

they have set out from worldly joys to seek the King of Glory.

- They dwell in Heaven now with the High-father
 135 living in glory, and I look forward
 constantly toward that time the Lord's rood
 which I beheld before here on this earth
 shall fetch me away from this fleeting life
 and bring me then where bliss is eternal
 140 to joy in Paradise where the Lord's people
 are joined at that feast where joy lasts forever
 and seat me there where evermore
 I shall dwell in glory, together with the saints
 share in their delights. May the Lord be my friend,
 145 who on earth long ago on the gallows-tree
 suffered agony for the sins of men:
 he redeemed us and gave us life,
 a home in Heaven. Hope was made new
 and blossomed with bliss to those burning in fire.²
 150 The Son was victorious in venturing forth,
 mighty and triumphant when he returned with many,
 a company of souls to the Kingdom of God,
 the Almighty Ruler, to the joy of angels,
 and all those holy ones come to Heaven before.³
 155 to live in glory, when their Lord returned,
 the Eternal King to His own country.

2. This line and those following refer to the so-called Harrowing of Hell. After his death on the Cross, Christ descended into hell, from which he released the souls of certain patriarchs and prophets, conducting them into heaven (see *Piers*

Plowman, Passus 18). The analogy is to the triumphal procession of a Roman emperor returning from war.

3. The line probably refers to a belief that God had sanctified a chosen few before the crucifixion.

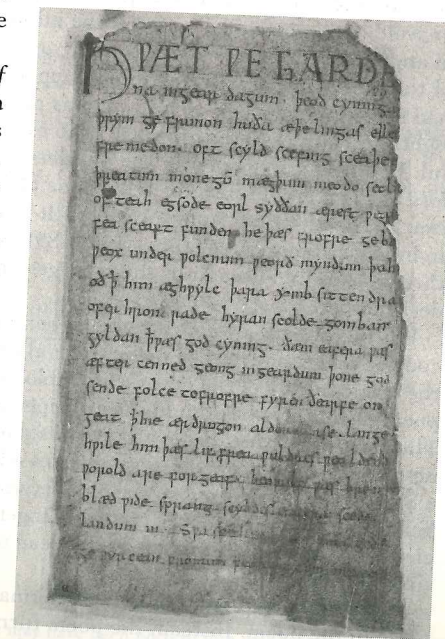
BEOWULF

Beowulf, the oldest of the great long poems written in English, may have been composed more than twelve hundred years ago, in the first half of the eighth century, although some scholars would place it as late as the tenth century. As is the case with most Old English poems, the title has been assigned by modern editors, for the manuscripts do not normally give any indication of title or authorship. Linguistic evidence shows that the poem was originally composed in the dialect of what was then Mercia, the Midlands of England today. But in the unique late-tenth-century manuscript preserving the poem, it has been converted into the West-Saxon dialect of the southwest in which most of Old English literature survives. In 1731, before any modern transcript of the text had been made, the manuscript was seriously damaged in a fire that destroyed the building in London that housed the extraordinary collection of medieval English manuscripts made by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571–1631). As a result of the fire and subsequent deterioration, a number of lines and words have been lost from the poem.

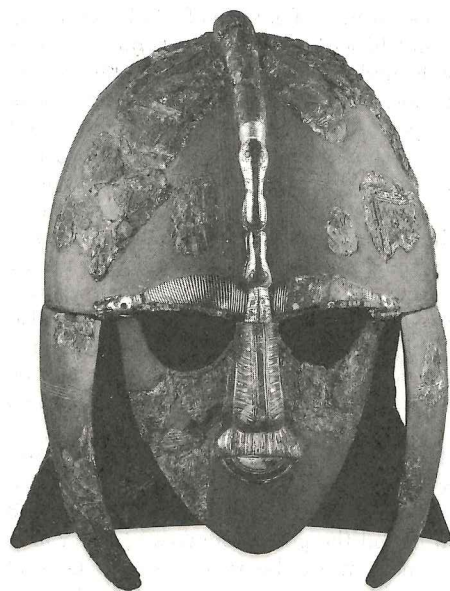
It is possible that *Beowulf* may be the lone survivor of a genre of Old English long epics, but it must have been a remarkable and difficult work even in its own day. The poet was reviving the heroic language, style, and pagan world of ancient Germanic oral poetry, a world that was already remote for his contemporaries and that is stranger to the modern reader, in many respects, than the epic world of Homer and Virgil. With the help of *Beowulf* itself, a few shorter heroic poems in Old English, and later poetry and prose in Old Saxon, Old Icelandic, and Middle High German, we can only conjecture what Germanic oral epic must have been like when performed by the Germanic *scop*, or bard. The *Beowulf* poet himself imagines such oral performances by having King Hrothgar's court poet recite a heroic lay at a feast celebrating Beowulf's defeat of Grendel. Many of the words and formulaic expressions in *Beowulf* can be found in other Old English poems, but there are also an extraordinary number of what linguists call *hapax legomena*—that is, words recorded only once in a language. The poet may have found them elsewhere, but the high incidence of such words suggests that he was an original wordsmith in his own right.

Although the poem itself is English in language and origin, it deals not with native Englishmen but with their Germanic forebears, especially with two south Scandinavian tribes, the Danes and the Geats, who lived on the Danish island of Zealand and in southern Sweden. Thus the historical period the poem concerns—insofar as it may be said to refer to history at all—is some centuries before it was written—that is, a time after the initial invasion of England by Germanic tribes in the middle of the fifth century but before the Anglo-Saxon migration was completed. The one datable fact of history mentioned in the poem is a raid on the Franks in which Hygelac, the king of the Geats and Beowulf's lord, was killed, and this raid occurred in the year 520. Yet the poet's elliptical references to quasihistorical and legendary material show that his audience was still familiar with many old stories, the outlines of which we can only infer, sometimes with the help of later analogous tales in other Germanic languages. This knowledge was probably kept alive by other heroic poetry, of which little has been preserved in English, although much may once have existed.

It is now widely believed that *Beowulf* is the work of a single poet who was a Christian and that his poem reflects well-established Christian tradition. The conversion of the Germanic settlers in England had been largely completed during the seventh century. The Danish king Hrothgar's poet sings a song about the Creation (lines 87–98) reminiscent of Caedmon's *Hymn*. The monster Grendel is said to be a descendant of Cain. There are allusions to God's judgment and to fate (*wyrð*) but none to pagan deities. References to the New Testament are notably absent, but Hrothgar and Beowulf often speak of God as though their religion is monotheistic. With sadness the poet relates that, made desperate by Grendel's attacks, the Danes pray for help at heathen shrines—apparently backsliding as the children of Israel had sometimes lapsed into idolatry.



Beowulf. The opening page. Note the charred edges, caused by a fire in 1731.



Anglo-Saxon helmet, 6th to 7th centuries.
Excavated at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk.

Although Hrothgar and Beowulf are portrayed as morally upright and enlightened pagans, they fully espouse and frequently affirm the values of Germanic heroic poetry. In the poetry depicting this warrior society, the most important of human relationships was that which existed between the warrior—the thane—and his lord, a relationship based less on subordination of one man's will to another's than on mutual trust and respect. When a warrior vowed loyalty to his lord, he became not so much his servant as his voluntary companion, one who would take pride in defending him and fighting in his wars. In return, the lord was expected to take care of his thanes and to reward them richly for their valor; a good king, one like Hrothgar or Beowulf, is referred to by such poetic epithets as “ring-giver” and as the “helmet” and “shield” of his people.

The relationship between kinsmen was also of deep significance to this society. If one of his kinsmen had been slain, a man had a moral obligation either to kill the slayer or to exact the payment of *wergild* (man-price) in compensation. Each rank of society was evaluated at a definite price, which had to be paid to the dead man's kin by the killer if he wished to avoid their vengeance—even if the killing had been an accident. In the absence of any legal code other than custom or any body of law enforcement, it was the duty of the family (often with the lord's support) to execute justice. The payment itself had less significance as wealth than as proof that the kinsmen had done what was right. The failure to take revenge or to exact compensation was considered shameful. Hrothgar's anguish over the murders committed by Grendel is not only for the loss of his men but also for the shame of his inability either to kill Grendel or to exact a “death-price” from the killer. “It is always better / to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning” (lines 1384–85), Beowulf says to Hrothgar, who has been thrown back into despair by the revenge-slaying of his old friend Aeschere by Grendel's mother.

Yet the young Beowulf's attempt to comfort the bereaved old king by invoking the code of vengeance may be one of several instances of the poet's ironic treatment of the tragic futility of the never-ending blood feuds. The most graphic example in the poem of that irony is the Finnsburg episode, the lay sung by Hrothgar's hall-poet. The Danish princess Hildeburh, married to the Frisian king Finn—probably to put an end to a feud between those peoples—loses both her brother and her son when a bloody fight breaks out in the hall between a visiting party of Danes and her husband's men. The bodies are cremated together on a huge funeral pyre: “The glutton element flamed and consumed / the dead of both sides. Their great days were gone” (lines 1124–25).

Such feuds, the staple subject of Germanic epic and saga, have only a peripheral place in the poem. Instead, the poem turns on Beowulf's three great fights against preternatural evil, which inhabits the dangerous and demonic space surrounding

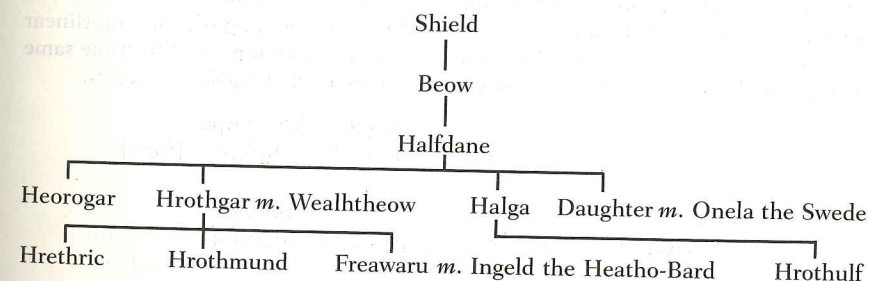
human society. He undertakes the fight against Grendel to save the Danes from the monster and to exact vengeance for the men Grendel has slain. Another motive is to demonstrate his strength and courage and thereby to enhance his personal glory. Hrothgar's magnificent gifts become the material emblems of that glory. Revenge and glory also motivate Beowulf's slaying of Grendel's mother. He undertakes his last battle against the dragon, however, only because there is no other way to save his own people.

A somber and dignified elegiac mood pervades *Beowulf*. The poem opens and closes with the description of a funeral and is filled with laments for the dead. Our first view of Beowulf is of an ambitious young hero. At the end, he has become an old king, facing the dragon and death. His people mourn him and praise him, as does the poet, for his nobility, generosity, courage, and, what is less common in Germanic heroes, kindness to his people. The poet's elegiac tone may be informed by something more than the duty to “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” (lines 3175–77). The entire poem could be viewed as the poet's lament for heroes like Beowulf who went into the darkness without the light of the poet's own Christian faith.

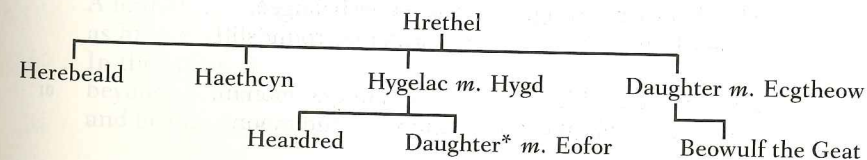
The present verse translation is by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995. Selections from Heaney's own poems appear in Volume 2 of the anthology.

TRIBES AND GENEALOGIES

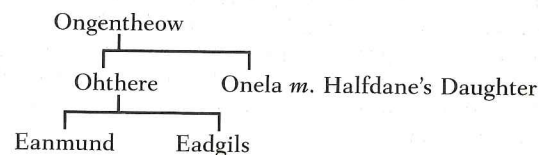
1. *The Danes (Bright-, Half-, Ring-, Spear-, North-, East-, South-, West-Danes; Shield-ings, Honor-, Victor-, War-Shieldings; Ing's friends)*



2. *The Geats (Sea-, War-, Weather-Geats)*



*The daughter of Hygelac who was given to Eofor may have been born to him by a former wife, older than Hygd.

3. *The Swedes*4. *Miscellaneous*

A. The Half-Danes (also called Shieldings) involved in the fight at Finnsburg may represent a different tribe from the Danes described above. Their king Hoc had a son, Hnaef, who succeeded him, and a daughter Hildeburh, who married Finn, king of the Jutes.

B. The Jutes or Frisians are represented as enemies of the Danes in the fight at Finnsburg and as allies of the Franks or Hugas at the time Hygelac the Geat made the attack in which he lost his life and from which Beowulf swam home. Also allied with the Franks at this time were the Hetware.

C. The Heatho-Bards (i.e., "Battle-Bards") are represented as inveterate enemies of the Danes. Their king Froda had been killed in an attack on the Danes, and Hrothgar's attempt to make peace with them by marrying his daughter Freawaru to Froda's son Ingeld failed when the latter attacked Heorot. The attack was repulsed, although Heorot was burned.

The Poet's Song in Heorot

To give the reader a sample of the language, style, and texture of *Beowulf* in the original we print the following passage, lines 90–98, in Old English with interlinear glosses. One may compare these lines with Cædmon's *Hymn* (pp. 28–32) on the same theme. See the headnote there for the pronunciation of Old English characters.

Sægde se þe cuþe
Said he who knew [how]

frumsceaft fira feorran reccan,
[the] origin [of] men from far [time] [to]recount,

cwæð þæt se Ælmyhtiga eorðan worhte,
said that the Almighty [the] earth wrought

wlita-beorhtne wang, swa wæter bebugeð,
beauty-bright plain as water surrounds[it]

gesette sige-hrepig sunnan ond monan,
set triumph-glorious sun and moon

leoman to leohte landbuendum,
beacons as light [for] land-dwellers

ond gefrætwaðe foldan sceatas
and adorned [of]earth[the]grounds

leomum ond leafum, lif eac gesceop
[with]limbs and leaves, life also[he]created

cynna gehwylcum* þara ðe cwice hwyrfaþ.
[of]kinds [for]each [of]those who living move about

A NOTE ON NAMES

Old English, like Modern German, contained many compound words, most of which have been lost in Modern English. Most of the names in *Beowulf* are compounds. Hrothgar is a combination of words meaning "glory" and "spear"; the name of his older brother, Heorogar, comes from "army" and "spear"; Hrothgar's sons Hrethric and Hrothmund contain the first elements of their father's name combined, respectively, with *ric* (kingdom, empire; Modern German *Reich*) and *mund* (hand, protection). As in the case of the Danish dynasty, family names often alliterate. Masculine names of the warrior class have military associations. The importance of family and the demands of alliteration frequently lead to the designation of characters by formulas identifying them in terms of relationships. Thus Beowulf is referred to as "son of Ecgtheow" or "kinsman of Hygelac" (his uncle and lord).

The Old English spellings of names are mostly preserved in the translation. A few rules of pronunciation are worth keeping in mind. Initial *H* before *r* was sounded, and so Hrothgar's name alliterates with that of his brother Heorogar. The combination *cg* has the value of *dg* in words like "edge." The first element in the name of Beowulf's father "Ecgtheow" is the same word as "edge," and, by the figure of speech called synecdoche (a part of something stands for the whole), *ecg* stands for *sword* and Ecgtheow means "sword-servant."

For more information about *Beowulf*, see "The Linguistic and Literary Contexts of *Beowulf*," in the supplemental ebook.

Beowulf

[PROLOGUE: THE RISE OF THE DANISH NATION]

So. The Spear-Danes¹ 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,² scourge of many tribes,
5 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.

*Modern syntax would be "for each of kinds." In Old English, the endings *-a* and *-um* indicate that *gewylcum* is an indirect object and *cynna*, a possessive plural.

1. There are different compound names for tribes, often determined by alliteration in Old English poetry. Line 1 reads, "Hwæt, we Gar-dena in gear-dagum," where alliteration falls on *Gar* (spear) and *gear* (year). Old English hard and soft *g* (spelled *y* in Modern English) alliterate. The compound

geardagum derives from "year," used in the special sense of "long ago," and "days" and survives in the archaic expression "days of yore."

2. Shield is the name of the founder of the Danish royal line. Sheafson translates *Scefing*, i.e., *sheaf* + the patronymic suffix *-ing*. Because Sheaf was a "foundling" (line 7: *seasceaf funden*, i.e., found destitute) who arrived by sea (lines 45–46), it is likely that as a child Shield brought with him only a sheaf, a symbol of fruitfulness.

Afterward 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,³
 15 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 afterward in age when fighting starts
 steadfast companions will stand by him
 and hold the line. Behavior that's admired
 25 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:
 30 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 harbor,
 ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.
 They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,
 35 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
 40 and coats of mail. The massed treasure
 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
 45 who cast him away when he was a child
 and launched him alone out over the waves.⁴
 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.
 He was well regarded and ruled the Danes
 55 for a long time after his father took leave
 of his life on earth. And then his heir,
 the great Haldane,⁵ held sway
 for as long as he lived, their elder and warlord.
 He was four times a father, this fighter prince:

3. Suffered, endured.

4. See n. 2, above. Since Shield was found destitute, "no less bountifully" is litotes or understatement; the ironic reminder that he came with

nothing (line 43) emphasizes the reversal of his fortunes.

5. Probably named so because, according to one source, his mother was a Swedish princess.

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 favored Hrothgar.
 65 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.⁶
 Far and wide through the world, I have heard,
 75 orders for work to adorn that wallstead
 were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there
 finished and ready, in full view,
 the hall of halls. Heorot was the name⁷
 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.⁸ That doom abided,
 but in time it would come: the killer instinct
 85 unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.⁹

[HEOROT IS ATTACKED]

Then a powerful demon,¹ 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 splendor He set the sun and the moon
 95 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

6. The king could not dispose of land used by all, such as a common pasture, or of slaves.

7. I.e., "Hart," from antlers fastened to the gables or because the crossed gable-ends resembled a stag's antlers; the hart was also an icon of royalty.
 8. An allusion to the future destruction of Heorot by fire, probably in a raid by the Heatho-Bards.

9. As told later (lines 2020–69), Hrothgar plans to marry a daughter to Ingeld, chief of the Heatho-Bards, in hopes of resolving a long-standing feud. See previous note.

1. The poet withholds the name for several lines. He does the same with the name of the hero as well as others.

haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
105 in misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
and condemned as outcasts.² 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 reward.

115 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
120 and human sorrow. Suddenly then
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,
125 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
at the demon's trail, in deep distress.
He was numb with grief, but got no respite
135 for one night later 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 bothies³ for who could be blind
to the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
of the hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
145 one against all, until the greatest house
in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead.
For twelve winters, seasons of woe,
the lord of the Shieldings⁴ suffered under
his load of sorrow; and so, before long,
150 the news was known over the whole world.

2. See Genesis 4.9–12.

3. Huts, outlying buildings. Evidently Grendel wants only to dominate the hall.

4. The descendants of Shield, another name for the Danes.

Sad lays were sung about the beset king,
the vicious raids and ravages of Grendel,
his long and unrelenting feud,
nothing but war; how he would never
155 parley or make peace with any Dane
nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.⁵
No counselor 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,
165 inflicting constant cruelties on the people,
atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot,
haunted the glittering hall after dark,
but the throne itself, the treasure-seat,
he was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast.

170 These were hard times, heartbreaking
for the prince of the Shieldings; powerful counselors,
the highest in the land, would lend advice,
plotting how best the bold defenders
might resist and beat off sudden attacks.
175 Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
offerings to idols, swore oaths
that the killer of souls⁶ 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 has to thrust his soul
185 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.

[THE HERO COMES TO HEOROT]

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 the terror.

When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac's thane
195 was on home ground, over in Geatland.
There was no one else like him alive.

5. I.e., *wergild* (man-price); monetary compensation for the life of the slain man is the only way, according to Germanic law, to settle a feud

peacefully.
6. I.e., the devil. Heathen gods were thought to be devils.

In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
 highborn and powerful. He ordered a boat
 that would ply the waves. He announced his plan:
 200 to sail the swan's road and seek 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
 205 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, warriors loaded
 a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear
 215 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
 225 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,
 235 this horseman of Hrothgar's, and challenged them
 in formal terms, flourishing his spear:
 "What kind of men are you who arrive
 rigged out for combat in your 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,
 any danger to the Danish shore.
 Never before has a force under arms
 245 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 armor.
 So now, before you fare inland
 as interlopers, I have to be informed
 about who you are and where you hail from.
 255 Outsiders from across the water,
 I say it again: the sooner you tell
 where you come 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 his day, my father was a famous man,
 a noble warrior-lord named Ecgtheow.
 He outlasted many a long winter
 265 and went on his way. All over the world
 men wise in counsel 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 advice 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,
 275 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
 285 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
 with your arms and your gear, and I will guide you.
 What's more, I'll order my own comrades
 on their word of honor to watch your boat
 295 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-shapes⁷ flashed
above their cheek-guards, the brightly forged
305 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,
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
315 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."

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 armor rang. So they duly arrived
in their grim war-graith⁸ and gear at the hall,
325 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 seafarers' stook, a stand of grayish
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,
335 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
345 son of Halfdane, will hear me out
and graciously allow me to greet him in person,
I am ready and willing to report my errand."

Wulfgar replied, a Wendel chief

renowned as a warrior, well known for his wisdom
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
355 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 foursquare
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,
365 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 he was a young boy.
His father before him was called Ecgtheow.
Hrethel the Geat⁹ gave Ecgtheow
375 his daughter in marriage. This man is their son,
here to follow up an old friendship.
A crew of seamen who sailed for me once
with a gift-cargo across to Geatland
returned with marvelous tales about him:
380 athane, they declared, with the strength of thirty
in the grip of each hand. Now Holy God
has, in His goodness, guided him here
to the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel.
This is my hope; and for his heroism
385 I will recompense him with a rich treasure.
Go immediately, bid him and the Geats
he has in attendance to assemble and enter.
Say, moreover, when you speak to them,
they are welcome to Denmark."

At the door of the hall,
390 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.
395 You are free now to move forward
to meet Hrothgar in helmets and armor,
but shields must stay here and spears be stacked

7. Carved images of boars were placed on helmets, probably as charms to protect the warriors.

8. "Graith": archaic for apparel.

9. Hygelac's father and Beowulf's grandfather.

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, led by their prince
 under Heorot's roof. And standing on the hearth
 in webbed links that the smith had woven,
 405 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.
 415 So every elder and experienced 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 boltered¹ 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).
 425 Now I mean to be a match for Grendel,
 settle the outcome in single combat.
 And so, my request, O king of Bright-Danes,
 dear prince of the Shieldings, friend of the people
 and their ring of defense, my one request
 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;
 435 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
 445 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:²
 if the battle takes me, send back
 this breast-webbing that Weland³ fashioned
 and Hrethel gave me, to Lord Hygelac.
 455 Fate goes ever as fate must."
 Hrothgar, the helmet of Shieldings, spoke:
 "Beowulf, my friend, you have traveled here
 to favor us with help and to fight for us.
 There was a feud one time, begun by your father.
 460 With his own hands he had killed Heatholaf
 who was a Wulfing; so war was looming
 and his people, in fear of it, forced him to leave.
 He came away then over rolling waves
 to the South-Danes here, the sons of honor.
 465 I was then in the first flush of kingship,
 establishing my sway over 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.
 "It bothers me to have to burden anyone
 with all the grief that Grendel has caused
 475 and the havoc he has wreaked upon us in Heorot,
 our humiliations. My household guard
 are on the wane, fate sweeps them away
 into Grendel's clutches—but God can easily
 halt these raids and harrowing attacks!
 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 their whetted swords.
 But when dawn broke and day crept in
 485 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."

[FEAST AT HEOROT]

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,

1. Clotted, sticky.

2. I.e., for burial. Hrothgar will not need to give Beowulf an expensive funeral.

3. Famed blacksmith in Germanic legend.

strong and stalwart. An attendant stood by
 495 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 Geats and Danes.
 From where he crouched at the king's feet,
 500 Unferth, a son of Ecglaf's, spoke
 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
 505 might enjoy greater regard than he did:
 "Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca
 in a swimming match on the open sea,
 risking the water just to prove that 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,
 515 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 Heatho-Reams, then made his way
 to where he belonged in Branding country,
 home again, sure of his ground
 in strongroom and bawn.⁴ So Breca made good
 his boast upon you and was proved right.
 525 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:
 530 "Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say
 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.
 535 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,
 540 a naked, hard-proofed blade for protection
 against the whale-beasts. But Breca could never
 move out farther or faster from me

4. Fortified outwork of a court or castle. The word was used by English planters in Ulster to describe fortified dwellings they erected on lands confiscated from the Irish [Translator's note].

than I could manage to move from him.
 Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on
 545 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 armor helped me to hold out;
 my hard-ringed chain-mail, hand-forged and linked,
 a fine, close-fitting filigree of gold,
 kept me safe when some ocean creature
 pulled me to the bottom. Pinioned fast
 555 and swathed in its grip, I was granted one
 final chance: my sword plunged
 and the ordeal was over. Through my own hands,
 the fury of battle had finished off the sea-beast.
 "Time and again, foul things attacked me,
 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.
 565 Instead, in the morning, mangled and sleeping
 the sleep of the sword, they slopped and floated
 like the ocean's leavings. From now on
 sailors would be safe, the deep-sea raids
 were over for good. Light came from the east,
 570 bright guarantee of God, and the waves
 went quiet; I could see headlands
 and buffeted cliffs. Often, for undaunted courage,
 fate spares the man it has not already marked.
 However it occurred, my sword had killed
 575 nine sea-monsters. Such night dangers
 and hard ordeals I have never heard of
 nor of a man more 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 were ever much
 585 celebrated for swordsmanship
 or for facing danger on the field of battle.
 You killed your own kith and kin,
 so for all your cleverness and quick tongue,
 you will suffer damnation in the depths of hell.
 590 The fact is, 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.

595 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 mead, when the morning light,
605 scarfed in sun-dazzle, shines forth from the south
and brings another daybreak to the world."

Then the gray-haired treasure-giver was glad;
far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes
and keeper of his people counted on Beowulf,
610 on the warrior's steadfastness and his word.
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
615 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.
625 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;
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, said:
"I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea.
As I sat in the boat with my band of men,
I meant to perform to the uttermost
635 what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfill that purpose,
prove myself with a proud deed
or meet my death here in the mead-hall."
This formal boast by Beowulf the Geat
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
645 Halfdane's heir had to be away

to his night's rest. He realized
that the demon was going to descend on the hall,
that he had plotted all day, from dawn light
until darkness gathered again over the world
650 and stealthy night-shapes 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:
655 "Never, since my hand could hold a shield
have I entrusted or given control
of the Danes' 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."

[THE FIGHT WITH GRENDEL]

Hrothgar departed then with his house-guard.
The lord of the Shieldings, their shelter in war,
left the mead-hall to lie with Wealhtheow,
665 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 favor.
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.
675 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 idea of the arts of war,
of shield or sword-play, although he does possess
a wild strength. No weapons, therefore,
for either this night: unarmed he shall face me
685 if face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord
in His wisdom grant the glory of 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,

695 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,
705 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 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.
The bane of the race of men roamed forth,
hunting for a prey in the high hall.
Under the cloud-murk he moved toward it
until it shone above him, a sheer keep
715 of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time
he had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar's dwelling—
although never in his life, before or since,
did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.
Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead
720 and arrived at the bawn.⁵ The iron-braced door
turned on its hinge when his hands touched it.
Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open
the mouth of the building, maddening for blood,
725 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 limb and devour them,
feed on their flesh; but his fate that night
was due to change, his days of ravening
735 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

5. See p. 52, n. 4.

utterly lifeless, eaten up
hand and foot. Venturing closer,
745 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
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 recoiled, but he could not escape.
He was desperate to flee to his den and hide
755 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
765 the terror-monger had taken to Heorot.
And now the timbers trembled and sang,
a hall-session⁶ 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
775 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 upon earth
capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall
780 unless the burning embrace of a 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,
785 a God-cursed scream and strain of catastrophe,
the howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf
keenening 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:

6. In Hiberno-English the word "session" (*seisiúin* in Irish) can mean a gathering where musicians and singers perform for their own enjoyment [Translator's note].

he did not consider that life of much account
to anyone anywhere. Time and again,
Beowulf's warriors worked to defend
795 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 not have known at the time,
that no blade on earth, no blacksmith's art
could ever damage their demon opponent.
He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge
of every weapon.⁷ But his going away
805 out of this 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 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
815 body was in pain; a tremendous wound
appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split
and the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted
the glory of winning; Grendel was driven
under the fen-banks, fatally hurt,
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,
825 proud and sure, had purged the hall,
kept it from harm; he was happy with his nightwork
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
835 shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.

[CELEBRATION AT HEOROT]

Then morning came and many a warrior
gathered, as I've heard, around the gift-hall,
clan-chiefs flocking from far and near
down wide-ranging roads, wondering greatly

7. Grendel is protected by a charm against metals.

840 at the monster's footprints. His fatal departure
was regretted by no one who witnessed his trail,
the ignominious marks of his flight
where he'd skulked away, exhausted in spirit
and beaten in battle, bloodying the path,
845 hauling his doom to the demons' mere.⁸
The bloodshot water wallowed and surged,
there were loathsome upthrows and overturnings
of waves and gore and wound-slurry.
With his death upon him, he had dived deep
850 into his marsh-den, drowned out his life
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
855 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
865 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 meter.⁹ 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 about Sigemund's exploits,¹
875 all of those many feats and marvels,
the struggles and wanderings of Wael's son,²
things unknown to anyone
except to Fitela, feuds and foul doings
confided by uncle to nephew when he felt
880 the urge to speak of them: always they had been
partners in the fight, friends in need.
They killed giants, their conquering swords
had brought them down.

*After his death
Sigemund's glory grew and grew*

8. A lake or pool, although we learn later that it has an outlet to the sea. Grendel's habitat.

9. I.e., an extemporaneous heroic poem in alliterative verse about Beowulf's deeds.

1. Tales about Sigemund, his nephew Sinfjotli (Fitela), and his son Sigurth are found in a 13th-

century Old Icelandic collection of legends known as the *Volsung Saga*. Analogous stories must have been known to the poet and his audience, though details differ.

2. Wael is the father of Sigemund.

885 because of his courage when he killed the dragon,
the guardian of the hoard. Under gray stone
he had dared to enter all by himself
to face the worst without Fitela.
But 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:
895 Waels's son weighted her hold
with dazzling spoils. The hot dragon melted.
Sigemund's name was known everywhere.
He was utterly valiant and venturesome,
a fence round his fighters and flourished therefore
900 after King Heremod's³ prowess declined
and his campaigns slowed down. The king was betrayed,
ambushed in Jutland, overpowered
and done away with. The waves of his grief
had beaten him down, made him a burden,
905 a source of anxiety to his own nobles:
that expedition was often condemned
in those earlier times by experienced men,
men who relied on his lordship for redress,
who presumed that the part of a prince was to thrive
910 on his father's throne and defend the nation,
the Shielding land where they lived and belonged,
its holdings and strongholds. Such was Beowulf
in the affection of his friends and of everyone alive.
But evil entered into Heremod.

915 They kept racing each other, urging 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 to the mead-hall.

When Hrothgar arrived at the hall, he spoke,
925 standing on the steps, under the steep eaves,
gazing toward 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

3. Heremod was a bad king, held up by the bard as the opposite of Beowulf, as Sigemund is held up as a heroic prototype of Beowulf.

glittered and reeked and ran with blood.
935 This one worry outweighed all others—
a constant distress to counselors entrusted
with defending the people's forts from assault
by monsters and demons. But now a man,
with the Lord's assistance, has accomplished something
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 labor the Lord of Ages
945 bestowed a grace on her. So now, Beowulf,
I adopt you in my heart as a dear son.
Nourish and maintain this new connection,
you noblest of men; there'll be nothing you'll want for,
no worldly goods that won't be yours.
950 I have often honored smaller achievements,
recognized warriors not nearly as worthy,
lavished rewards on the less deserving.
But you have made yourself immortal
by your glorious action. May the God of Ages
955 continue to keep and requite you well."
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"We have gone through with a glorious endeavor
and been much favored 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
965 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.
975 He is hasped and hooped and hirpling with pain,
limping and looped in it. Like a man outlawed
for wickedness, he must 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
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
985 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 to refurbish Heorot immediately:
men and women thronging the wine-hall,
getting it ready. Gold thread shone
in the wall-hangings, woven scenes
995 that attracted and held the eye's attention.
But iron-braced as the inside of it had been,
that 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
1005 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,
1015 Hrothgar and Hrothulf, were in high spirits
in the raftered hall. Inside Heorot
there was nothing but friendship. The Shielding nation
was not yet familiar with feud and betrayal.⁴

Then Halfdane's son presented Beowulf
1020 with a gold standard as a victory gift,
an embroidered banner; also breast-mail
and a helmet; and a sword carried high,
that was both precious object and token of honor.
So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease;
1025 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 exchanged
four such treasures at so friendly a sitting.
An embossed ridge, 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.

4. Probably an ironic allusion to the future usurpation of the throne from Hrothgar's sons by Hrothulf, although no such treachery is recorded of Hrothulf, who is the hero of other Germanic stories.

Next the king ordered eight horses
1035 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.
Then the Danish prince, descendant of Ing,
handed over both the arms and the horses,
urging Beowulf to use them well.
1045 And so their leader, the lord and guard
of coffer and strongroom, 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:
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 cruelly killed earlier—
1055 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:
1065 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.⁵
1070 *Hildeburh*

*had little cause
to credit the Jutes:
son and brother,
she lost them both
on the battlefield.
She, bereft
and blameless, they*

5. The bard's lay is known as the Finnsburg Episode. Its allusive style makes the tale obscure in many details, although some can be filled in from a fragmentary Old English lay, which modern editors have entitled *The Fight at Finnsburg*. Hildeburh, the daughter of the former Danish king Hoc, was married to Finn, king of Friesland, presumably to help end a feud between their peoples. As the episode opens, the feud has already broken

out again when a visiting party of Danes, led by Hildeburh's brother Hnaef, who has succeeded their father, is attacked by a tribe called the Jutes. The Jutes are subject to Finn but may be a clan distinct from the Frisians, and Finn does not seem to have instigated the attack. In the ensuing battle, both Hnaef and the son of Hildeburh and Finn are killed, and both sides suffer heavy losses.

1075

1085

1090

1095

6. The truce was offered by Finn to Hengest, who succeeded Hnaef as leader of the Danes.

1100

1105

1110

1115

1120

7. The meaning may be that the warrior was placed up on the pyre, or went up in smoke. "Keens": lamentations or dirges for the dead.

The glutton element
 flamed and consumed
 1125 the dead of both sides. Their great days were gone.
 Warriors scattered
 to homes and forts
 all over Friesland,
 fewer now, feeling
 loss of friends.
 Hengest stayed,
 lived out that whole
 resentful, blood-sullen
 1130 winter with Finn,
 homesick and helpless.
 No ring-whorled prow
 could up then
 and away on the sea.
 Wind and water
 raged with storms,
 wave and shingle
 were shackled in ice
 until another year
 1135 appeared in the yard
 as it does to this day,
 the seasons constant,
 the wonder of light
 coming over us.
 Then winter was gone,
 earth's lap grew lovely,
 longing woke
 in the cooped-up exile
 for a voyage home—
 1140 but more for vengeance,
 some way of bringing
 things to a head:
 his sword arm hankered
 to greet the Jutes.
 So he did not balk
 once Hunlafing
 placed on his lap
 Dazzle-the-Duel,
 the best sword of all,⁸
 1145 whose edges Jutes
 knew only too well.
 Thus blood was spilled,
 the gallant Finn
 slain in his home
 after Guthlaf and Oslaf⁹

8. Hunlafing may be the son of a Danish warrior called Hunlaf. The placing of the sword in Hengest's lap is a symbolic call for revenge.
 9. It is not clear whether the Danes have traveled

home and then returned to Friesland with reinforcements, or whether the Danish survivors attack once the weather allows them to take ship.

back from their voyage
 made old accusation:
 the brutal ambush,
 the fate they had suffered,
 1150 all blamed on Finn.
 The wildness in them
 had to brim over.
 The hall ran red
 with blood of enemies.
 Finn was cut down,
 the queen brought away
 and everything
 the Shieldings could find
 inside Finn's walls—
 1155 the Frisian king's
 gold collars and gemstones—
 swept off to the ship.
 Over sea-lanes then
 back to Daneland
 the warrior troop
 bore that lady home.

The poem was over,
 the poet had performed, a pleasant murmur
 1160 started on the benches, stewards did the rounds
 with wine in splendid jugs, and Wealhtheow came to sit
 in her gold crown between two good men,
 uncle and nephew, each one of whom
 still trusted the other;¹ and the forthright Unferth,
 1165 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 on you.
 The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed
 1175 and now the word is that you want to adopt
 this warrior as a son. So, while you may,
 bask in your fortune, and then bequeath
 kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,
 before your decease. I am certain of Hrothulf.
 1180 He is noble and will use the young ones well.
 He will not let you down. Should you die before him,
 he will treat our children truly and fairly.
 He will honor, I am sure, our two sons,
 repay them in kind, when he recollects

1. See n. 4, p. 62.

1185 all the good things we gave him once,
the favor and respect he found in his childhood."
She turned then to the bench where her boys sat,
Hrethric and Hrothmund, with other nobles' sons,
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 a wealth of wrought gold
graciously bestowed: two arm bangles,
a mail-shirt and rings, and the most resplendent
1195 torque of gold I 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 shining fort,
1200 away from Eormenric's wiles and hatred,²
and thereby ensured his eternal reward.
Hygelac the Geat, grandson of Swerting,
wore this neck-ring on his last raid;³
at bay under his banner, he defended the booty,
1205 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.
They 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.

1215 Then Wealhtheow pronounced in the presence of the company:
"Take delight in this torque, dear Beowulf,
wear it for luck and wear also this mail
from our people's armory: may you prosper in them!
Be acclaimed for 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 as the wind's home,
as the sea around cliffs. And so, my prince,
1225 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.

2. The necklace presented to Beowulf is compared to one worn by the goddess Freya in Germanic mythology. In another story it was stolen by Hama from the Gothic king Eormenric, who is treated as a tyrant in Germanic legend, but how Eormenric came to possess it is not known.
3. Later we learn that Beowulf gave the necklace

to Hygd, the queen of his lord Hygelac. Hygelac is here said to have been wearing it on his last expedition. This is the first of several allusions to Hygelac's death on a raid up the Rhine, the one incident in the poem that can be connected to a historical event documented elsewhere.

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,
1235 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:
1245 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.

[ANOTHER ATTACK]

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,
1255 death after his crimes. Then it became clear,
obvious to everyone once the fight was over,
that an avenger lurked and was still alive,
grimly biding time. Grendel's mother,
monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.
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 a sword. Branded an outlaw,
marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds,
1265 shunned 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 favor. So he overcame the foe,
brought down the hell-brute. Broken and bowed,
1275 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
 strength is less than an armed man's
 1285 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
 1295 in a tight hold, then headed for the fen.
 To Hrothgar, this man was the most beloved
 of the friends he trusted between the two seas.
 She had done away with a great warrior,
 ambushed him at rest.

Beowulf was elsewhere.

1300 Earlier, after the award of the treasure,
 the Geat had been given another lodging.

There was uproar in Heorot. She had snatched their trophy,
 Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow
 to the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard,
 1305 both parties having to pay
 with the lives of friends. And the old lord,
 the gray-haired warrior, was heartsore and weary
 when he heard the news: his highest-placed adviser,
 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
 1315 would ever turn the tide of his misfortunes.
 So Beowulf entered with his band in attendance
 and the wooden floorboards banged and rang
 as he advanced, hurrying to address
 the prince of the Ingwins, asking if he'd rested
 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.
 He was Yrmenlaf's elder brother
 1325 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. Aeschere 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,
 1335 wrestled and racked him in ruinous combat
 since for too long he had terrorized us
 with his depredations. He died in battle,
 paid with his life; and now this powerful
 other one arrives, this force for evil
 1340 driven to avenge her kinsman's death.
 Or so it seems to thanes in their grief,
 in the anguish everythane endures
 at the loss of a ring-giver, now that the hand
 that bestowed so richly has been stilled in death.

1345 "I have heard it said by my people in hall,
 counselors who live in the upland country,
 that they have seen two such creatures
 prowling the moors, huge marauders
 from some other world. One of these things,
 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 the country people
 1355 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 the 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
 is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface.
 1365 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 wind blows up and stormy weather
 makes clouds scud and the skies weep,
 1375 out of its depths a dirty surge
 is pitched toward the heavens. Now help depends
 again on you and on 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 the last time with lavish wealth,
coffers of coiled gold, if you come back."

[BEOWULF FIGHTS GREDEL'S MOTHER]

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better
1385 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 under ground nor upland groves
nor the ocean floor. She'll have nowhere to flee to.
1395 Endure your troubles today. Bear up
and be the man I expect you to be."

With that the old lord sprang 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,
her trail on the ground wherever she had gone
1405 across the dark moors, dragging away
the body of that thane, Hrothgar's best
counselor and overseer of the country.
So the noble prince proceeded undismayed
up fells and screes, along narrow footpaths
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,
1415 mountain trees growing out at an angle
above gray stones: the bloodshot water
surged underneath. It was a sore blow
to all of the Danes, friends of the Shieldings,
a hurt to each and every one
1420 of that noble company when they came upon
Aeschere's head at the foot of the cliff.

Everybody gazed as the hot gore
kept wallowing up and an urgent war-horn
repeated its notes: the whole party
1425 sat down to watch. The water was infested
with all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-dragons
and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,
serpents and wild things such as those that often
surface at dawn to roam the sail-road

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
1435 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 underwater.
1445 It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:
no enemy's clasp could crush him in it,
no vicious armlock choke his life out.
To guard his head he had a glittering helmet
that was due to be muddled on the mere bottom
1450 and blurred in the upswirl. 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.
1455 And another item lent by Unferth
at that moment of need was of no small importance:
the brehon⁴ 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 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.

1465 When he lent that blade to the better swordsman,
Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf,
could hardly have remembered 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 reputation. 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
1475 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

4. One of an ancient class of lawyers in Ireland [Translator's note]. The Old English word for Unferth's office, *thyle*, has been interpreted as "orator" and "spokesman."

and suffer death while serving your cause,
would act like a father to me afterward.

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,
1485 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-honed, 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
1495 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 chain-mail
saved him on the outside. Her savage talons
1505 failed to rip the web of his war-shirt.
Then once she touched bottom, that 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 chain-mail
in a ghastly onslaught. The gallant man
could see he had entered some hellish turn-hole
and yet the water there did not work against him
1515 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
and singing on her head. But he soon found
his battle-torch extinguished; the shining blade
refused to bite. It spared her and failed
1525 the man in his need. It had gone through many
hand-to-hand fight, had hewed the armor
and helmets of the doomed, but here at last
the fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.

Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about

1530 his name and fame: he never lost heart.
Then, in a fury, he flung his sword away.
The keen, inlaid, worm-loop-patterned steel
was hurled to the ground: he would have to rely
on the might of his arm. So must a man do
1535 who intends to gain enduring glory
in a combat. Life doesn't cost him a thought.
Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to this 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 fighter felt daunted,
the strongest of warriors stumbled and fell.
1545 So she pounced upon him and pulled out
a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge
her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail
on Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life,
turned the edge and tip of the blade.
1550 The son of Ecgtheow would have surely 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,
1555 the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance
once Beowulf got back up on his feet.
Then he saw a blade that boded well,
a sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom
from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon,
1560 one that any warrior would envy,
but so huge and heavy of itself
only Beowulf could wield it in a battle.
So the Shieldings' hero hard-pressed and enraged,
took a firm hold of the hilt and swung
1565 the blade in an arc, a resolute blow
that bit deep 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
1575 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 plunder. Beowulf in his fury
1585 now settled that score: he saw the monster
in his resting place, war-weary and wrecked,
a lifeless corpse, a casualty
of the battle in Heorot. The body gaped
at the stroke dealt to it after death:
1590 Beowulf cut the corpse's head off.

Immediately the counselors keeping a lookout
with Hrothgar, watching the lake water,
saw a heave-up and surge of waves
and blood in the backwash. They bowed gray heads,
1595 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 the 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.

1605 Meanwhile, the sword
began to wilt into gory icicles
to slather and thaw. It was a wonderful thing,
the way it all melted as ice melts
when the Father eases the fetters off the frost
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
1615 embossed with jewels; its blade had melted
and the scrollwork on it burned, so scalding was the blood
of the poisonous fiend who had perished there.
Then away he swam, the one who had survived
the fall of his enemies, flailing to the surface.
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,
1625 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 footpaths and trails through the fields,
roads that they knew, each of them wrestling
1635 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 their leader.
In he came then, the thanes' commander,
1645 the arch-warrior, to address Hrothgar:
his courage was proven, his glory was secure.
Grendel's head was hauled by the hair,
dragged across the floor where the people were drinking,
a horror for both queen and company to behold.
1650 They stared in awe. It was an astonishing sight.

[ANOTHER CELEBRATION AT HEOROT]

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.
1655 I barely survived the battle under water.
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.
1665 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,
1675 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 smithwork
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 to that king
1685 who of all the lavish gift-lords of the north
was the best regarded between the two seas.

Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt,
that relic of old times. It was engraved all over
and showed how war first came into the world
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
1695 there were rune-markings correctly incised,
stating and recording for whom the sword
had been first made and ornamented
with its scrollworked hilt. Then everyone hushed
as the son of Halfdane spoke this 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,
1705 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,
1710 the way he behaved to Ecgwela's sons.
His rise in the world brought little joy
to the Danish people, only death and destruction.
He vented his rage on men he caroused with,
killed his own comrades, a pariah king
1715 who cut himself off from his own kind,
even though Almighty God 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 honor the Danes. He suffered in the end
for having plagued his people for so long:
his life lost happiness.

So learn from this
and understand true values. I who tell you
have wintered into wisdom.

It is a great wonder
1725 how Almighty God in His magnificence
favors our race with rank and scope
and the gift of wisdom; His sway is wide.
Sometimes He allows the mind of a man
of distinguished birth to follow its bent,
1730 grants him fulfillment 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.

1735 He indulges his desires; illness and old age
mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled
by envy or malice or the 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, drowns,
grown too distracted. A killer stalks him,
an archer who draws a deadly bow.
1745 And then the man is hit in the heart,
the arrow flies beneath his defenses,
the devious promptings of the demon start.
His old possessions seem paltry to him now.
He covets and resents; dishonors custom
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
1755 prey to its death; ancestral possessions
and the goods he hoarded are 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
1765 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
1775 from bliss to grief. Grendel struck
after lying in wait. He laid waste to 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 that after such harrowing
I can look upon it in triumph at last.
Take your place, then, with pride and pleasure,

and move to the feast. Tomorrow morning
our treasure will be shared and showered upon you."

1785 The Geat was elated and gladly obeyed
the old man's bidding; he sat on the bench.
And soon all was restored, the same as before.
Happiness came back, the hall was thronged,
and a banquet set forth; black night fell
1790 and covered them in darkness.

Then the company rose
for the old campaigner: the gray-haired prince
was ready for bed. And a need for rest
came over the brave shield-bearing Geat.
He was a weary seafarer, far from home,
1795 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.

[BEOWULF RETURNS HOME]

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
1805 was beckoning the nobles; and the bold voyager
longed to be aboard his distant boat.
Then that stalwart fighter ordered Hrunting
to be brought to Unferth, and bade Unferth
take the sword and thanked him for lending it.
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 honored lord
1815 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 entertained. You have treated us well.
If there is any favor on earth I can perform
beyond deeds of arms I have done already,
anything that would merit your affections more,
1825 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
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 honor dictates
1835 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 friends. 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,
1845 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, then 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.
1855 What you have done is to draw two peoples,
the Geat nation and us neighboring Danes,
into shared peace and a pact of friendship
in spite of hatreds we have harbored in the past.
For as long as I rule this far-flung land
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,
1865 steadfast in the old way with friend or foe."
Then the earls' 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 gray-haired Dane,
that highborn king, kissed Beowulf
and embraced his neck, then broke down
in sudden tears. Two forebodings
disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger:
1875 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,