Overseer of men, decides. I am resolved.

I scorn further words against this sky-born foe.

“Men at arms, remain here on the barrow,

2530 Safe in your armour, to see which one of us

Is better in the end at bearing wounds

In a deadly fray. This fight is not yours,

Beowulf pledges to fight the dragon alone

Nor is it up to any man except me

To measure his strength against the monster

Or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold

By my courage, or else mortal combat,

Doom of battle, will bear your lord away.”

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Then he drew himself up beside his shield.

The fabled warrior in his war-shirt and helmet

2540 Trusted in his own strength entirely

And went under the crag. No coward path.

Hard by the rock-face that hale veteran,

A good man who had gone repeatedly

Into combat and danger and come through,

Saw a stone arch and a gushing stream

That burst from the barrow, blazing and wafting

A deadly heat. It would be hard to survive

Unscathed near the hoard, to hold firm

Against the dragon in those flaming depths.

2550 Then he gave a shout. The lord of the Geats

Unburdened his breast and broke out

In a storm of anger. Under grey stone

His voice challenged and resounded clearly.

Heat was ignited. The hoard-guard recognised

A human voice, the time was over

For peace and parleying. Pouring forth

In a hot battle-fume, the breath of the monster

Burst from the rock. There was a rumble underground.

Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior

2560 Lifted his shield: the outlandish thing

Writhed and convulsed and viciously

Turned on the king, whose keen-edged-sword,

And heirloom inherited by ancient right,

Was already in his hand. Roused to a fury,

Each antagonist struck terror in the other.

Unyielding, the lord of his people loomed

By his tall shield, sure of his ground,

While the serpent looped and unleashed itself.

Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing

2570 And racing toward its fate. Yet his shield defended

The renowned leader’s life and limb

For a shorter time than he meant it to:

That final day was the first time

When Beowulf fought and fate denied him

Glory in battle. So the king of the Geats

Raised his hand and struck hard

At the enamelled scales, but hardly cut through:

The blade flashed and slashed yet the blow

Was far less powerful than the hard-pressed king

2580 Had need of at the moment. The hoard-keeper

Went into a spasm and spouted deadly flames:

When he felt the stroke, battle-fire

Billowed and spewed. Beowulf was foiled

Of a glorious victory. The glittering sword,

Infallible before that day,

Failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should have.

For the son of Ecgtheow, it was no easy thing

To have to give ground like that and go

Unwillingly to inhabit another home

2590 In a place beyond; so every man must yield

The leasehold of his days. Before long

The fierce contenders clashed again.

The hoard-guard took heart, inhaled and swelled up

And got a new wind; he who had once ruled

Was furled in fire and had to face the worst.

No help or backing was to be had then

From his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop

Broke ranks and ran for their lives

To the safety of the wood. But within one heart

2600 Sorrow welled up: in a man of worth

The claims of kinship cannot be denied.

His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan’s,

One of Beowulf’s kinsmen; courageous and loyal

A well-regarded Shylfing warrior

Related to Aelfhere. When he saw his lord

Tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,

He remembered the bountiful gifts he bestowed on him,

How well he lived among the Waegmundings,

A reference to the war between the Geats and Swedes

The freehold he inherited from his father before him.

He could not hold back: one hand brandished

2610 The yellow-timbered shield, the other drew his sword –

An ancient blade that was said to have belonged

To Eanmund, the son of Ohthere, the one

Weohstan had slain when he was in exile without friends.

He carried the arms to the victim’s kinfolk,

The burnished helmet, the webbed chainmail

And that relic of the giants. But Onela retuned

The weapons to him, rewarded Weohstan

With Eadmund’s war-gear. He ignored the blood-feud,

The fact that Eadmund was his brother’s son.

2620 Weohstan kept that war-gear for a lifetime,

The sword and the mail-shirt, until it was the son’s turn

To follow his father and perform his part.

Then, in old age, at the end of his days

Among the Weather-Geats, he bequeathed to Wiglaf

Innumerable weapons. And now the youth

Was to enter the line of battle with his lord,

His first time to be tested as a fighter.

His spirit did not break and the ancestral blade

Would keep its edge, as the dragon discovered

2630 As soon as they came together in combat.

Sad at heart, addressing his companions,

Wiglaf spoke wise and fluent words:

“I remember that time when the mead was flowing,

How we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall,

Promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price,

Make good the gift of the war-gear,

Those swords and helmets, as and when

His need required it. He picked us out

From the army deliberately, honoured us and judged us

2640 Fit for this action, made me these lavish gifts –

And all because he considered us the best

Of his arms-bearing thanes. And now, although

He wanted this challenge to be the one he’d face

By himself alone – the shepherd of our land,

A man unequalled in the quest for glory

And a name for daring – now the day has come

When this lord we serve needs sound men

To give him their support. Let us go to him,

Help our leader through the hot flame

2650 And dread of the fire. As God is my witness,

I would rather my body were robbed in the same

Burning blaze as my gold-giver’s body

Than go back home bearing arms.

That is unthinkable, unless we have first

Slain the foe and defended the life

Of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I well know

That things he has done for us deserve better.

Should he alone be left exposed

To fall in battle? We must bond together,

2660 Shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword.”

Then he wadded the dangerous reek and went

Under arms to his lord, saying only:

“Go on, dear Beowulf, do everything

You said you would when you were still young

And vowed you would never let your name and fame

Be dimmed while you lived. Your deeds are famous,

So stay resolute, my lord, defend your life now

With the whole of your strength. I shall stand by you.”

Wiglaf goes forward to help Beowulf fight the dragon

After those word, a wildness rose

2670 In the dragon again and drove it to attack,

Heaving up fire, hunting for enemies,

The humans it loathed. Flames lapped the shield,

Charred it to the boss, and the body armour

On the young warrior was useless to him.

But Wiglaf did well under the wide rim

Beowulf shared with him once his own had shattered

In sparks and ashes. Inspired again

By the thought of glory, the war-king threw

His whole strength behind a sword-stroke

2680 And connected with the skull. And Naegling snapped.

Beowulf’s ancient iron-grey sword

Let him down in the fight. It was never his fortune

To be helped in combat by the cutting-edge

Of weapons made of iron. When he yielded a sword,

No matter how blooded and hard-edged the blade

His hand was too strong, the stroke he dealt

(I have heard) would ruin it. He could reap no advantage.

Then the bane of that people, the fire-breathing dragon,

Was mad to attack for a third time.

2690 When a chance came, he caught the hero

In a rush of flame and clamped sharp fangs

Beowulf later discovers that the bite of the dragon is venomous

Into his neck. Beowulf’s body

Ran wet with his life-blood: it came welling out.

Next thing, they say, the noble son of Weohstan

Saw the king in danger at his side

And displayed his inborn bravery and strength.

He left the head alone, but his fighting hand

Was burned when he came to his kinsman’s aid.

He lunged at the enemy lower down

2700 So that his decorated sword sank into its belly

And the flames grew weaker. Once again the king

Gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife

He carried on his belt, sharpened for battle.

He stuck it deep into the dragon’s flank.

Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound.

They had killed the enemy, courage quelled his life;

That pair of kinsmen, partners in nobility,

Had destroyed the foe. So every man should act,

Be at hand when needed; but now, for the king,

2710 This would be the last of his many labours

And triumphs in the world. Then the wound

Dealt by the ground-burner earlier began

To scald and swell; Beowulf discovered

Deadly poison suppurating inside him,

Surges of nausea, and so, in his wisdom,

The prince realised his state and struggled

Towards a seat on the rampart. He steadied his gazed

On those gigantic stones, saw how the earthwork

Was braced with arches built over columns.

2720 And now that thane unequalled for goodness

With his own hands washed his lord’s wounds,

Swabbed the weary prince with water,

Bathed him clean, unbuckled his helmet.

Beowulf spoke: in spite of his wounds,

Mortal wounds, he still spoke

For he well knew his days in the world

Had been lived out to the end: his allotted time

Was drawing to a close, death was very near.

“Now is the time when I would have wanted

2730 To bestow this armour on my own son,

Had it been my fortune to have fathered an heir

And live on in his flesh. For fifty years

I ruled this nation. No king

Of any neighbouring clan would dare

Face me with troops, none had the power

To intimidate me. I took what came,

Cared for and stood by things in my keeping,

Never fomented quarrels, never

Swore to a lie. All this consoles me,

2740 Doomed as I am and sickening for death;

Because of my right way, the Ruler of Mankind

Need never blame me when the breath leaves my body

Beowulf’s earlier premonition about his death is coming true

For murder of kinsmen. Go now quickly,

Dearest Wiglaf, under the grey stone

Where the dragon is laid out, lost to his treasure;

Hurry to feast your eyes on the hoard.

Away you go: I want to examine

That ancient gold, gaze my fill

On those garnered jewels; my going will be easier

2750 For having seen the treasure, a less troubled letting-go

Of the life and lordship I have long maintained.”

And so, I have heard, the son of Weohstan

Quickly obeyed the command of his languishing

War-weary lord; he went in his chainmail

Under the rock-piled roof of the barrow,

Exulting in his triumph, and saw beyond the seat

A treasure-trove of astonishing richness,

Wall-hangings that were a wonder to behold,

Glittering gold spread across the ground,

2760 The old dawn-scorching serpent’s den

Packed with goblets and vessels of the past,

Tarnished and corroding. Rusty helmets

All eaten away. Armbands everywhere,

Artfully wrought. How easily treasure

Buried in the ground, gold hidden

However skilfully, can escape from any man!

And he saw too a standard, entirely of gold,

Hanging high over the hoard,

A masterpiece of filigree; it glowed with light

2770 So he could make out the ground at his feet

And inspect the valuables. Of the dragon there was no

Remaining sign: the sword had dispatched him.

Then, the story goes, a certain man

Plundered the hoard in the immemorial howe,

Filled his arms with flagons and plates,

Anything he wanted; and took the standard also,

Most brilliant of banners. Already the blade

Of the old king’s sharp killing-sword

Had done its worst: the one who had for long

2780 Minded the hoard, hovering over gold,

Unleashing fire, surging forth

Midnight after midnight, had been mown down.

Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back,

Excited by the treasure. Anxiety weighed

Wiglaf is aware that Beowulf is severely wounded

On his brave heart – he was hoping he would find

The leader of the Geats alive where he had left him

Helpless, earlier, on the open ground.

So he came to the place, carrying the treasure,

And found his lord bleeding profusely,

2790 His life at an end: again he began

To swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance

Broke out from the king’s breast-cage.

The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.

“To the everlasting Lord of All,

To the King of Glory, I give thanks

That I beheld this treasure here in front of me,

That I have been allowed to leave my people

So well-endowed on the day I die.

Now that I have bartered my last breath

2800 To own this fortune, it is up to you

To look after their needs. I can hold out no longer.

Order my troop to construct a barrow

On a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled.

It will loom in the horizon at Hronesness

And be a reminder among my people –

So that in coming times crews under sail

Will call it Beowulf’s barrow, as they steer

Ships across the wide and shrouded waters.”

Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped

2810 The collar of gold from his neck and gave it

To the young thane, telling him to use

It and the war shirt and the gilded helmet well.

“You are the last of us, the only one left

Of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,

Sent my whole brave high-born clan

To their final doom. Now I must follow them.”

That was the warrior’s last word.

He had no more to confide. The furious heat

Of the pyre would assail him. His soul fled from his breast

Beowulf dies; there is no longer a great hero to protect the Geats

2820 To its destined place among the steadfast ones.

It was hard then on the young hero,

Having to watch the one he held so dear

There on the ground, going through

His death agony. The dragon from underearth,

His nightmarish destroyer, lay destroyed as well,

Utterly without life. No longer would his snake folds

Ply themselves to safeguard hidden gold.

Hard-edged blades, hammered out

And keenly filed, had finished him

2830 So that the sky-roamer lay there rigid,

Brought low beside the treasure-lodge.

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Never again would he glitter and glide

And show himself off in midnight air,

Exulting in his riches: he fell to earth

Through the battle-strength in Beowulf’s arm.

There were few, indeed, as far as I have heard,

Big and brave as they may have been,

Few who would have held out if they had had to face

The outpourings of that poison-breather

A reference to the dragon and its venomous bite

2840 Or gone foraging on the ring-hall floor

And found the deep barrow-dweller

On guard and awake. The treasure had been won,

Bought and paid for by Beowulf’s death.

Both had reached the end of the road

Through the life they had been lent. Before long

The battle-dodgers abandoned the wood,

The ones who had let down their lord earlier,

The tail-turners, ten of them together.

When he needed them the most, they had made off.

2850 Now they were ashamed and came behind shields,

In their battle-outfits, to where the old man lay.

They watched Wiglaf, sitting worn out,

A comrade shoulder to shoulder with his lord,

Trying in vain to bring him round with water.

Much as he wanted to, there was no way

He could preserve his lord’s life on earth

Or alter in the least the Almighty’s will.

What God judged right would rule what happened

To every man, as it does to this day.

2860 Then a stern rebuke was bound to come

From the young warrior to the ones who had been cowards.

Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke

Disdainfully and in disappointment:

“Anyone ready to admit the truth

Will surely realise the lord of men

Who showered you with gifts and gave you the armour

You are standing in – when he would distribute

Helmets and mail-shirts to men on the mead-benches,

A prince treating his thanes in hall

2870 To the best he could find, far or near –

Was throwing weapons uselessly away.

It would be a sad waste when the war broke out.

Beowulf had little cause to brag

About his armed guard; yet God who ordains

Who wins or loses allowed him to strike

With his own blade when bravery was needed.

There was little I could do to protect his life

In the heat of the fray, yet I found new strength

Welling up when I went to help him.

2880 Then my sword connected and the deadly assaults

Of our foe grew weaker, the fire coursed

Less strongly from his head. But when the worst happened

Too few rallied around the prince.

Wiglaf criticises those who did not help Beowulf slay the dragon

“So it is goodbye now to all you know and love

On your home-ground, the open-handedness,

The giving of war-swords. Every one of you

With freeholds of land, our whole nation,

Will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond

Get tidings of how you turned and fled

2890 And disgraced yourselves. A warrior will sooner

Die than live a life of shame.”

Then he ordered the outcome of the fight to be reported

To those camped on the ridge, that crowd of retainers

Who had sat all morning, sad at heart,

Shield-bearers wondering about

The man they loved: would this day be his last

Or would he return. He told the truth

And did not balk, the rider who bore

News to the cliff-top. He addressed them all:

2900 “Now the people’s pride and love,

The lord of the Geats, is laid on his deathbed,

Brought down by the dragon’s attack.

Beside him lies the bane of his life,

Dead from knife-wounds. There was no way

Beowulf could manage to get the better

Of the monster with his sword. Wiglaf sits

At Beowulf’s side, the son of Weohstan,

The living warrior watching by the dead,

Keeping weary vigil, holding a wake

2910 For the loved and the loathed. Now war is looming

Over our nation, soon it will be known

To Franks and Frisians, far and wide,

That the king is gone. Hostility has been great

The Friesians are historic enemies of the Geats

Among the Franks since Hygelac sailed forth

At the head of a war-fleet into Friesland:

There the Hetware harried and attacked

And overwhelmed him with great odds.

The leader in his war-gear was laid low,

Fell amongst followers; that lord did not favour

2920 His company with spoils. The Merovingian king

Has been an enemy to us ever since.

…

Such was the drift of the dire report

That gallant man delivered. He got little wrong

3030 In what he told and predicted. The whole troop

Rose in tears, then took their way

To the uncanny scene under Earnaness.

There, on the sand, where his soul had left him,

They found him at rest, their ring-giver

From days gone by. The great man

Had breathed his last. Beowulf the King

Had indeed met with a marvellous death.

But what they saw first was far stranger:

The serpent on the ground, gruesome and vile,

3040 Lying facing him. The fire-dragon

Was scaresomely burnt, scorched all colours.

From head to tail, his entire length

Was fifty feet. He had shimmered forth

On the night air once, then winged back

Down to his den; but death owned him now,

He would never enter his earth-gallery again.

Beside him stood pitchers and piled-up dishes,

Silent flagons, precious swords

Eaten through with rust, ranged as they had been

3050 While they waited their thousand winters underground.

That huge cache, gold inherited

From an ancient race, was under a spell –

The hoard was protected by a powerful spell

Which meant no one was ever permitted

To enter the king-hall unless God himself,

Mankind’s Keeper, True King of Triumphs,

Allowed some person pleasing him –

And in his eyes worthy – to open the hoard.

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What came about brought to nothing

The hopes of the one who had wrongly hidden

3060 Riches under the rock face. First the dragon slew

That man among men, who in turn made fierce amends

And settled the feud. Famous for his deeds

A warrior may be, but it remains a mystery

Where his life will end, when he may no longer

Dwell in the mead-hall among his own.

So it was with Beowulf, when he faced the cruelty

And cunning of the mound-guard. He himself was ignorant

Of how his departure from the world would happen.

The high-born chiefs who had buried the treasure

3070 Declared it until doomsday so accursed

That whoever robbed it would be guilty of wrong

And grimly punished for their transgression,

Hasped in hell-bonds in heathen shrines.

Yet Beowulf’s gaze at the gold treasure

When he first saw it had not been selfish.

Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke:

“Often when one man follows his own will

Many are hurt. This happened to us.

Nothing we advised could ever convince

3080 The prince we loved, our land’s guardian,

These are both references to Beowulf

Not to vex the custodian of the gold,

Let him lie where he was long accustomed,

Lurk there under the earth until the end of the world.

He held to his high destiny. The hoard is laid bare,

But at a grave cost; it was too cruel a fate

That forced the king to that encounter.

I have been inside and seen everything

Amassed in the vault. I managed to enter

Although no great welcome awaited me

3090 Under the earth wall. I quickly gathered up

A huge pile of the priceless treasures

Handpicked from the hoard and carried them here

Where the king could see them. He was still himself,

Alive, aware, and in spite of his weakness

He had many requests. He wanted me to greet you

And order the building of a barrow that would crown

The site of his pyre, serve as his memorial,

In a commanding position, since of all men

To have lived and thrived and lorded it on earth

3100 His worth and due as a warrior were the greatest.

Now let us again go quickly

And feast our eyes on that amazing fortune

Heaped under the wall. I will show the way

And take you close to those coffers packed with rings

And bars of gold. Let a bier be made

And got ready quickly when we come out

And then let us bring the body of our lord,

The man we loved, to where he will lodge

For a long time in the care of the Almighty.”

3110 Then Weohstan’s son, Stalwar to the end,

Had orders given to owners of dwellings,

Many people of importance in the land,

To fetch wood from far and wide

For the good man’s pyre. “Now shall flame consume

Our leader in battle, the blaze darken

Round him who stood his ground in the steel-hail,

When the arrow-storm shot from bowstrings

Pelted from the shield-wall. The shaft hit home.

Feather-fledged, it finned the barb in flight.”

3120 Next the wise son of Weohstan

Called from among the king’s thanes

A group of seven: he selected the best

And entered with them, the eighth of their number,

Under the God-cursed roof; one raised

A lighted torch and led the way.

No lots were cast for who should loot the hoard

For it was obvious to them that every bit of it

Lay unprotected within the vault,

There for the taking. It was no trouble

3130 To hurry to work and haul out

The priceless store. They pitched the dragon

Over the cliff top, let tide’s flow

The carcass of the dragon is pushed over the cliff

And backwash take the treasure-minder.

Then coiled gold was loaded on a cart

In great abundance, and the grey-haired leader,

The prince of his bier, born to Hronesness.

The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,

Stacked and decked it until it stood four-square,

Hung with helmets, heavy war-shields

3140 And shining armour, just as he had ordered.

Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,

Mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.

On a height they kindled the hugest of all

Funeral fires; fumes of wood smoke

Billowed darkly up, the blaze roared

And drowned out their weeping, wind died down

And flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,

Burning it to the core. They were disconsolate

And wailed aloud for their lord’s decease.

3150 A Geat woman too sang out in grief:

With hair bound up, she unburdened herself

Of her worst fears, a wild litany

Of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,

Enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,

Slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

Then the Geat people began to construct

A mound on a headland, high and imposing,

A marker that sailors could see from far away,

Beowulf is buried in a prominent position on a cliff

And in ten days they had done the work.

3160 It was their hero’s memorial; what remained from fire

They housed inside it, behind a wall

As worthy of him as their workmanship could make it.

And they buried torques in the barrow, and jewels

And a trove of such things as trespassing men

Had once dared to drag from the hoard.

They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure,

Gold under gravel, gone to earth,

As useless to men now as it ever was.

Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,

3170 Chieftain’s sons, champions in battle,

All of them distraught, chanting in dirges,

Mourning his loss as a man and a king.

They extolled his heroic exploits

And gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,

For a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear

And cherish his memory when that moment comes

When he has to be convoyed from his bodily home.

So the Geat people, his hearth companions,

Sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.

3180 They said that of all the kings upon the earth

He was the man most gracious and fair-minded,

Kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.