

LANGUAGE AND PROSODY

Old English poetry differs in important ways from later English poetry. Whereas a modern poem can be written in any of a number of forms—sonnets, blank verse, ballad meter, free verse, and so on—all surviving Old English poetry is written in essentially the same meter and form. Lines in modern English metrical poetry are built out of a fixed number of feet, each of which has (in principle) the same sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables; in Old English poetry, apart from a small number of extended or hypermetric lines appearing irregularly throughout the corpus of surviving verse and a handful of isolated “half-lines” that may or may not be errors, every line consists of two half-lines, each containing (usually) two stressed syllables and a varying number of unstressed syllables. The two half-lines are linked by alliteration between one or both stressed syllables in the first half-line and the first stressed syllable of the second half-line. Alliteration and stress held together the lines of an Old English poem, as meter and rhyme hold together the lines of a Shakespearean sonnet; they were not decorative, as they are in modern poetry, but necessary structural elements.

The opening lines of the poem *Beowulf* illustrate this poetic structure:

Hwæt: We gardena in geardagum
 þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,
 hu ða æpelingas ellen fremedon!
 Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum
 monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah,
 egsode eorl, syððan ærest wearð
 feascaft funden. He þæs frofre gebad,
 weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah,
 oð þæt him æghwylc þara ymsittendra
 ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
 gomban gyldan. Þæt wæs god cyning.
 Ðæm eafera wæs æfter cenned
 geong in geardum, þone God sende
 folce to frofre. Fyrendearfe ongeat
 bæt hie ær drugon aldorlease
 lange hwile. Him þæs Liffrea,
 wuldres wealdend, woroldare forgeaf.
 Beowulf wæs breme, blæd wide sprang,
 Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in.
 Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,

fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme,
 þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
 wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,
 leode gelæsten. Lofdædum sceal
 in mægþa gehwære man geþeon.

Most of this passage (to *fæder*, line 21) is on fol. 129r of the *Beowulf* manuscript. Old English script is relatively easy to read, though some letter forms are different from those of modern printed English (especially the round *d*, the open *g*, the long *f*, *r*, and *s*, the short *t*, the *p*-shaped *w* called *wynn*, and the *ae* ligature called *aesc* or “ash”) and some letters have not survived (the crossed *d* called *eth* (*ð*) and the long *p*-shaped letter called *thorn* (*þ*), both of which represent the sound spelled *th* in Modern English). As with other surviving Old English poems, the scribe does not put each line of verse on its own line but writes straight across the page. Abbreviations in this text are rare, consisting mostly of a line over a final vowel to indicate that it is followed by the consonant *m* or *n* (e.g., *monegū* for the adjective *monegum*, “many,” in line 5). Punctuation is much lighter than in Modern English, and the divisions between what modern linguists recognize as words is not always clear, so that the scribe combines a preposition with the word that follows it, and divides the two parts of a compound word to write *in geardagum* in line 1, or combines two short words to write *hu ða* in line 3.

Though many thousands of words have changed their shape, disappeared, or been added to the lexicon over the past millennium, Old English is still recognizably the ancestor of Modern English. The most common words have changed hardly at all: pronouns such as *we*, *he*, *him*, and *that* (though it is spelled *þæt* in Old English); prepositions such as *in*, *under*, and *over* (spelled *ofer*, but pronounced just like Modern English *over*); and adverbs such as *hu* (how) and *ofi*. Many other words are either the same as Modern English words though spelled differently (*god* “good,” *wæs* “was”) or related to surviving words: *gearda-gum* is recognizable as “yore-days” (i.e., “days of yore”); *wolcnum*, an inflected plural form of the noun *wolcn*, survives as the archaic word “welkin” and still means “the heavens”; *funden* is the past participle of *fīndan*, which is the modern word “find”; *hyran* is the ancestor of modern “hear,” though

it means “obey” as well as “hear” in Old English. Some other words, however, especially those in the aristocratic or poetic register, vanished from the language soon after the arrival of the Normans—examples here include *ǣpelingas* “noblemen,” *ellen* “brave (deeds),” *þrym* “glory,” and *frofre* “consolation.”

Other important differences between Old and Modern English are found in word order and inflection. A literal translation of these lines into Modern English clearly reveals this (words in parentheses are grammatical particles required in Modern English but expressed by inflectional endings in Old English):

What! We (of the) spear-Danes in yore-days
of people's-kings glory heard
how those noblemen brave-deeds did!
Often Scyld Son-of-Sheaf (of) enemies (from) troops
(from) many tribes mead-benches took away
terrified (the) noblemen, after first (he) was
penniless found. He (for) that comfort awaited,
grew under (the) skies, (in) honors prospered,
until (to) him each (of those) surrounding-sitters
over (the) whale's-riding-place to obey had to,
tribute pay. That was (a) good king.
(To) that (one) (a) son was afterwards born
young in (the) yards, whom God sent
(the) people to comfort. Severe-need (he) perceived
that they before endured lord-less
(a) long while. (To) him (for) that (the) Life-lord,
(of) glory (the) wielder, world-honor gave.
Beowulf was famous, fame widely sprang,
(of) Scyld (the) son Scandinavian-lands in.
So shall (a) young man good make-happen
(with) pious gifts from (his) father's coffers,
so that him in old-age afterwards might support
willing-companions, when war (should) come,
the people (might) support. (With) praise-deeds shall
in tribes each one (a) man prosper.

If we compare this literal rendering to the translation below, we can see that Old English tended to place verbs after direct objects and at the ends of clauses, while Modern English requires a fairly strict subject-verb-object order:

Listen!

We have heard of the glory in bygone days
of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes,
how those noble lords did lofty deeds.
Often Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches
from many tribes, troops of enemies,
struck fear into earls. Though he first was
found a waif, he awaited solace for that—
he grew under heaven and prospered in honor
until every one of the encircling nations
over the whale's-riding had to obey him,
grant him tribute. That was a good king!
A boy was later born to him,
young in the courts, whom God sent
as a solace to the people—He saw their need,
the dire distress they had endured, lordless,
for such a long time. The Lord of Life,
Wielder of Glory, gave him worldly honor;
Beowulf, the son of Scyld, was renowned,
his fame spread far and wide in Scandinavian lands.
Thus should a young man bring about good
with pious gifts from his father's possessions,
so that later in life loyal comrades
will stand beside him when war comes,
the people will support him—with praiseworthy deeds
a man will prosper among any people.

Old English, then, expresses most grammatical relationships by inflection, while Modern English requires grammatical particles such as prepositions and definite articles. Sentence elements could be multiplied without explicit connections such as “and” or “or”: *gardena* and *þeodcýninga* in lines 1–2 are both plural possessives modifying *þrym*, and the whole phrase means something like “the glory of the spear-Danes (who were) the kings of the people”; *sceapena þreatum* and *monegum mægþum* in lines 4–5 are both plural datives modifying the verb *ofteah*, so the phrase means “took away from troops of enemies (who were) from many tribes.” The sentence beginning *He þæs frofre* on line 7 has three verbs, *gebad*, *weox*, and *þah*; it can be translated “He awaited consolation for that (as he) grew under the heavens (and) prospered in honors”—even though the three

verbs are in one sense a temporal series (first he waited, then he grew, and finally he prospered), they are (more importantly) three variations of one idea (the consolation, the growing, and the prospering are all the same thing). As this example suggests, Old English poetry can be considerably more compressed than a modern translation, and its unlinked chains of multiple statements often require the reader's time and consideration to unfold their full meaning.

The borrowings of French words into the English vocabulary are many, and generally seem to have been culturally motivated; thus, English borrows words for government (*peace, justice, court, judge, sentence*—though *gallows* is an English word) and culture (*noble, dame, gentle, honor, courtesy, polite, manners*). One effect of all this borrowing is that English has a great flexibility in its synonyms; we can express things in several different ways using words from different origins: we can *ask* or *question* someone, and get an *answer* or a *response*, which may make us *glad* or *pleased*, or it may make us *mad* or *angry*, and lead to a *fight* or *dispute* (or even an *altercation*). Often the English and French words for the same thing have come to differ in meaning: it has long been observed, for example, that animals used for meat are called by their English names when they are in the field—*cow, calf, pig, sheep, deer*—and by their French names on the table—*beef, veal, pork, mutton, venison*. This linguistic development reflects the social situation of post-Conquest England, in which the lower-class English raised the animals and the upper-class French ate them; it may also have something to do with the superiority of French over English cooking, which was recognized even a thousand years ago.

Alongside this generous borrowing of vocabulary and literary forms, one of the most important changes in Middle English was the wearing-away of the complex inflectional system of Old English, which had already begun to disappear by the end of the tenth century in some dialects, and the concomitant fixing of word order into something more like its modern form. Another was the representation of many different regional dialects in written Middle English; Old English had regional varieties, but by far the majority of surviving manuscripts are written in some approximation of the

standard West Saxon of the late tenth century. In the absence of a strong educational system teaching a standard for English spelling, regional dialects were much more fully represented in written Middle English. The differences between Old and Middle English can be seen in the following three passages, each translating the opening verses of Psalm 23. The first is from the Old English "Paris Psalter" of the ninth century. The second is from the Wycliffite translation of the Bible in the later fourteenth century. The third shows the same verses from the modern Douay-Rheims Bible, also translated from the Latin Vulgate:

Drihten me ræt, ne byð me nanes godes wan, and he me geset on swyðe good feohland. And fedde me be wætera staðum, and min mod gehwyrfd e of unrottesse on gefean. He me gelædde ofer þa wegas rihtwisesse, for his naman.

The Lord governeth me, and no thing schal fail to me; in the place of pasture there he hath set me. He nurschide me on the watir of refreischyng; he conuertide my soule. He ledde me forth on the pathis of rihtfulness; for his name.

The LORD ruleth me; and I shall want nothing. He hath set me in a place of pasture: he hath brought me up, on the water of refreshment. He hath converted my soul. He hath led me on the paths of justice, for his own name's sake.

Even in these few lines the differences between Old and Middle English are notable: considerable developments in vocabulary (*Drihten* > *Lord*, *ræt* > *governeth*, *feohland* > *the place of pasture*, *mod* > *soule*, *gehwyrfd e* > *conuertide*, *wegas* > *pathis*), changes in word order (*Drihten me ræt* > *The Lord governeth me*, *he me geset* > *he hath set me*, *min mod gehwyrfd e* > *he conuertide my soule*), and the erosion of inflectional endings (*be wætera staðum* > *on the watir of refreischyng*, *for his naman* > *for his name*) all indicate the movement of English toward its present state. The Middle English passage is nearly identical to the early Modern English of the Douay-Rheims version. To understand something of the dialect diversity in written Middle English, however, one should compare the Wycliffite version to the same passage in two other

Middle English texts, the *West Midlands Psalter* and the Yorkshire version of Richard Rolle, both written around the middle of the fourteenth century:

(*West Midlands Psalter*) Our Lord gouerneþ me, and noþyng shal defailen to me; in þe stede of pasture he sett me þer. He norissed me vp water of fyllyng; he turned my soule fram þe fende. He lad me vp þe bistiges of rigtfulnes for his name.

(*Richard Rolle Psalter*) Lord gouerns me and naþyng sall me want; in sted of pasture þare he me sett. On þe watere of rehetynge forþ he me broght; my saule he turnyd. He led me on þe stretis of rightwisnes; for his name.

By the end of the thirteenth century English began to appear once again as a language of official documents and public occasions. In 1337 a lawyer addressed the Parliament in English for the first time, as a chronicle says, “so that he might be better understood by all”; in 1362 Parliament ordered all lawsuits to be conducted in English. There is some indication that at the beginning of the fourteenth century the nobility had to be taught French—the language still held prestige, but it was by no means the native tongue of those born on English soil. Not surprisingly, it is in the same period, the fourteenth century, that English literary output becomes significant again. But the language that emerged had been strongly altered by two centuries of “underground” existence and the shaping pressure from the dominant French language and literary culture. It is thought that the use of alliterative verse in the Old English style may have persisted through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, though evidence of this is scarce and ambiguous. In the fourteenth century alliterative verse reappears in written form throughout much of England, and is used for subjects as varied as Arthurian legendary history (the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*), Christian dream vision (*Pearl*), and satiric commentary (Langland’s *Piers Plowman*), among others. Rhymed, metrical, non-alliterative poetry such as that of Chaucer and Gower was largely inspired by French traditions.

The literary flowering of the second half of the fourteenth century was by no means restricted to one region. Chaucer wrote in the dialect of London and the

east Midlands which, more than any other, is the ancestor of Modern English; the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on the other hand, wrote in a dialect of the northwest Midlands. As Chaucer himself put it, there was great “diversitee in English and in writing of our tonge.” With the coming of the printing press in the fifteenth century, the printed language began to take on more and more common characteristics, though it would be not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that grammar, spelling, and punctuation were standardized.

In reading Old and Middle English (in whatever dialect) it is important to be aware of the major ways in which the language differs from our own. For any historical period of English the reconstruction of pronunciation is only approximate, but a careful study of sound changes, spelling, cognate languages, and word histories allows scholars to make highly educated guesses about the way Old and Middle English sounded. Old English used some letters not found in the Latin alphabet, including *thorn* (þ), *eth* (ð), and *yogh* (ȝ); the first two survived into Middle English, where þ gradually came to be written much like the letter *y* (giving rise to the common misreading of “ye” for “the” in faux-antique signs like “ye olde shoppe”). Some Old English consonant clusters were pronounced in unusual ways; *sc* was pronounced like *sh* and *cg* like *dg*, so that Old English *scip* and *ecg* sounded much like their modern descendants *ship* and *edge*. The consonants *c* and *g* were pronounced differently depending on their position in a word; the Old English words *gold* and *camb* were pronounced much as in Modern English *gold* and *comb*, but *geat* was pronounced with a *y* as if it were roughly *yat*, and *ciric* was pronounced with *ch* sounds as in its modern descendant *church*.

One way in which Old and Middle English are dramatically different from Modern English is in sounding all consonants, including those in combinations such as *kn*, *gn*, *lk*, and *wr* that have become largely or entirely silent in Modern English. The word “knight,” for example, is pronounced something like “k-nicht” (with the *i* short). Final unstressed *e* in words is always sounded in Old English, and sounded far more frequently in Middle English than is the case in Modern English—though during the late-medieval period the

sounding of the final *e* was beginning to die out, and scholars continue to dispute how frequently the final *e* should be sounded in Chaucerian English. Vowels are pronounced roughly as in French or Spanish—the Modern English values are the result of a “Great Vowel Shift” that began in the fifteenth century. The long *a* in words such as “made,” for example, was pronounced like the *a* in “father”; the long *e* in words such as “sweete” was sounded like the *a* in “mate”; the long *i* (or *y*) in words such as “lif” and “myn” was pronounced in the same way we sound the *i* in “machine”; the long *o* in words such as “do” and “spoon” was sounded as we pronounce the *o* in “note”; and the long *u* (or *ou* or *ow*) in words such as “flowr” was sounded as we would pronounce the *oo* in “boot.”

While Middle English is far less inflected than Old English, meaning that fewer grammatical differences are signaled in the form of words, matters are, as noted above, complicated by dialect. Third person singular formations of verbs, for example, tend to end in *-s* or *-ys* in northern dialects, and in *-th* or *-ith* (later *-eth*) in southern dialects. “She has” is thus a form deriving from northern Middle English dialects, and “she hath” from southern English forms (cf. Richard Rolle’s “Lord gouerns me” where the Wycliffite version has “The Lord gouerneth me”). When the sheep thief Mak in *The*

Second Shepherds’ Play pretends to be from southern England he says “ich be” instead of “I am” as northerners then (and all English speakers nowadays) would say. Word order in Middle English is often substantially different from modern practice, with the verb often coming later in the sentence than is our custom in statements, but coming at the beginning of the sentence in questions, as is the practice in many Romance languages. Many Middle English words are of course unfamiliar to the modern reader, but there are also many “false friends”—words that look identical or very similar to Modern English words but carry significantly different denotations. *Lewd*, which in Old English means “secular, not relating to the clergy,” evolved in Middle English to mean “unlearned,” but without any suggestion of a sexual character. *Sely*, though the ancestor of the modern “silly,” can mean “poor,” “miserable,” or “innocent” as well as “strange” or “foolish.” Even at the level of a single word, one might say, we can see the peculiar and provocative mixture of strangeness and familiarity, the haunting family resemblances and the disconcerting dissonances, that make the study of medieval literary culture so compelling and rewarding. We hope that in this collection of works you will come to know its powerful appeal.

under the wide ground, the Geatish champion,
 had not his armored shirt offered him help,
 the hard battle-net, and holy God
 brought about war-victory—the wise Lord,
 1555 Ruler of the heavens, decided it rightly,
 easily, once he stood up again.

23

He saw among the armor a victorious blade,
 ancient giant-sword strong in its edges,
 an honor in battle; it was the best of weapons,
 1560 except that it was greater than any other man
 might even bear into the play of battle,
 good, adorned, the work of giants.¹
 The Scyldings' champion seized its linked hilt,
 fierce and ferocious, drew the ring-marked sword
 1565 despairing of his life, struck in fury
 so that it caught her hard in the neck,
 broke her bone-rings; the blade cut through
 the doomed flesh—she fell to the floor,
 the sword was bloody, the soldier rejoiced.
 1570 The flames gleamed, a light glowed within
 even as from heaven clearly shines
 the firmament's candle. He looked around the chamber,
 passed by the wall, hefted the weapon
 hard by its hilt, that thane of Hygelac,
 1575 angry and resolute—nor was the edge useless
 to that warrior, but he quickly wished
 to pay back Grendel for the many battle-storms
 which he had wrought on the West-Danes
 much more often than on one occasion,
 1580 when Hrothgar's hall-companions
 he slew in their beds, devoured sleeping
 fifteen men of the Danish folk,
 and made off with as many more,
 a loathsome booty. He paid him back for that,
 1585 the fierce champion, for on a couch he saw
 Grendel lying lifeless,
 battle-weary from the wound he received
 in the combat at Heorot. His corpse burst open
 when he was dealt a blow after death,
 1590 a hard sword-stroke, and his head chopped off.

¹ *the work of giants* Old, highly-praised weapons are often called “the work of giants”—whether this reference is meant to connect the sword to the giants “who fought against God” is not clear.

Soon the wise men saw it,
 those who kept watch on the water with Hrothgar—
 all turbid were the waves, and troubled,
 the sea stained with blood. The graybearded
 1595 elders spoke together about the good one,
 said they did not expect that nobleman
 would return, triumphant, to seek
 the mighty prince; to many it seemed
 that the sea-wolf had destroyed him.
 1600 The ninth hour came; the noble Scyldings
 abandoned the headland, and home went
 the gold-friend of men. The guests² sat
 sick at heart, and stared into the mere;
 they wished, but did not hope, that they would
 1605 see their lord himself.

Then the sword began,
 that blade, to waste away into battle-icicles
 from the war-blood; it was a great wonder
 that it melted entirely, just like ice
 when the Father loosens the frost's fetters,
 1610 unwraps the water's bonds—He wields power
 over times and seasons; that is the true Maker.
 The man of the Geats took no more precious treasures
 from that place—though he saw many there—
 than the head, and the hilt as well,
 1615 bright with gems; the blade had melted,
 the ornamented sword burned up; so hot was the blood
 of the poisonous alien spirit who died in there.
 Soon he was swimming who had survived in battle
 the downfall of his enemies, dove up through the water;
 1620 the sea-currents were entirely cleansed,
 the spacious regions, when that alien spirit
 gave up life-days and this loaned world.

The defender of seafarers came to land,
 swam stout-hearted; he rejoiced in his sea-booty,
 1625 the great burden which he brought with him.
 That splendid troop of thanes went towards him,
 thanked God, rejoiced in their prince,
 that they might see him safe and sound.
 Then from that bold man helmet and byrnie
 1630 were quickly unstrapped. Under the clouds
 the mere stewed, stained with gore.
 They went forth, followed the trail,
 rejoicing in their hearts; they marched along the road,

² *guests* I.e., the Geats who had come to Heorot with Beowulf.

the familiar path; proud as kings
 1635 they carried the head from the sea-cliff
 with great trouble, even for two pairs
 of stout-hearted men; four of them had to
 bear, with some strain, on a battle-pole
 Grendel's head to the gold-hall,
 1640 until presently fourteen proud
 and battle-hardy Geats came to the hall,
 warriors marching; the lord of those men,
 mighty in the throng, trod the meadhall-plain.
 Then the ruler of thanes entered there,
 1645 daring in actions, honored in fame,
 battle-brave hero, to greet Hrothgar.
 Then, where men were drinking, they dragged by its hair
 Grendel's head across the hall-floor,
 a grisly spectacle for the men and the queen.
 1650 Everyone stared at that amazing sight.

24

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
 "Look! son of Healfdene, prince of the Scyldings,
 we have brought you gladly these gifts from the sea
 which you gaze on here, a token of glory.
 1655 Not easily did I escape with my life
 that undersea battle, did my brave deed
 with difficulty—indeed, the battle would have been
 over at once, if God had not guarded me.
 Nor could I achieve anything at that battle
 1660 with Hrunting, though that weapon is good;
 but the Ruler of Men granted to me
 that I might see on the wall a gigantic old sword,
 hanging glittering—He has always guided
 the friendless one—so I drew that weapon.
 1665 In that conflict, when I had the chance, I slew
 the shepherds of that house. Then that battle-sword
 burned up with its ornaments, as the blood shot out,
 hottest battle-sweat. I have brought the hilt
 back from the enemy; I avenged the old deeds,
 1670 the slaughter of Danes, as seemed only right.
 Now you have my word that you may in Heorot
 sleep without care with your company of men,
 and everythane, young and old,
 in your nation; you need fear nothing,
 1675 prince of the Scyldings, from that side,
 no deadly manslaughters, as you did before."

Then the golden hilt was placed in the hand
 of the gray-haired war-chief, wise old leader,
 that old work of giants; it came to the keeping
 1680 of the Danish lord after the fall of demons,
 a work of wonder-smiths; and when that evil-hearted man,
 God's adversary, gave up the world,
 guilty of murders—and his mother too—
 it passed to the possession of the best
 1685 of world-kings between the two seas,
 of all those that dealt out treasures in Danish lands.

Hrothgar spoke—he studied the hilt
 of the old heirloom, where was written¹ the origin
 of ancient strife, when the flood slew,
 1690 rushing seas, the race of giants—
 they suffered awfully. That was a people alien
 to the eternal Lord; a last reward
 the Ruler gave them through the raging waters.
 Also, on the sword-guard of bright gold
 1695 was rightly marked in rune-letters,
 set down and said for whom that sword,
 best of irons, had first been made,
 with scrollery and serpentine patterns. Then spoke
 the wise son of Healfdene—all fell silent:
 1700 "One may, indeed, say, if he acts in truth
 and right for the people, remembers all,
 old guardian of his homeland, that this earl was
 born a better man! My friend Beowulf,
 your glory is exalted throughout the world,
 1705 over every people; you hold it all with patient care,
 and temper strength with wisdom. To you I shall fulfill
 our friendship, as we have said. You shall become a comfort
 everlasting to your own people,
 and a help to heroes.

Not so was Heremod
 1710 to the sons of Ecgwala,² the Honor-Scyldings;³
 he grew not for their delight, but for their destruction
 and the murder of Danish men.
 Enraged, he cut down his table-companions,
 comrades-in-arms, until he turned away alone
 1715 from the pleasures of men, that famous prince;
 though mighty God exalted him in the joys

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

² *Ecgwala* A king of Danes.

³ *Honor-Scyldings* I.e., Danes.

of strength and force, advanced him far
 over all men, yet in his heart he nursed
 a blood-ravenous breast-hoard. No rings did he give
 1720 to the Danes for their honor; he endured, joyless,
 to suffer the pains of that strife,
 a long-lasting harm to his people. Learn from him,
 understand virtue! For your sake I have told this,
 in the wisdom of my winters.

It is a wonder to say

1725 how mighty God in His great spirit
 allots wisdom, land and lordship
 to mankind; He has control of everything.
 At times He permits the thoughts of a man
 in a mighty race to move in delights,
 1730 gives him to hold in his homeland
 the sweet joys of earth, a stronghold of men,
 grants him such power over his portion of the world,
 a great kingdom, that he himself cannot
 imagine an end to it, in his folly.
 1735 He dwells in plenty; in no way plague him
 illness or old age, nor do evil thoughts
 darken his spirit, nor any strife
 or sword-hate shows itself, but all the world
 turns to his will; he knows nothing worse.

25

1740 “At last his portion of pride within him
 grows and flourishes, while the guardian sleeps,
 the soul’s shepherd—that sleep is too sound,
 bound with cares, the slayer too close
 who, sinful and wicked, shoots from his bow.¹
 1745 Then he is struck in his heart, under his helmet
 with a bitter dart—he knows no defense—
 the strange, dark demands of evil spirits.
 What he has long held seems too little;
 angry and greedy, he gives no golden rings
 1750 for vaunting boasts, and his final destiny
 he neglects and forgets, since God, Ruler of glories,
 has given him a portion of honors.
 In the end it finally comes about
 that the loaned life-dwelling starts to decay
 1755 and falls, fated to die; another follows him

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

who doles out his riches without regret,
 the earl’s ancient treasure; he heeds no terror.
 Defend yourself from wickedness, dear Beowulf,
 best of men, and choose the better,
 1760 eternal counsel; care not for pride,
 great champion! The glory of your might
 is but a little while; soon it will be
 that sickness or the sword will shatter your strength,
 or the grip of fire, or the surging flood,
 1765 or the cut of a sword, or the flight of a spear,
 or terrible old age—or the light of your eyes
 will fail and flicker out; in one fell swoop
 death, o warrior, will overwhelm you.

“Thus, a hundred half-years I held the Ring-Danes
 1770 under the skies, and kept them safe from war
 from many tribes throughout this middle-earth,
 from spears and swords, so that I considered none
 under the expanse of heaven my enemy.
 Look! Turnabout came in my own homeland,
 1775 grief after gladness, when Grendel became
 my invader, ancient adversary;
 for that persecution I bore perpetually
 the greatest heart-cares. Thanks be to the Creator,
 eternal Lord, that I have lived long enough
 1780 to see that head, stained with blood,
 with my own eyes, after all this strife!
 Go to your seat, enjoy the feast,
 honored in battle; between us shall be shared
 a great many treasures, when morning comes.”

1785 Glad-hearted, the Geat went at once
 to take his seat, as the wise one told him.
 Then again as before, a feast was prepared
 for the brave ones who occupied the hall
 on this new occasion. The dark helm of night
 1790 overshadowed the troop. The soldiers arose;
 the gray-haired ruler was ready for bed,
 the aged Scylding. Immeasurably well
 did rest please the Geat, proud shield-warrior;
 at once a chamberlain led him forth,
 1795 weary from his adventure, come from afar,
 he who attended to all the needs
 of that thane, for courtesy, as in those days
 all battle-voyagers used to have.

The great-hearted one rested; the hall towered
 1800 vaulted and gold-adorned; the guest slept within

until the black¹ raven, blithe-hearted, announced
the joy of heaven. Then light came hurrying
[bright over shadows;] the soldiers hastened,
the noblemen were eager to travel
1805 back to their people; the bold-spirited visitor
wished to seek his far-off ship.

The hardy one ordered Hrunting to be borne
to the son of Ecglaf,² bid him take his sword,
lordly iron; he thanked him for the loan,
1810 and said that he regarded it as a good war-friend,
skillful in battle, and the sword's edges
he did not disparage; he was a noble man.
And when the warriors were eager for their way,
equipped in their war-gear, the nobleman went,
1815 the Danes' honor, to the high seat where the other was:
the hero, brave in battle, saluted Hrothgar.

26

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
“Now we seafarers, come from afar,
wish to say that we desire
1820 to seek Hygelac. Here we were honorably
entertained with delights; you have treated us well.
If ever on earth I can do any thing
to earn more of your affection,
than the battle-deeds I have done already,
1825 ruler of men, I will be ready at once.
If ever I hear over the sea's expanse
that your neighbors threaten you with terror
as your enemies used to do,
I will bring you a thousand thanes,
1830 heroes to help you. I have faith in Hygelac—
the lord of the Geats, though he be young,
shepherd of his people, will support me
with words and deeds, that I might honor you well
and bring to your side a forest of spears,
1835 the support of my might, whenever you need men.
If ever Hrethric decides, son of a prince,
to come to the Geatish court, he will find
many friends there; far-off lands

¹ *black* Either OE *blac* “shining” or *bleac* “black”; the translation prefers the irony of the image of the black raven, not otherwise known as a harbinger of joy, announcing the surprising good news of a dawn without slaughter.

² *Son of Ecglaf* I.e., Unferth.

are better sought by one who is himself good.”

1840 Hrothgar spoke in answer to him:
“The wise Lord has sent those words
into your heart; I have never heard
a shrewder speech from such a young man.
You are strong in might and sound in mind,
1845 prudent in speech! I expect it is likely
that if it should ever happen that the spear
or the horrors of war take Hrethel's son,³
or sickness or sword strike the shepherd of his people,
your lord, and you still live,
1850 that the sea-Geats could not select
a better choice anywhere for king,
hoard-guard of heroes, if you will hold
the realm of your kinsmen. Your character pleases me
better and better, beloved Beowulf.
1855 You have brought it about that between our peoples,
the Geatish nation and the spear-Danes,
there shall be peace, and strife shall rest,
the malicious deeds that they endured before,
as long as I shall rule this wide realm,
1860 and treasures together; many shall greet
another with gifts across the gannet's bath;⁴
the ring-necked ship shall bring over the sea
tribute and tokens of love. I know these nations
will be made fast against friend and foe,
1865 blameless in everything, in the old way.”

The protector of heroes, kinsman of Healfdene,
gave him twelve great treasures in the hall;
bid him seek his own dear people in safety
with those gifts, and quickly come again.
1870 Then the good king, of noble kin, kissed
that best of thanes and embraced his neck,
the Scylding prince; tears were shed
by that gray-haired man. He was of two minds—
but in his old wisdom knew it was more likely
1875 that never again would they see one another,
brave in their meeting-place. The man was so dear to him
that he could not hold back the flood in his breast,
but in his heart, fast in the bonds of his thought,
a deep-felt longing for the dear man
1880 burned in his blood. Beowulf from thence,
gold-proud warrior, trod the grassy lawn,

³ *Hrethel's son* I.e., Hygelac.

⁴ *gannet's bath* I.e., the sea.

exulting in treasure; the sea-goer awaited
 its lord and owner, where it rode at anchor.
 As they were going, the gift of Hrothgar
 1885 was often praised; that king was peerless,
 blameless in everything, until old age took from him
 —it has injured so many—the joy of his strength.

27

Those men of high courage then came to the sea,
 that troop of young retainers, bore their ring-mail,
 1890 locked shirts of armor. The coast-guard observed
 the return of those earls, as he had once before;
 he did not greet those guests with insults
 on the cliff-top, but he rode towards them,
 said that the warriors in their shining armor
 1895 would be welcome in their ships to the people of the
 Weders.

The sea-curved prow, the ring-necked ship,
 as it lay on the sand was laden with war-gear,
 with horses and treasures; the mast towered high
 over Hrothgar's hoard-gifts.
 1900 To the ship's guardian he¹ gave a sword,
 bound with gold, so that on the mead-benches
 he was afterwards more honored by that heirloom,
 that old treasure. Onward they went, the ship
 sliced through deep water, gave up the Danish coast.
 1905 The sail by the mast was rigged fast with ropes,
 a great sea-cloth; the timbers creaked,
 the wind over the sea did not hinder at all
 the wave-floater on its way; the sea-goer sped on,
 floated foamy-necked, forth upon the waves,
 1910 the bound prow over the briny streams,
 until they could make out the cliffs of Geatland,
 familiar capes; the keel drove forward
 thrust by the wind, and came to rest on land.
 Right away the harbor-guard was ready at the shore,
 1915 who for a long time had gazed far
 over the currents, eager for the beloved men;
 he moored the broad-beamed ship on the beach
 fast with anchor-ropes, lest the force of the waves
 should drive away the handsome wooden vessel.
 1920 He bade that the nobleman's wealth be borne ashore,
 armor and plated gold; they had not far to go

¹ *he* I.e., Beowulf.

to seek their dispenser of treasure,
 Hygelac son of Hrethel, where he dwelt at home
 with his companions, near the sea-wall.

1925 The building was splendid, the king quite bold,
 high in his hall, Hygd² very young,
 wise, well-mannered, though few winters
 had the daughter of Hæreth passed within
 the palace walls—yet not poor for that,
 1930 nor stingy of gifts to the Geatish people,
 of great treasures. She considered Thryth's pride,³
 famous folk-queen, and her terrible crimes;
 no man so bold among her own retainers
 dared to approach her, except as her prince,⁴
 1935 or dared to look into her eyes by day;
 for he knew that deadly bonds, braided by hand,
 were waiting for him—first the hand-grip,
 and quickly after a blade appointed,
 so that a patterned sword had to settle things,
 1940 proclaim the execution. That is no queenly custom
 for a lady to perform—no matter how lovely—
 that a peace-weaver⁵ should deprive of life
 a friendly man after a pretended affront.
 The kinsman of Hemming⁶ put a halt to that:
 1945 then ale-drinkers told another tale,
 said she caused less calamity to the people,
 less malicious evil, after she was
 given gold-adorned to the young champion,
 fair to that nobleman, when to Offa's floor
 1950 she sought a journey over the fallow sea
 at her father's wish, where she afterwards

² *Hygd* Hygelac's queen.

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

⁴ *her prince* I.e., as her husband or her father.

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

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

on the throne, famous for good things,
 used well her life while she had it,
 held high love with that chief of heroes,
 1955 of all mankind, as men have told me,
 the best between the two seas
 of all the races of men; therefore Offa,
 in gifts and battle, spear-bold man,
 was widely honored, and held in wisdom
 1960 his own homeland. From him arose Eomer
 as a help to heroes, kinsman of Hemming,
 grandson of Garmund, skilled in violence.

28

The hardy man¹ with his hand-picked troop
 went across the sand, trod the sea-plain,
 1965 the wide shore. The world's candle shone,
 hastening from the south. They had survived their journey,
 went boldly to where they knew
 the protector of earls, slayer of Ongentheow,²
 good young battle-king, gave out rings
 1970 in his fortress. To Hygelac
 the arrival of Beowulf was quickly reported,
 that to the enclosures his battle-companion,
 protector of warriors, came walking alive
 back to his court, safe from his battle-play.
 1975 Quickly, as the powerful one commanded,
 the hall was cleared out inside for the foot-guests.

He sat down with him, who had survived the fight,
 kinsmen together, after he greeted
 his friend and liege-lord with a formal speech,
 1980 with courteous words and cups of mead.
 The daughter of Hæreth³ passed through the hall,
 cared for the people, bore the cup
 to the hand of the hero.⁴ Hygelac began
 to question his companion courteously
 1985 in the high hall—curiosity pressed him
 to know how the sea-Geats' adventures were:
 "How did you fare, beloved Beowulf,

¹ *The hardy man* I.e., Beowulf.

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

³ *daughter of Hæreth* I.e., Hygd.

⁴ *to the hand of the hero* The manuscript reads "to the hands of heathens," which makes sense, but is usually emended.

in your journey, when you suddenly resolved
 to seek a far-off strife over the salt sea,
 1990 a battle in Heorot? Did you better at all
 the well-known woe of Hrothgar,
 the famous prince? For that I seethed
 with heart-care and distress, mistrusted the adventure
 of my beloved man; long I implored
 1995 that you not seek that slaughter-spirit at all,
 let the south-Danes themselves make
 war against Grendel. I say thanks to God
 that I might see you again safe and sound."

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:

2000 "It is no mystery to many men,
 my lord Hygelac—the great meeting,
 what a time of great struggle Grendel and I
 had in that place where he made so many
 sorrows for the victory-Scyldings,
 2005 life-long misery—I avenged them all,
 so that none of Grendel's tribe needs to boast
 anywhere on earth of that uproar at dawn,
 whoever lives longest of that loathsome kind,
 enveloped in foul evil. First I came there
 2010 to the ring-hall to greet Hrothgar;
 quickly the famous kinsman of Healfdene,
 once he knew of my intentions,
 assigned me a seat with his own sons.
 That troop was in delight; never in my life
 2015 have I seen among hall-sitters, under heaven's vault,
 a more joyous feast. At times the famous queen,
 bond of peace to nations, passed through the hall,
 urged on her young sons; often she gave
 twisted rings before she took her seat.
 2020 At times before the hall-thanes the daughter of Hrothgar
 bore the ale-cup to the earls in the back—
 Freawaru, I heard the men in the hall
 call her, when the studded treasure-cup
 was passed among them. She is promised,
 2025 young, gold-adorned, to the gracious son of Froda;⁵
 the ruler of the Scyldings has arranged this,
 the kingdom's shepherd, and approves the counsel
 that he should settle his share of feud and slaughter

⁵ *the gracious son of Froda* Ingeld, prince of the Heathobards. His attack on the Danes, alluded to earlier in the poem (80–5), was apparently unsuccessful; another Old English poem, *Widsith*, reports that "Hrothulf and Hrothgar ... humbled Ingeld's battle-array."

with this young woman. But seldom anywhere
 2030 after the death of a prince does the deadly spear rest
 for even a brief while, though the bride be good!

“It may, perhaps, displease the Heathobards’ prince,
 and every retainer among his tribe,
 when across the floor, following that woman, goes
 2035 a noble son of the Danes, received with honors;
 on him glitters an ancestral heirloom,
 hard, ring-adorned, once a Heathobard treasure
 as long as they were able to wield their weapons.

29

“And then in that deadly shield-play they undid
 2040 their beloved comrades and their own lives.
 Then an old spear-bearer¹ speaks over his beer,
 who sees that ring-hilt and remembers all
 the spear-deaths of men—his spirit is grim—
 begins, sad-minded, to test the mettle
 2045 of a young thane with his innermost thoughts,
 to awaken war, and says these words:

‘Can you, my friend, recognize that sword,
 which your father bore into battle
 in his final adventure beneath the helmet,
 2050 that dear iron, when the Danes struck him,
 ruled the field of slaughter after the rout of heroes,
 when Withergyld² fell—those valiant Scyldings?
 Now here some son or other of his slayer
 walks across this floor, struts in his finery,
 2055 brags of the murder and bears that treasure
 which ought, by right, to belong to you.’

He urges and reminds him on every occasion
 with cruel words, until the time comes
 that Freawaru’s thane, for his father’s deeds,
 2060 sleeps, bloodstained from the bite of a sword,
 forfeits his life; from there the other
 escapes alive, for he knows the land well.
 Then on both sides the sworn oaths of earls
 will be broken, once bitter violent hate
 2065 wells up in Ingeld, and his wife-love

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

² *Withergyld* Apparently a famous Heathobard warrior.

grows cooler after his surging cares.
 Thus I expect that the Heathobards’ part
 in the Danish alliance is not without deceit,
 nor their friendship fast.

I will speak further

2070 concerning Grendel, so that you might certainly know,
 giver of treasure, how it turned out,
 the heroic wrestling-match. When heaven’s gem
 slipped under the ground, the angry spirit came,
 horrible, evening-grim, sought us out
 2075 where, unharmed, we guarded the hall.

The attack came first against Hondscio³ there,
 deadly to that doomed man—he fell first,
 a girded champion; Grendel was
 that famous young retainer’s devourer,
 2080 gobbled up the body of that beloved man.
 None the sooner did that slayer, blood in his teeth,
 mindful of misery, mean to leave
 that gold-hall empty-handed,
 but in his mighty strength he tested me,
 2085 grabbed with a ready hand. A glove⁴ hung
 huge, grotesque, fast with cunning clasps;
 it was all embroidered with evil skill,
 with the devil’s craft and dragons’ skins.
 Inside there, though I was innocent,
 2090 that proud evil-doer wanted to put me,
 one of many; but it was not to be,
 once I angrily stood upright.

30⁵

“It is too long to tell how I handed back payment
 to the people’s enemy for all his evils—
 2095 there, my prince, I did honor to your people
 with my actions. He escaped away,
 enjoyed his life a little while longer;
 yet behind him, guarding his path, was his right

³ *Hondscio* We finally learn the name of the retainer killed in section 11. The name, as in modern German (*Handschuh*), means “glove.”

⁴ *glove* It is not clear what this is; apparently a pouch of some kind. It is characteristic of a troll in Norse legend. In any case it does not figure in the narrator’s own description of Grendel’s attack, and is but one of several discrepancies between the two tellings of the story.

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

hand in Heorot, and wretched, he went hence,
 2100 sad at heart, and sank to the sea-floor.
 For that bloody onslaught the friend of the Scyldings
 repaid me greatly with plated gold,
 many treasures, when morning came,
 and we had gathered together to the feast again.
 2105 There was song and joy; the aged Scylding,¹
 widely learned, told of far-off times;
 at times the brave warrior touched the song-wood,
 delight of the harp, at times made lays
 both true and sad, at times strange stories
 2110 he recounted rightly. That great-hearted king,
 gray-bearded old warrior wrapped in his years,
 at times began to speak of his youth again,
 his battle-strength; his heart surged within him
 when, old in winters, he remembered so much.
 2115 And so there inside we took our ease
 all day long, until night descended
 again upon men. There, quickly ready
 with revenge for her griefs, Grendel's mother
 journeyed sorrowful; death took her son,
 2120 the war-hate of the Wæders. That monstrous woman
 avenged her son, killed a soldier
 boldly at once—there the life of Æschere,
 wise old counselor, came to its end.
 And when morning came the men of the Danes
 2125 were not able to burn his body, death-weary,
 with flames, nor place him on a funeral pyre,
 beloved man; she bore away his corpse
 in her evil embrace under the upland streams.
 That, to Hrothgar, was the most wrenching distress
 2130 of all those that had befallen that folk-leader.
 Then the prince—by your life—implored me,
 his mind wracked, that in the roaring waves
 I should do a noble deed, put my life in danger,
 perform glorious things—he promised me reward.
 2135 In the waves I found, as is widely known,
 a grim, horrible guardian of the abyss.
 There, for a while, we fought hand-to-hand;
 the sea foamed with blood, and I severed the head
 of Grendel's mother with a mighty sword

¹ *the aged Scylding* It is not clear whether this is Hrothgar or not, or how many storytellers and singers are at this banquet.

2140 in that [battle-]hall;² I barely managed
 to get away with my life—I wasn't doomed yet—
 and the protector of earls once again gave me
 many treasures, that kinsman of Healfdene.

31

“So that nation's king followed good customs;
 2145 in no wise have I lost those rewards,
 the prize for my strength, but the son of Healfdene
 offered me treasures at my own choice,
 which I wish to bring to you, o war-king,
 to show good will. Still all my joys
 2150 are fixed on you alone; I have few
 close kinsmen, my Hygelac, except for you.”
 He ordered to be borne in the boar standard,
 the helmet towering in battle, the gray byrnie,
 the decorated sword, and told this story:
 2155 “Hrothgar gave me this battle-gear,
 wise prince, and commanded particularly
 that first I should tell you the story of his gift—
 he said that Heorogar the king³ first had it,
 lord of the Scyldings, for a long while;
 2160 none the sooner would he give to his own son,
 the valiant Heoroward—loyal though he was—
 that breast-armor. Use all well!”
 Then, as I've heard, four swift horses,
 fallow as apples, well-matched, followed
 2165 that war-gear; he gave him as a gift
 the horses and harness—as kinsman should behave,
 never knitting a net of malice for another
 with secret plots, preparing death
 for his hand-picked comrades. Hygelac's nephew
 2170 was loyal to him, hardy in the fight,
 and each man to the other mindful of benefits.—
 I heard that he gave the necklace to Hygd,
 the wondrous ornamented treasure which Wealhtheow
 had given him,
 to that lord's daughter, along with three horses
 2175 graceful and saddle-bright; her breast was adorned
 the more graciously after that ring-giving.
 So the son of Ecgtheow showed himself brave,

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

³ *Heorogar the king* Eldest brother of Hrothgar.

renowned for battles and noble deeds,
 pursued honor, by no means slew, drunken,
 2180 his hearth-companions; he had no savage heart,
 but the great gift which God had given him,
 the greatest might of all mankind, he held,
 brave in battle. He had been long despised,
 as the sons of the Geats considered him no good,
 2185 nor did the lord of the Weders wish to bestow
 many good things upon him on the meadbenches,
 for they assumed that he was slothful,
 a cowardly nobleman. Reversal came
 to the glorious man for all his griefs.

2190 The protector of earls, battle-proud king,
 ordered the heirloom of Hrethel¹ brought in,
 adorned with gold; among the Geats there was
 no finer treasure in the form of a sword.
 He laid the sword in Beowulf's lap,
 2195 and gave him seven thousand hides² of land,
 a hall and a princely throne. Both of them held
 inherited land in that nation, a home
 and native rights, but the wider rule
 was reserved to the one who was higher in rank.

2200 Then it came to pass amid the crash of battle
 in later days, after Hygelac lay dead,
 and for Heardred³ the swords of battle held
 deadly slaughter under the shield-wall,
 when the Battle-Scylfings sought him out,
 2205 those hardy soldiers, and savagely struck down
 the nephew of Hereric⁴ in his victorious nation—
 then came the broad kingdom
 into Beowulf's hands; he held it well
 for fifty winters—he was then a wise king,
 2210 old guardian of his homeland—until
 in the dark nights a dragon began his reign,
 who guarded his hoard in the high heaths
 and the steep stone barrows; the path below
 lay unknown to men. Some sort of man
 2215 went inside there, found his way to

¹ *Hrethel* Father of Hygelac.

² *hides* Units of land, originally the amount of land which could support a peasant and his family; its actual size varied from one region to another. Seven thousand hides is by any measure a very generous area.

³ *Heardred* Son of Hygelac.

⁴ *nephew of Hereric* I.e., Heardred.

the heathen hoard—his hand ...⁵
 inlaid with jewels. He⁶ got no profit there,
 though he had been trapped in his sleep
 by a thief's trickery: the whole nation knew,
 2220 and all the people around them, that he was enraged.

32

Not for his own sake did he who sorely harmed him
 break into that worm-hoard,⁷ or by his own will,
 but in sad desperation some sort of [slave]⁸
 of a warrior's son fled the savage lash,
 2225 the servitude of a house, and slipped in there,
 a man beset by sins. Soon he gazed around
 and felt the terror from that evil spirit;
 yet ...

...made...

2230 ... when the terror seized him
 he snatched a jeweled cup.⁹

There were many such
 antique riches in that earth-hall,
 for in ancient days an unknown man
 had thought to hide them carefully there,
 2235 the rich legacy of a noble race,
 precious treasures. In earlier times
 death had seized them all, and he who still survived
 alone from that nation's army lingered there,
 a mournful sentry, expected the same,
 2240 that he might enjoy those ancient treasures
 for just a little while. A waiting barrow
 stood in an open field near the ocean waves,
 new on the cape, safe with crafty narrow entrances;
 he bore within the noble wealth,
 2245 the plated gold, that guardian of rings,
 a share worthy of a hoard, and spoke few words:
 "Hold now, o thou earth, for heroes cannot,

⁵ The manuscript is damaged here and some text is unreadable. Among many conjectural restorations one thing is clear—a cup is taken from the dragon's hoard.

⁶ *He* The thief; "he" in the following line refers to the dragon. These lines are nearly illegible and other readings have been proposed.

⁷ *worm-hoard* Dragon's treasure.

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

⁹ *yet ... cup* The manuscript is unreadable at this point.

the wealth of men—lo, from you long ago
 those good ones first obtained it! Death in war
 2250 and awful deadly harm have swept away
 all of my people who have passed from life,
 and left the joyful hall. Now have I none
 to bear the sword or burnish the bright cup,
 the precious vessel—all that host has fled.
 2255 Now must the hardened helm of hammered gold
 be stripped of all its trim; the stewards sleep
 who should have tended to this battle-mask.
 So too this warrior's coat, which waited once
 the bite of iron over the crack of boards,
 2260 molders like its owner. The coat of mail
 cannot travel widely with the war-chief,
 beside the heroes. Harp-joy have I none,
 no happy song; nor does the well-schooled hawk
 soar high throughout the hall, nor the swift horse
 2265 stamp in the courtyards. Savage butchery
 has sent forth many of the race of men!"

So, grieving, he mourned his sorrow,
 alone after all. Unhappy sped
 both days and nights, until the flood of death
 2270 broke upon his heart. An old beast of the dawn
 found that shining hoard standing open—
 he who, burning, seeks the barrows,
 a fierce and naked dragon, who flies by night
 in a pillar of fire; people on earth
 2275 fear him greatly. It is his nature to find
 a hoard in the earth, where, ancient and proud,
 he guards heathen gold, though it does him no good.¹

Three hundred winters that threat to the people
 held in the ground his great treasury,
 2280 wondrously powerful, until one man
 made him boil with fury; he² bore to his liege-lord
 the plated cup, begged for peace
 from his lord. Then the hoard was looted,
 the hoard of rings fewer, a favor was granted
 2285 the forlorn man; for the first time
 his lord looked on that ancient work of men.

When the dragon stirred, strife was renewed;
 he slithered along the stones, stark-hearted he found
 his enemy's footprint—he had stepped too far

¹ *It is ... good* The association of dragons and hoarded treasure is ancient and proverbial.

² *he* I.e., the thief.

2290 in his stealthy skill, too close to the serpent's head.
 Thus can an undoomed man easily survive
 wrack and ruin, if he holds to the Ruler's
 grace and protection!³ The hoard-guardian
 searched along the ground, greedy to find
 2295 the man who had sorely harmed him while he slept;
 hot, half-mad, he kept circling his cave
 all around the outside, but no one was there
 in that wilderness to welcome his warfare
 and the business of battle. Soon he returned to his barrow,
 2300 sought his treasure; he soon discovered
 that some man had disturbed his gold,
 his great wealth. The hoard-guardian waited
 impatiently until evening came;
 the barrow's shepherd was swollen with rage,
 2305 the loathsome foe would repay with fire
 his precious drinking-cup. Then day was departed
 to the delight of that worm; he did not linger
 on the barrow wall, but took off burning
 in a burst of flames. The beginning was terror
 2310 to the people on land, and to their ring-giving lord
 the ending soon would be sore indeed.

33

Then that strange visitor began to spew flames
 and burn the bright courts; his burning gleams
 struck horror in men. That hostile flier
 2315 would leave nothing alive.
 The worm's warfare was widely seen,
 his ferocious hostility, near and far,
 how the destroyer hated and harmed
 the Geatish people, then hastened to his hoard,
 2320 his dark and hidden hall, before the break of day.
 He had surrounded the people of that region with fire,
 flames and cinders; he took shelter in his barrow,
 his walls and warfare—but that trust failed him.

To Beowulf the news was quickly brought
 2325 of that horror—that his own home,
 best of buildings, had burned in waves of fire,
 the gift-throne of the Geats. To the good man that was
 painful in spirit, greatest of sorrows;
 the wise one believed he had bitterly offended
 2330 the Ruler of all, the eternal Lord,

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

against the old law; his breast within groaned
with dark thoughts—that was not his custom.
The fire-dragon had found the stronghold of that folk,
that fortress, and had razed it with flames
2335 entirely and from without; for that the war-king,
prince of the Weders, devised revenge.

Then the lord of men bade them make,
protector of warriors, a wondrous war-shield,
all covered with iron; he understood well
2340 that wood from the forest would not help him,
linden against flames. The long-good nobleman
had to endure the end of his loaned days,
this world's life—and so did the worm,
though he had held for so long his hoarded wealth.

2345 Then that prince of rings scorned to seek out
the far-flung flier with his full force of men,
a large army; he did not dread that attack,
nor did he worry much about the dragon's warfare,
his strength or valor, because he had survived
2350 many battles, barely escaping alive
in the crash of war, after he had cleansed,
triumphant hero, the hall of Hrothgar,
and at battle crushed Grendel and his kin,
that loathsome race.

It was not the least
2355 of hand-to-hand combats when Hygelac was slain,
when the king of the Geats, in the chaos of battle,
the lord of his people, in the land of the Frisians,
the son of Hrethel, died sword-drunk,
beaten by blades. Beowulf escaped from there
2360 through his own strength, took a long swim;
he had in his arms the battle-armor
of thirty men, when he climbed to the cliffs.
By no means did the Hetware¹ need to exult
in that fight, when they marched on foot to him,
2365 bore their linden shields; few came back
from that brave soldier to seek their homes.
The son of Ecgtheow crossed the vast sea,
wretched, solitary, returned to his people,
where Hygd offered him the hoard and kingdom,
2370 rings and royal throne; she did not trust
that her son could hold the ancestral seat
against foreign hosts, now that Hygelac was dead.
But despite their misery, by no means

¹ *Hetware* A Frankish tribe apparently on the side of the Frisians.

could they prevail upon that prince at all
2375 that he should become lord over Heardred,
or choose to rule the kingdom.
Yet he upheld him² in the folk with friendly counsel,
good will and honors, until he was older,
and ruled the Weder-Geats.

Wretched exiles,
2380 the sons of Ohthere,³ sought him out across the seas;
they had rebelled against the Scylfings' ruler,⁴
the best of all the sea-kings
who dispensed treasure in the Swedish lands,
a famous king. That cost him⁵ his life:
2385 for his hospitality he took a mortal hurt
with the stroke of a sword, that son of Hygelac;
and the son of Ongentheow afterwards went
to seek out his home, once Heardred lay dead,
and let Beowulf hold the high throne
2390 and rule the Geats—that was a good king.

34

In later days he⁶ did not forget
that prince's fall, and befriended Eadgils
the wretched exile; across the open sea
he gave support to the son of Ohthere
2395 with warriors and weapons. He⁷ wreaked his revenge
with cold sad journeys, and took the king's life.

And so the son of Ecgtheow had survived
every struggle, every terrible onslaught,
with brave deeds, until that one day
2400 when he had to take his stand against the serpent.

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

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

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

⁵ *him* I.e., Heardred.

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

⁷ *He* I.e., Eadgils.

Grim and enraged, the lord of the Geats
 took a dozen men¹ to seek out the dragon;
 he had found out by then how the feud arose,
 the baleful violence; the precious vessel
 2405 had come to him through the thief's hands.
 He was the thirteenth man among that troop,
 who had brought about the beginning of that strife,
 a sad-minded captive—wretched and despised
 he led the way to that plain. He went against his will
 2410 to where he alone knew the earth-hall stood,
 an underground cave near the crashing waves,
 the surging sea; inside it was full
 of gems and metal bands. A monstrous guardian,
 eager for combat, kept his gold treasures
 2415 ancient under the ground; getting them
 was no easy bargain for any man.

The battle-hardened king sat down on the cape,
 then wished good health to his hearth-companions,
 the gold-friend of the Geats. His heart was grieving,
 2420 restless and ripe for death—the doom was
 immeasurably near

that was coming to meet that old man,
 seek his soul's treasure, split asunder
 his life and his body; not for long was
 the spirit of that noble king enclosed in its flesh.

2425 Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
 "In my youth I survived many storms of battle,
 times of strife—I still remember them all.
 I was seven years old when the prince of treasures,
 friend to his people, took me from my father;²
 2430 Hrethel the king held me and kept me,
 gave me gems and feasts, remembered our kinship.
 I was no more hated to him while he lived
 —a man in his stronghold—than any of his sons,
 Herebeald and Hæthcyn and my own Hygelac.
 2435 For the eldest,³ undeservedly,
 a death-bed was made by the deeds of a kinsman,
 after Hæthcyn with his horn bow
 struck down his own dear lord with an arrow—
 he missed his mark and murdered his kinsman,

¹ *a dozen men* Literally "one of twelve"—Beowulf, Wiglaf, and ten others. The thief who leads the way is the thirteenth man.

² *took me ... father* Beowulf was brought up as a noble foster-child in the royal court.

³ *eldest* I.e., Herebeald.

2440 one brother to the other with a bloody shaft.
 That was a fight beyond settling, a sinful crime,
 shattering the heart; yet it had to be
 that a nobleman lost his life unavenged.

"So it is sad for an old man

2445 to live to see his young son
 ride on the gallows⁴—then let him recount a story,
 a sorry song, when his son hangs
 of comfort only to the ravens, and he cannot,
 though old and wise, offer him any help.

2450 Each and every morning calls to mind
 his son's passing away; he will not care
 to wait for any other heir or offspring
 in his fortress, when the first one has
 tasted evil deeds and fell death.

2455 He looks sorrowfully on his son's dwelling,
 the deserted wine-hall, the windswept home,
 bereft of joy—the riders sleep,
 heroes in their graves; there is no harp-music,
 no laughter in the court, as there had been long before.

35

2460 "He takes to his couch and keens a lament
 all alone for his lost one; all too vast to him
 seem the fields and townships.

So the protector of the Weders⁵

bore surging in his breast heartfelt sorrows
 for Herebeald. He could not in any way
 2465 make amends for the feud with his murderer,
 but neither could he hate that warrior
 for his hostile deeds, though he was not dear to him.
 Then with the sorrow which befell him too sorely,
 he gave up man's joys, chose God's light;⁶

2470 he left to his children his land and strongholds
 —as a blessed man does—when he departed this life.

⁴ *So it is ... gallows* It is usually suggested that this is a kind of epic simile, comparing Hrethel's grief over his son's death—a death beyond the scope of vengeance—to the grief of a criminal's father, who cannot claim compensation for the execution of his son. Mitchell and Robinson suggest that this is rather a reference to a pagan practice, part of the cult of Odin (also known as "Woden"), in which the body of a man who did not die in battle was ritually hanged on a gallows. If this interpretation is correct, the "old man" is Hrethel himself.

⁵ *the protector of ... Weders* I.e., Hrethel.

⁶ *God's light* I.e., he died.

Then there was strife between Swedes and Geats,¹
 a quarrel in common across the wide water,
 hard hostility after Hrethel died,
 2475 until the sons of Ongentheow²
 were bold and warlike, wanted no peace
 over the sea, but around the Hill of Sorrows³
 they carried out a terrible and devious campaign.
 My friends and kinsmen got revenge for those
 2480 feuds and evils⁴—as it is said—
 although one of them paid for it with his own life,
 a hard bargain; that battle was fatal
 for Hæthcyn, king of the Geats.
 Then, I've heard, the next morning, one kinsman
 2485 avenged the other with the sword's edge,⁵
 when Ongentheow attacked Eofor;
 his battle-helm slipped, the old Scylfing
 staggered, corpse-pale; Eofor's hand recalled
 his fill of feuds, and did not withhold the fatal blow.
 2490 "I have paid in battle for the precious treasures
 he⁶ gave me, as was granted to me,
 with a gleaming sword; he gave me land,
 a joyous home. He had no need
 to have to go seeking among the Gifthas
 2495 or the Spear-Danes or the Swedes
 for a worse warrior, or buy one with his wealth;
 always on foot I would go before him,
 alone in the front line—and all my life
 I will wage war, while this sword endures,
 2500 which before and since has served me well,
 since I slew Dæghrefn, champion of the Hugas,⁷
 with my bare hands in front of the whole army.
 He could not carry off to the Frisian king

¹ *strife ... Geats* This refers to a time a generation before the conflicts of Heardred, Eanmund and Eadgils; the Swedish-Geatish feud is longstanding.

² *sons of Ongentheow* I.e., Ohthere and Onela.

³ *Hill of Sorrows* A hill in Geatland, in OE *Hreosnabeorh*.

⁴ *My friends ... evils* The scene of this revenge is apparently Sweden, in a place called "Ravenswood"; this battle is described again in sections 40 and 41.

⁵ *one kinsman ... sword's edge* Hygelac avenged the death of Hæthcyn on his slayer Ongentheow—not directly but through his man Eofor.

⁶ *he* I.e., Hygelac.

⁷ *Hugas* Frankish tribes allied to the Frisians; the battle in question may be the same as Hygelac's fatal raid.

that battle-armor and that breast-adornment,⁸
 2505 but there in the field the standard-bearer fell,
 a nobleman in his strength; no blade was his slayer,
 but my warlike grip broke his beating heart,
 cracked his bone-house. Now the blade's edge,
 hand and hard sword, shall fight for the hoard."

2510 Beowulf spoke, said boasting words
 for the very last time: "I have survived
 many battles in my youth; I will yet
 seek out, an old folk-guardian, a feud
 and do a glorious deed, if only that evildoer
 2515 will come out to me from his earth-hall."
 Then for the last time he saluted
 each of the soldiers, his own dear comrades,
 brave in their helmets: "I would not bear a sword
 or weapon to this serpent, if I knew any other way
 2520 I could grapple with this great beast⁹
 after my boast, as I once did with Grendel;
 but I expect the heat of battle-flames there,
 steam and venom; therefore shield and byrnie
 will I have on me. From the hoard's warden
 2525 I will not flee a single foot, but for us
 it shall be at the wall as *wyrd* decrees,
 the Ruler of every man. My mind is firm—
 I will forgo boasting against this flying foe.
 Wait on the barrow, protected in your byrnies,
 2530 men in war-gear, to see which of the two of us
 after the bloody onslaught can better
 bear his wounds. It is not your way,
 nor proper for any man except me alone,
 that he should match his strength against this monster,
 2535 do heroic deeds. With daring I shall
 get that gold—or grim death
 and fatal battle will bear away your lord!"

Then that brave challenger stood up by his shield,
 stern under his helmet, bore his battle-shirt
 2540 under the stone-cliffs, trusted the strength
 of a single man—such is not the coward's way.
 He saw then by the wall—he who had survived
 a great many conflicts, good in manly virtues,
 the crash of battles when footsoldiers clashed—
 2545 stone arches standing, and a stream

⁸ *breast-adornment* Possibly the same as the necklace described in 1195–1214.

⁹ *great beast* The OE word *æglecan* is here used of the dragon.

shooting forth from the barrow; its surge
 was hot with deadly flames, and near the hoard
 he could not survive for very long
 unburnt, for the dragon's flaming breath.
 2550 Enraged, the ruler of the Weder-Geats
 let a word burst forth from his breast,
 shouted starkly; the sound entered
 and resounded battle-clear under the gray stone.
 Hate was stirred up—the hoard-warden recognized
 2555 the voice of a man; there was no more time
 to sue for peace. First there issued
 the steam of that great creature out of the stone,
 hot battle-sweat; the earth bellowed.
 The warrior in the barrow turned his shield-board
 2560 against the grisly stranger, lord of the Geats,
 when the writhing beast's heart was roused
 to seek combat. The good war-king
 had drawn his sword, its edges undulled,
 an ancient heirloom; each of the two
 2565 hostile ones was horrified by the other.
 He stood stouthearted behind his steep shield,
 that friend and commander, when the worm coiled itself
 swiftly together—he waited in his war-gear.
 Then coiled, burning, slithering he came,
 2570 rushing to his fate. The shield defended well
 the life and limb of the famous lord
 for less time than he might have liked;
 there on that day for the first time
 he faced the outcome,¹ and *wyrð* did not
 2575 grant victory in battle. The lord of the Geats
 raised his hand, struck that mottled horror
 with his ancient sword, so that that edge failed
 bright against the bony scales, bit less strongly
 than the king of that nation needed it to do,
 2580 hard-pressed in battle. Then the barrow-warden
 was more savage after that battle-stroke,
 and spit out gruesome fire; wide sprang
 the battle-flames. The gold-friend of the Geats
 did not boast of his glorious victories; his bare sword
 2585 failed at need, as it should never have done,
 that ancient good iron. It was no easy journey
 for the famous son of Ecgtheow to agree
 to give up his ground in that place;

¹ *for the first time ... outcome* Or “if he could have controlled the outcome for the first time.”

he was forced, against his will, to find
 2590 a place of rest elsewhere—just as every one of us
 must give up these loaned days.

It was not long
 until those two great creatures² came together again.
 The hoard-guard took heart, his breast swelled with breath
 once again; he³ suffered anguish,
 2595 trapped by flames, he who had once ruled his folk.
 His comrades, hand-chosen, sons of noblemen,
 did not take their stand in a troop around him,
 with warlike valor—they fled to the woods
 and saved their lives. The spirit rose up in sorrow
 2600 in the heart of one of them; nothing can overrule
 kinship at all, in one who thinks well.

36

He was called Wiglaf, Weohstan's son,
 a worthy shield-warrior, a prince of the Scyldings,⁴
 kinsman of Ælfhere. He saw his liege-lord
 2605 suffer heat under his war-helmet;
 he recalled the honors he had received from him,
 the wealthy homestead of the Waegmundings,
 every folk-right that his father had possessed;
 he could not hold back—his hand seized
 2610 the pale linden shield, and he drew his old sword.
 It was known among men as the heirloom of Eanmund,
 son of Ohthere; that friendless exile
 was slain in battle with the edge of a sword
 by Weohstan, who brought to his kinsman
 2615 the burnished helmet, the ringed byrnie,
 the old giant-work sword; Onela gave to him
 the war-equipment of his young kinsman,
 the shining armor—he never spoke of a feud,
 though he had slain his brother's son.⁵

² *creatures* OE *aglæcan* again, here referring to Beowulf and the dragon together.

³ *he* I.e., Beowulf.

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

⁵ *he never ... brother's son* Onela never spoke of a feud, though Weohstan had killed Onela's brother's son, for he wished him dead. As elsewhere in the poem, a sword is the reminder of both victory and vengeance.

2620 He¹ kept that war-gear for a great many years,
 the blade and byrnie, until his boy could
 perform brave deeds like his father before him;
 he gave him among the Geats that battle-gear,
 every piece of it, when, old, he departed this life
 2625 and went forth. That was the first time
 that the young warrior had to weather
 the storm of battle beside his noble lord.
 His courage did not melt, nor did his kinsman's legacy
 weaken in war; the worm discovered that,
 2630 when they began to meet together.

Wiglaf spoke, said to his companions
 many true words—he was mournful at heart—
 “I remember the time that we took mead together,
 when we made promises to our prince
 2635 in the beer-hall—he gave us these rings—
 that we would pay him back for this battle-gear,
 these helmets and hard swords, if such a need
 as this ever befell him. For this he chose us from the army
 for this adventure by his own will,
 2640 thought us worthy of glory, and gave me these treasures—
 for this he considered us good spear-warriors,
 proud helmet-wearers, even though our prince,
 shepherd of his people, intended to perform
 this act of courage all alone,
 2645 because he has gained the most glory among men,
 reckless heroic deeds. Now the day has come
 that our noble lord has need of the support
 of good warriors; let us go to it,
 help our warlord, despite the heat,
 2650 grim fire-terror. God knows for my part
 that I would much prefer that the flames should enfold
 my body alongside my gold-giving lord.

It seems wrong to me that we should bear shields
 back to our land, unless we first might
 2655 finish off this foe, defend the life
 of the prince of the Wēders. I know full well
 that he does not deserve to suffer
 this torment all alone among the Geatish troop,
 or fall in the struggle; now sword and helmet,
 2660 byrnie and battle-dress, shall be ours together!”

He hurried through the deadly fumes, bore his
 helmet
 to the aid of his lord, spoke little:

“Dear Beowulf, do all well,
 as in your youth you said you would,
 2665 that you would never let in your whole life
 your fame decline; now firm in deeds,
 single-minded nobleman, with all your strength
 you must protect your life—I will support you.”
 After these words the worm came angrily,
 2670 terrible vicious creature, a second time,
 scorched with surging flames, seeking out his enemies,
 the hated men. The hot flames rolled in waves,
 burned the shield to its rim; the byrnie was not
 of any use to the young soldier,
 2675 but he showed his courage under his kinsman's shield,
 the young warrior, when his own was
 charred to cinders. Still the battle-king
 remembered his glory, and with his mighty strength
 swung his warblade with savage force,
 2680 so that it stuck in the skull. Nægling shattered—
 the sword of Beowulf weakened at battle,
 ancient and gray. It was not granted to him
 that iron-edged weapons might ever
 help him in battle; his hand was too strong,
 2685 he who, I am told, overtaxed every blade
 with his mighty blows, when he bore to battle
 a wound-hardened² weapon—it was no help to him at all.

Then that threat to the people for a third time,
 fierce fire-dragon, remembering his feud,
 2690 rushed on the brave man, hot and bloodthirsty,
 when he saw the chance, seized him by the neck
 in his bitter jaws; he was bloodied
 by his mortal wounds—blood gushed in waves.

37

Then, I have heard, in his king's hour of need
 2695 the earl³ beside him showed his bravery,
 the noble skill which was his nature.
 He did not heed that head when he helped his kinsman;
 that brave man's hand was burned, so that
 he struck that savage foe a little lower down,
 2700 the soldier in armor, so that his sword plunged in
 bejeweled and bloody, so that the fire began
 to subside afterwards. The king himself

¹ *He* I.e., Weohstan.

² *wound-hardened* Or “wondrously hard”; the OE text is unclear.

³ *earl* I.e., Wiglaf.

still had his wits, drew the war-dagger,
bitter and battle-sharp, that he wore in his byrnie;
2705 the protector of the Weders carved through the
worm's midsection.

They felled their foe—their force took his life—
and they both together had brought him down,
the two noble kinsmen; a thane at need,
as a man should be! But that, for the prince, was
2710 his last work of victory, by his own will,
of worldly adventures.

When the wound
which the earth-dragon had worked on him
began to burn and swell, he soon realized
that in his breast, with an evil force,
2715 a poison welled; then the nobleman went,
still wise in thought, so that he sat
on a seat by the wall. On that work of giants he gazed,
saw how stone arches and sturdy pillars
held up the inside of that ancient earth-hall.
2720 Then with his hands the thane, immeasurably good,
bathed with water his beloved lord,
the great prince, spattered with gore,
sated with battle, and unstrapped his helmet.
Beowulf spoke—despite his wound,
2725 that deadly cut; he knew clearly
that his allotted life had run out,
and his joys in the earth; all gone
was his portion of days, death immeasurably near:

“Now I should wish to give my war-gear
2730 to my son, if there had been such,
flesh of my flesh, if fate had granted me
any heir. I held this people
fifty winters; there was no folk-king,
not any of the neighboring tribes,
2735 who dared to face me with hostile forces
or threaten fear. The decrees of fate
I awaited on earth, held well what was mine;
I sought no intrigues, nor swore many
false or wrongful oaths. For all that I may
2740 have joy, though sick with mortal wounds,
because the Ruler of men need not reproach me
with the murder of kinsmen, when my life
quits my body. Now go quickly
to look at the hoard under the hoary stone,
2745 dear Wiglaf, now that the worm lies dead,
sleeps with his wounds, stripped of his treasure.

Hurry, so I might witness that ancient wealth,
those golden goods, might eagerly gaze on
the bright precious gems, and I might more gently,
2750 for that great wealth, give up my
life and lordship, which I have held so long.”

38

Then swiftly, I have heard, the son of Weohstan
after these words obeyed his lord,
sick with wounds, wore his ring-net,
2755 the woven battle-shirt, under the barrow's roof.
As he went by the seat he saw there, triumphant,
the brave young warrior, many bright jewels,
glittering gold scattered on the ground,
wonders on the walls, and the lair of that worm,
2760 the old dawn-flier—flagons standing,
ancient serving-vessels without a steward,
their trappings all moldered; there was many a helmet
old and rusty, a number of arm-bands
with twisted ornaments.—Treasure may easily,
2765 gold in the ground, give the slip
to any one of us: let him hide it who will!¹—
Likewise he saw an ensign, all golden,
hanging high over the hoard, greatest hand-work,
linked together with skill; light gleamed from it
2770 so that he could see the cave's floor,
survey those strange artifacts. There was no sign
of the serpent there—a sword had finished him off.
Then the hoard in that barrow, as I've heard, was looted,
ancient work of giants, by one man alone;
2775 he piled in his arms cups and plates,
whatever he wanted; he took the ensign too,
brightest of beacons. His aged lord's blade
—its edge was iron— had earlier harmed
the one who was protector of those treasures
2780 for such a long time, who bore his fiery terror
flaming before the hoard, seething fiercely
in the darkest night, until he died a bloody death.

The messenger rushed out, eager to return,
burdened with treasures; he was burning to know
2785 whether, stout-hearted, he would find still alive

¹ *give the slip . . . who will* Or “can get the better of any man—heed [these words] who will!” The OE is uncertain; the translation follows Mitchell and Robinson.

the prince of the Weders, weakened by wounds,
in the place where he had left him on that plain.
Then with the treasures he found the famous prince,
his own lord, his life at an end,
2790 all bloody; he began once more
to sprinkle water on him, until the point of a word
escaped from his breast.

Old, full of grief, he looked on the gold:

“For all these treasures, I offer thanks

2795 with these words to the eternal Lord,
King of Glory, for what I gaze upon here,
that I was able to acquire such wealth
for my people before my death-day.

Now that I have sold my old lifespan

2800 for this hoard of treasures, they will attend¹
to the needs of the people; I can stay no longer.

The brave in battle will bid a tomb be built
shining over my pyre on the cliffs by the sea;

it will be as a monument to my people

2805 and tower high on Whale’s Head,

so that seafarers afterwards shall call it

‘Beowulf’s Barrow,’ when their broad ships
drive from afar over the darkness of the flood.”

The boldminded nobleman took from his neck

2810 a golden circlet, and gave it to the thane,

the young spear-carrier, and the gold-covered helmet,

ring and byrnie, bid him use them well:

“You are the last survivor of our lineage,

the Wægmundings; fate has swept away

2815 all of my kinsmen, earls in their courage,

to their final destiny; I must follow them.”

That was the last word of the old warrior,

his final thought before he chose the fire,

the hot surging flames—from his breast flew

2820 his soul to seek the judgment of the righteous.²

¹ *they will attend* Usually translated “you [Wiglaf] will attend . . .”; the OE verb may be indicative or imperative, but it is unambiguously plural, and the imperative plural is not used elsewhere in the poem to address a single person.

² *the judgment of the righteous* Literally “the *dom* (fame) of the truth-fast,” an ambiguous pronouncement. It is not clear whether this means that Beowulf’s soul will receive the sort of judgment that a righteous soul ought to receive (and so go to Heaven), or that it will be judged by those “fast in truth” (and so go to Hell as an unbaptized pagan).

Then it came to pass with piercing sorrow
that the young warrior had to watch
his most precious lord fare so pitifully,
his life at an end. Likewise his slayer lay dead,
2825 the awesome earth-dragon deprived of his life,
overcome by force. The coiled serpent
could no longer rule his hoard of rings—
edges of iron did away with him,
the hard, battle-scarred shards of the smithy,
2830 so that the wide-flier, stilled by his wounds,
toppled to the ground near his treasure-house.
No more soaring about in the skies
at midnight, preening in his precious treasures,
showing his face—he fell to earth
2835 through that war-commander’s handiwork.
Indeed, few men on earth, no matter how strong,
could succeed at that, as I have heard tell,
though he were daring in every deed,
could rush against the reek of that venomous foe,
2840 or rifle through that ring-hall with his hands,
if he should find a waking warden
waiting in that barrow. Beowulf’s share
of that royal treasure was repaid by his death—
each of them had journeyed to the end
2845 of this loaned life.

It was not long before
the men late for battle left the woods,
ten of those weak traitors all together
who had not dared to hoist their spears
when their lord of men needed them most;
2850 now shamefaced, they carried their shields
and battledress to where the old man lay dead,
to stare at Wiglaf. He sat exhausted,
a foot-soldier at his lord’s shoulder,
tried to rouse him with water—but it was no use.
2855 He could not, no matter how much he wanted,
keep the life in the body of his captain,
nor change any bit of the Ruler’s decree;
the judgment of God would guide the deeds
of every man, as it still does today.
2860 Then it was easy to get a grim answer
from that youth to those who gave up courage.
Wiglaf spoke, son of Weohstan,
looked, sad-hearted, on those unloved:

2865 “He can say—o yes—who would speak the truth
 that the liege-lord who gave you those gifts of treasures,
 the military gear that you stand in there,
 when on the ale-benches he often handed out
 helmets and byrnies to the hall-sitters,
 a lord to his followers, whatever he could find
 2870 finest anywhere, far or near—
 that all that battle-dress he absolutely
 and entirely threw away, when war beset him.
 Our nation’s king had no need to boast
 of his comrades-in-arms! But the Ruler of victories
 2875 allowed that he, alone with his blade,
 might avenge himself when he needed your valor.
 Only a little life-protection could I offer
 him in battle, but began nevertheless
 to support my kinsman beyond my own strength;
 2880 ever the worse was the deadly enemy
 when I struck with my sword, a fire less severe
 surging from his head. Too few supporters
 thronged around our prince in his great peril.
 Now the getting of treasure, the giving of swords,
 2885 and all the happy joys of your homeland
 shall end for your race; empty-handed
 will go every man among your tribe,
 deprived of his land-rights, when noblemen learn
 far and wide of your flight,
 2890 your inglorious deed. Death is better
 for any earl than a life of dishonor!”

40

He bade that the battle-work be announced to
 the camp
 up by the cliff’s edge, where that troop of earls,
 shield-bearers, sat sad-minded
 2895 all the long morning, expecting either
 the final day of their dear lord
 or his homecoming. He who rode up to the cape
 was not at all silent with his new tidings,
 but he spoke truly in the hearing of all:
 2900 “Now is the joy-giver of the Geatish people,
 the lord of the Weders, laid on his deathbed,
 holding a place of slaughter by the serpent’s deeds;
 beside him lies his life-enemy,
 sick with knife-slashes; he could not with his sword

2905 make in the monstrous beast
 any kind of wound. Wiglaf sits,
 Weohstan’s offspring, over Beowulf,
 one earl over the other, now dead;
 he holds with desperate heart the watch
 2910 over friend and foe.

Now this folk may expect
 a time of trouble, when this is manifest
 to the Franks and Frisians, and the fall of our king
 becomes widespread news. The strife was begun
 hard with the Hugas, after Hygelac came
 2915 travelling with his ships to the shores of Frisia,
 where the Hetware attacked him in war,
 advanced with valor and a vaster force,
 so that the warrior in his byrnie had to bow down,
 and fell amid the infantry; not at all did that lord
 2920 give treasure to his troops. Ever after that
 the Merovingians have not shown mercy to us.

“Nor do I expect any peace or truce
 from the Swedish nation, but it has been well-known
 that Ongentheow ended the life
 2925 of Hæthcyn, son of Hrethel, in Ravenswood,
 when in their arrogant pride the Geatish people
 first sought out the Battle-Scylfings.
 Immediately the ancient father of Ohthere,
 old and terrifying, returned the attack—
 2930 the old warrior cut down the sea-captain,¹
 rescued his wife, bereft of her gold,
 Onela’s mother and Ohthere’s;
 and then hunted down his deadly enemies
 until they escaped, with some difficulty,
 2935 bereft of their lord, into Ravenswood.
 With his standing army he besieged those sword-leavings,
 weary, wounded; he kept threatening woe
 to that wretched troop the whole night through—
 in the morning, he said, with the edge of his sword
 2940 he would gut them, and leave some on the gallows-tree
 as sport for birds. But for those sad-hearted men
 solace came along with the sunrise,
 after they heard Hygelac’s horn and trumpet
 2945 sounding the charge, when the good man came
 following the trail of that people’s troop.

¹ *old warrior . . . sea-captain* Ongentheow killed Hæthcyn. Hygelac is not present at this battle, but arrives later.

“The bloody swath of the Swedes and Geats,
 the slaughter of men, was easily seen,
 how the folk had stirred up feud between them.
 That good man¹ then departed, old, desperate,
 2950 with a small band of kinsmen, sought his stronghold,
 the earl Ongentheow turned farther away;
 he had heard of proud Hygelac’s prowess in battle,
 his war-skill; he did not trust the resistance
 he might muster against the seafarers’ might
 2955 to defend from the wave-borne warriors his treasure,
 his women and children; he ran away from there,
 old, into his fortress. Then the pursuit was offered
 to the Swedish people, the standard of Hygelac
 overran the place of refuge,
 2960 after the Hrethlings thronged the enclosure.
 There with the edge of a sword was Ongentheow,
 old graybeard, brought to bay,
 so that the king of that nation had to yield
 to Eofor’s will. Angrily he struck;
 2965 Wulf the son of Wonred lashed at him with his weapon,
 so that with his blow the blood sprang in streams
 from under his hair. Yet the ancient Scylfing
 was undaunted, and dealt back quickly
 a worse exchange for that savage stroke,
 2970 once the ruler of that people turned around.
 The ready son of Wonred could not
 give a stroke in return to the old soldier,
 for he had cut through the helmet right on his head
 so that he collapsed, covered in blood,
 2975 fell to the ground—he was not yet fated to die,
 but he recovered, though the cut hurt him.
 The hardy thane of Hygelac² then let
 his broad blade, as his brother lay there,
 his ancient giant-made sword, shatter that gigantic helmet
 2980 over the shield-wall; then the king stumbled,
 shepherd of his people, mortally stricken.
 There were many there who bandaged his³
 kinsman,
 quickly raised him up, when a way was clear for them,
 so that they had control of that killing field.

¹ *good man* I.e., Ongentheow.

² *thane of Hygelac* I.e., Eofor, Wulf’s brother.

³ *his* I.e., Eofor’s.

2985 Then one warrior plundered another,⁴
 took from Ongentheow the iron byrnie,
 his hard hilted sword and his helmet too,
 and carried the old man’s armor to Hygelac.
 He⁵ took that war-gear and promised him gifts
 2990 among his people—and he kept that promise;
 the king of the Geats repaid that carnage,
 the offspring of Hrethel, when he made it home,
 gave to Eofor and Wulf extravagant treasures,
 gave them each lands and locked rings,
 2995 worth a hundred thousand. Not a man in this world
 could
 reproach those rewards, since they had won them
 with their deeds;
 and to Eofor he gave his only daughter,
 the pride of his home, as a pledge of his friendship.
 “That is the feud and the fierce enmity,
 3000 savage hatred among men, that I expect now,
 when the Swedish people seek us out
 after they have learned that our lord
 has perished, who had once protected
 his hoard and kingdom against all hostility,
 3005 after the fall of heroes, the valiant Scyldings,⁶
 worked for the people’s good, and what is more,
 performed noble deeds. Now we must hurry
 and look upon our people’s king,
 and go with him who gave us rings
 3010 on the way to the pyre. No small part
 of the hoard shall burn with that brave man,
 but countless gold treasures, grimly purchased,
 and rings, here at last with his own life
 paid for; then the flames shall devour,
 3015 the fire enfold—let no warrior wear
 treasures for remembrance, nor no fair maiden
 have a ring-ornament around her neck,
 but sad in mind, stripped of gold, she must
 walk a foreign path, not once but often,
 3020 now that leader of our troop has laid aside laughter,

⁴ *one ... another* Eofor plundered Ongentheow.

⁵ *He* I.e., Hygelac.

⁶ *Scyldings* The manuscript reading (“Scyldings” is a further object of “protected”) is often emended to *Scylfingas*, i.e., Swedes, or *scildwigan*, “shield-warriors”; the present reading is that of Mitchell and Robinson. As it stands in the manuscript the Geatish herald is referring to Beowulf’s earlier adventures against Grendel and his mother.

his mirth and joy. Thus many a cold morning
 shall the spear be grasped in frozen fingers,
 hefted by hands, nor shall the sound of the harp
 rouse the warriors, but the dark raven,
 3025 greedy for carrion, shall speak a great deal,
 ask the eagle how he fared at his feast
 when he plundered corpses with the wolf.¹

Thus that brave speaker was speaking
 a most unlovely truth; he did not lie much
 3030 in words or facts. The troop of warriors arose;
 they went, unhappy, to the Cape of Eagles,
 with welling tears to look at that wonder.
 There on the sand they found the soulless body
 of the one who gave them rings in earlier times
 3035 laid out to rest; the last day
 had come for the good man, when the war-king,
 prince of the Weders, died a wondrous death.
 But first they saw an even stranger creature,
 a loathsome serpent lying on the plain
 3040 directly across from him; grim with his colors
 the fire-dragon was, and scorched with his flames.
 He was fifty feet long, lying there
 stretched out; once he had joy in the air
 in the dark night, and then down he would go
 3045 to seek his den, but now he was fast in death;
 he had come to the end of his cave-dwelling.
 Cups and vessels stood beside him,
 plates lay there and precious swords,
 eaten through with rust, as if in the bosom of the earth
 3050 they had lain for a thousand winters;
 all that inheritance was deeply enchanted,
 the gold of the ancients was gripped in a spell
 so that no man in the world would be able to touch
 that ring-hall, unless God himself,
 3055 the true King of Victories, Protector of men,
 granted to whomever He wished to open the hoard,
 to whatever person seemed proper to Him.²

¹ *the dark raven ... the wolf* The eagle, wolf, and raven, the “beasts of battle,” are a recurring motif in Old English poetry.

² *unless God himself ... proper to Him* The power of the pagan spell can be overruled by the will of the true God.

Then it was plain that the journey did not profit
 the one³ who had wrongfully hidden under a wall
 3060 that great treasure. The guardian had slain
 that one and few others;⁴ then that feud was
 swiftly avenged. It is a wonder to say
 where a valiant earl should meet the end
 of his span of life, when he may no longer
 3065 dwell in the meadhall, a man with his kinsmen.
 So it was with Beowulf, when he sought the barrow’s
 guardian
 and a hostile fight; even he did not know
 how his parting from life should come to pass,
 since until doomsday mighty princes had deeply
 3070 pronounced, when they placed it there,
 that the man who plundered that place would be
 harried by hostile demons, fast in hellish bonds,
 grievously tortured, guilty of sins,
 unless the Owner’s grace had earlier
 3075 more readily favored the one eager for gold.⁵

Wiglaf spoke, son of Weohstan:
 “Often many earls must suffer misery
 through the will of one man, as we have now seen.
 We could not persuade our dear prince,
 3080 shepherd of a kingdom, with any counsel,
 that he should not greet that gold-guardian,
 let him lie there where he long had been,
 inhabit the dwellings until the end of the world:
 he held to his high destiny. The hoard is opened,
 3085 grimly gotten; that fate was too great
 which impelled the king of our people thither.
 I was in there, and looked over it all,
 the hall’s ornaments, when a way was open to me;
 by no means gently was a journey allowed
 3090 in under that earth-wall. In eager haste I seized
 in my hands a great mighty burden

³ *the one* I.e., the dragon.

⁴ *that one and few others* Or “that one of a few,” i.e., “a unique man” or “a man of rare greatness.”

⁵ *favored the one eager for gold* The OE text is corrupt and the precise meaning of this passage is not certain; the present translation tries to incorporate several suggested interpretations. The general sense seems to be clear enough—the gold was cursed, and only God’s special grace would enable anyone to remove it. What this implies about Beowulf’s failure, and his moral status, is less clear.

of hoard-treasure, and bore it out hither
 to my king. He was still conscious then,
 thoughtful and alert; he spoke of many things,
 3095 an old man in his sorrow, and ordered that I greet you;
 he asked that you build a great high barrow
 for your prince's deeds, in the place of his pyre,
 mighty and glorious, since he was of men
 the most worthy warrior throughout the wide world,
 3100 while he could enjoy the wealth of a hall.
 Let us now make haste for one more time
 to see and seek out that store of cunning gems,
 the wonder under the wall; I will direct you
 so that you can inspect them up close,
 3105 abundant rings and broad gold. Let the bier be ready,
 quickly prepared, when we come out,
 then let us bear our beloved lord,
 that dear man, to where he must long
 rest in the keeping of the Ruler."

3110 Then the son of Weohstan, brave battle-warrior,
 let it be made known to many heroes
 and householders that they should bring from afar
 the wood for the pyre to that good one,¹
 the leader of his folk: "Now the flames must devour,
 3115 the black blaze rise over the ruler of warriors,
 who often awaited the showers of iron
 when the storm of arrows hurled from bow-strings
 shot over the wall, the shafts did their duty
 swift on feather-wings, sent on the arrow-heads."

3120 Lo, then the wise son of Weohstan
 summoned from that host some of the best
 of the king's thanes, seven altogether;
 he went, one of eight, under that evil roof;
 one of the brave warriors bore in his hands
 3125 a flaming torch, and went before them.
 It was not chosen by lots who should loot that hoard,²
 once the men saw it sitting in the hall,
 every part of it unprotected,
 lying there wasting; there was little lament
 3130 that they should have to hurry out with
 the precious treasures. They also pushed the dragon,
 the worm, over the cliff-wall, let the waves take him,
 the flood embrace the guard of that finery;

¹ *that good one* I.e., the dead Beowulf.

² *It was not chosen ... hoard* I.e., everybody had a share; there was enough for all.

then the twisted gold, an uncountable treasure,
 3135 was loaded in a wagon, and the noble one was carried,
 the gray-haired warrior, to the Cape of Whales.

43

The people of the Geats then prepared for him
 a splendid pyre upon the earth,
 hung with battle-shields and helmets
 3140 and bright byrnies, as he had bidden;
 there in the middle they laid the mighty prince,
 the heroes lamenting their dear lord.
 Then the warriors kindled there on the cliff
 the greatest of funeral pyres; dark over the flames
 3145 the woodsmoke rose, the roaring fire
 mingled with weeping—the wind lay still—
 until it had broken that bone-house
 hot at the heart. With heavy spirits
 they mourned their despair, the death of their lord;
 3150 and a sorrowful song sang the Geatish woman,³
 with hair bound up, for Beowulf the king,
 with sad cares, earnestly said
 that she dreaded the hard days ahead,
 the times of slaughter, the host's terror,
 3155 harm and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

Then the Weder people wrought for him
 a barrow on the headland; it was high and broad,
 visible from afar to sea-voyagers,
 and in ten days they built the beacon
 3160 of that battle-brave one; the ashes of the flames
 they enclosed with a wall, as worthily
 as the most clever of men could devise it.
 In the barrow they placed rings and bright jewels,
 all the trappings that those reckless men
 3165 had seized from the hoard before,
 let the earth hold the treasures of earls,
 gold in the ground, where it yet remains,
 just as useless to men as it was before.
 Then round the mound rode the battle-brave men,
 3170 offspring of noblemen, twelve in all;
 they wished to voice their cares and mourn their king,

³ *Geatish woman* The manuscript is damaged throughout this section and the readings in this passage are conjectural; it is not clear who the "Geatish woman" is, though her advanced age is indicated by her bound-up hair. Typically, in Germanic poetry, it is women (and poets) who mourn.

utter sad songs and speak of that man;
 they praised his lordship and his proud deeds,
 judged well his prowess. As it is proper
 3175 that one should praise his lord with words,
 should love him in his heart when the fatal hour comes,
 when he must from his body be led forth,

so the men of the Geats lamented
 the fall of their prince, those hearth-companions;
 3180 they said that he was of all the kings of the world
 the mildest of men and the most gentle,
 the kindest to his folk and the most eager for fame.

IN CONTEXT

Background Material

Glossary of Proper Names

Abel	slain by his brother Cain ; the story is told in Genesis 4.1–16
Ælfhere	kinsman of Wiglaf
Æschere	a prominent Dane, advisor to Hrothgar ; slain by Grendel's mother
Battle-Scyldings	see Scyldings
Battle-Scylfings	see Scylfings
Beanstan	father of Breca
Beowulf	(prologue) Danish king, son of Scyld
Breca	engaged in a youthful swimming contest with Beowulf
Bright-Danes	see Danes
Brondings	the people of Breca
Brosinga	makers of the magical necklace of Freya in Norse myth, to which a necklace in the story is compared
Cain	slayer of Abel in Genesis 4.1–16; father of the race of monsters
Dæghrefn	a warrior of the Hugas slain by Beowulf in hand-to-hand combat during Hygelac's ill-fated raid on Frisia
Danes	Hrothgar's people; the Scyldings ; also called Bright-, Half-, Ring-, Spear-, East-, West-, North-, and South-Danes
Eadgils	son of Ohthere , brother of Eanmund
Eanmund	son of Ohthere , brother of Eadgils ; slain by Weohstan
East-Danes	see Danes
Ecglaf	father of Unferth
Ecgtheow	father of Beowulf
Ecgwala	a Danish king; the “sons of Ecgwala” are the Danes
Eofor	a warrior of the Geats ; brother of Wulf ; slayer of Ongentheow
Eomer	son of Offa
Eormanric	king of the Ostrogoths
Eotens	unclear: perhaps the Jutes , perhaps the Frisians , perhaps “giants” (the literal meaning of the word) as a nickname for one group or the other
Finn	king of the Frisians , husband of Hildeburh ; killed by Hengest
Finns	the people of Finland; the Lapps
Fitela	legendary companion, nephew (and son) of Sigemund
Folcwalda	father of Finn
Franks	a Germanic tribe; see Hetware , Hugas , Merovingians

The Geatish-Swedish Wars

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

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

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

1. Hæthcyn accidentally kills his brother Herebeald; their father Hrethel dies of grief (2432–71). Hæthcyn becomes king.
2. After the death of Hrethel, Ohthere and Onela, the sons of the Swedish king Ongentheow, attack the Geats (2472–78).
3. In retaliation, Hæthcyn attacks Ongentheow in Sweden (2479–84); at first he is successful, but later is killed at Ravenswood (2922–41). Hygelac's men Wulf and Eofor kill Ongentheow, and Hygelac (Hæthcyn's brother) is victorious (2484–89, 2942–99). Ohthere becomes king of the Swedes.
4. Hygelac is killed in Frisia; his son Heardred becomes king (2354–78).
5. Ohthere's brother Onela seizes the Swedish throne and drives out the sons of Ohthere, Eanmund and Eadgils (2379–84). Heardred takes in these exiles, and Onela attacks Heardred for this hospitality and kills him. Onela allows Beowulf to rule the Geats (2385–90).
6. Around this time Weohstan, father of Wiglaf, kills Eanmund on behalf of Onela (2611–19).
7. Eadgils escapes later to kill Onela in Sweden, with help sent by Beowulf (2391–96); he presumably becomes king of the Swedes.
8. During Beowulf's fifty-year reign, the death of Eanmund is unavenged. After Beowulf's death, Eanmund's brother Eadgils will probably seek vengeance against Wiglaf, son of Weohstan (2999–3005).