

BEOWULF

Only one copy of the poem that modern editors call *Beowulf* has survived, and it probably survived only by accident. A manuscript containing *Beowulf* and a small collection of other texts—a poetic treatment of the Old Testament story of Judith, a prose life of St. Christopher, and two treatises of fantastical geography known as *The Wonders of the East* and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*—was copied by two scribes, probably in the decade after 1000, in a monastic center somewhere in the south of England; it lay disregarded for centuries, narrowly escaped destruction by fire in 1731, and is now preserved in the British Library under the shelfmark Cotton Vitellius A.xv.

Beowulf is the longest surviving poem in Old English, consisting of 3,182 extant lines of alliterative verse divided into forty-four sections. Its language is allusive and embellished and its narrative digressive and complex, but its relatively straightforward plot follows the outlines of a folktale: a young hero who fights in isolation from friends and family engages in fabulous battles against monstrous foes, faces three challenges in ascending order of difficulty, and in the end wins glory and fame. The fabulous outlines of the story equally recall the deep undertones of myth: the mighty Beowulf may be a distant cousin of Thor, and his death may contain a hint of Ragnarok, the northern apocalypse.

But whatever its underlying structural patterns, *Beowulf* is neither myth nor folktale; its stories of dragon-slaying and night-battles are set against a complex background of legendary history. The action of the poem unfolds in a recognizable version of Scandinavia: Hrothgar's hall Heorot has been plausibly placed in the village of Lejre on the Danish island of Zealand; Beowulf's tribe of Geats may be the historical Gautar of Southern Sweden; and a number of the poem's characters (Heremod, Hrothgar, Ingeld, and Hygelac) are mentioned in other sources as if they were figures of history rather than fable. Moreover, *Beowulf* is an intensely political poem; the poet seems as intrigued by Danish diplomacy and the bitter feud between the Geats and Swedes as he is by the hero's monster-slaying. Kingdoms and successions, alliances and truces, loyalties and the tragically transient stability of heroic society are the poem's somber subtext, a theme traced less in the clashes of the battlefield than in the patterns of marriage and kin, in stories remembered and retold, in allusion and digression and pointed foreshadowing.

Despite the poem's historical interests, we cannot read *Beowulf* with any modern expectation of historical accuracy. Like many medieval works, *Beowulf* is frustratingly ambivalent—not quite mythical enough to be read apart from the history it purports to contain, nor historical enough to furnish clear evidence for the past it poetically recreates. The action of the poem is set in a somewhat vague heroic *geardagum* (“bygone days”), an age not meant to be counted on a calendar, nor its kingdoms and tribes marked on a map. Nor, undoubtedly, were the monstrous races of Grendels and dragons so clearly distinct in the poet's mind from the real dangers of the real world just beyond the margins of the known. While medieval authors certainly made distinctions between *historia* and *fabula*, the boundaries between these terms are not nearly as impermeable as those of our modern categories “history” and “fable.”

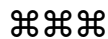
Both the ultimate and the immediate origins of *Beowulf* are unknown. Most scholars assume that the single surviving manuscript, written around 1000–20, is a copy of an earlier text, and probably the last in a long chain of copies. But it may be impossible to determine when that chain of texts began, or what cultural and literary milieu gave birth to the poem; proposed dates have ranged from 700 to 1000, and most years in between. The poem seems to arise from a world in which such stories were common, and it presupposes our own position in this world. The poem begins with the assumption that we are hearing a well-known story, or at least a story from a familiar milieu: “We have

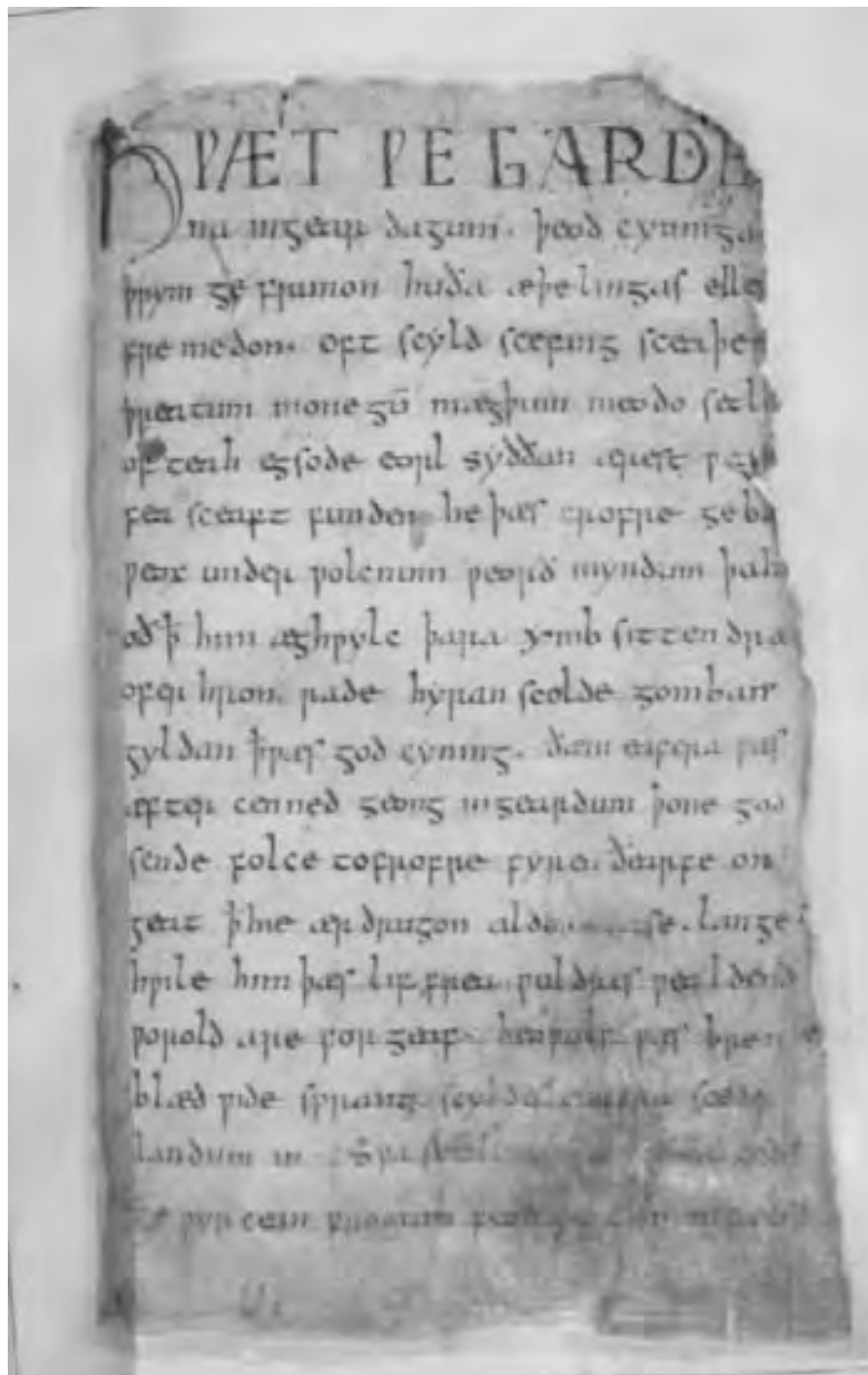
heard of the glory ... of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes," the poet asserts, and the way he tosses out cryptic allusions throughout the poem suggests that his audience was already familiar with songs and stories of other kings and heroes. But at what time in the history of the Anglo-Saxons did such a world exist? And can we trust the narrator as a faithful reporter of this world, or should we view him as a vivid creator of the illusion of antiquity?

The question of the origin of *Beowulf* is not just philological pedantry: the poem will yield very different meanings if it is imagined to have been produced in the time of Bede (c. 725, just a generation or two after the conversion of the English) or of Alfred (c. 880, a time of nation-building and political centralization) or of Ælfric (c. 1000, after half a century of monastic reform and a decade which saw the demoralizing collapse of national security). The earlier we think the poem to be, the more potentially authentic its historical material; the later we imagine it, the more openly fictional and nostalgic it seems. Moreover, the more closely we try to assign a date and place of origin to the poem, the more closely we read it as a text, the intention of a single author or a reflection of a particular ideology, rather than a product of a poetic art whose composition may have been oral and communal and whose traditional roots are beyond discovery.

Most critics agree that the heroic action of the poem is thoroughly accommodated to a world in which the truths of Christianity are accepted without question; they disagree, often sharply, on the meaning and purpose of that accommodation. Some scholars have argued that *Beowulf* is a type of Christ, because he gives his life for his people; others have read the poem as a condemnation of pagan pride, greed and violence. These two extreme positions capture the poem's deliberate ambivalence: *Beowulf* is a secular Christian poem about pagans which avoids the easy alternatives of automatic condemnation or enthusiastic anachronism. The person responsible for putting *Beowulf* in its final form was certainly a Christian: the technology of writing in the Anglo-Saxon period was almost entirely a monopoly of the church. The manuscript in which *Beowulf* survives contains a saint's legend and a versified Bible story, and the poet indicates a clear familiarity with the Bible and expects the same from his audience. Though the paganism of *Beowulf*'s world is downplayed, however, it is not denied; his age is connected to that of the audience but separated by the gulf of conversion and the seas of migration.

More recent work, rather than trying to define a single source for the poem's complex and peculiar texture (whether that source is pure Germanic paganism or orthodox Augustinian Christianity), recognizes that *Beowulf*, like the culture of the Anglo-Saxons themselves, reflects a variety of interdependent and competing influences and attitudes, even a certain tension inherent in the combination of biblical, patristic, secular Latin, and popular Germanic material. The search for a single unified "audience" of *Beowulf*, and with it a sense of a single meaning, has given way to a recognition that there were many readers in Anglo-Saxon England, often with competing and conflicting interests.





Beowulf, lines 1–21
 (British Library, Ms Cotton Vitellius A.xv, fol. 129r).

*Beowulf*¹

PROLOGUE

Listen!

We have heard of the glory in bygone days
of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes,²
how those noble lords did lofty deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing³ seized the mead-benches
5 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
10 over the whale's-riding⁴ 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,
15 the dire distress they had endured, lordless,
for such a long time. The Lord of Life,
Wielder of Glory, gave him worldly honor;
Beowulf,⁵ the son of Scyld, was renowned,
his fame spread wide in Scandinavian lands.
20 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
25 a man will prosper among any people.

Scyld passed away at his appointed hour,
the mighty lord went into the Lord's keeping;
they bore him down to the brimming sea,

¹ *Beowulf* This translation is by R.M. Liuzza, from the edition published by Broadview Press.

² *spear-Danes* The Danes are described by many different epithets in the poem.

³ *Scyld Scefing* The name means "Shield, Son of Sheaf" (i.e., of grain). The mysterious origins of Scyld, who seems to arrive providentially from nowhere and is returned to the sea after his death, have occasioned much critical speculation.

⁴ *whale's-riding* A condensed descriptive image of the sea—the riding-place of whales. Elsewhere the sea is the "gannet's bath" and the "swan's riding."

⁵ *Beowulf* Not the monster-slaying hero of the title, but an early Danish king. Many scholars argue that the original name was *Beow*.

his dear comrades, as he himself had commanded
30 while the friend of the Scyldings⁶ wielded speech—
that dear land-ruler had long held power.
In the harbor stood a ring-prowed ship,
icy, outbound, a nobleman's vessel;
there they laid down their dear lord,
35 dispenser of rings, in the bosom of the ship,
glorious, by the mast. There were many treasures
loaded there, adornments from distant lands;
I have never heard of a more lovely ship
bedecked with battle-weapons and war-gear,
40 blades and byrnies;⁷ in its bosom lay
many treasures, which were to travel
far with him into the keeping of the flood.
With no fewer gifts did they furnish him there,
the wealth of nations, than those did who
45 at his beginning first sent him forth
alone over the waves while still a small child.⁸
Then they set a golden ensign
high over his head, and let the waves have him,
gave him to the Deep with grieving spirits,
50 mournful in mind. Men do not know
how to say truly—not trusted counselors,
nor heroes under the heavens—who received that cargo.

I

Then Beowulf Scylding, beloved king,
was famous in the strongholds of his folk
55 for a long while—his father having passed away,
a lord from earth—until after him arose
the great Healfdene, who held the glorious Scyldings
all his life, ancient and fierce in battle.
Four children, all counted up,
60 were born to that bold leader of hosts:
Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga the Good,
I heard that ...⁹ was Onela's queen,

⁶ *Scyldings* The Danes, "sons of Scyld."

⁷ *byrnie* Coat of ring-mail.

⁸ *With no fewer ... small child* Scyld was found destitute—this statement is an example of *litotes*, or ironic understatement, not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

⁹ A name is missing from the manuscript here; it has been conjectured from parallel sources that it should be Yrse, or Ursula. The Swedish ("Scylfing") king Onela appears later in the story, causing much distress to Beowulf's nation.

dear bedfellow of the Battle-Scylfing.

Then success in war was given to Hrothgar,
 65 honor in battle, so that his beloved kinsmen
 eagerly served him, until the young soldiers grew
 into a mighty troop of men. It came to his mind
 that he should order a hall-building,
 have men make a great mead-house
 70 which the sons of men should remember forever,¹
 and there inside he would share everything
 with young and old that God had given him,
 except for the common land and the lives of men.
 Then the work, as I've heard, was widely proclaimed
 75 to many nations throughout this middle-earth,
 to come adorn the folk-stead. It came to pass
 swiftly among men, and it was soon ready,
 the greatest of halls; he gave it the name "Heorot,"²
 he who ruled widely with his words.

80 He remembered his boast; he gave out rings,
 treasure at table. The hall towered
 high and horn-gabled—it awaited hostile fires,
 the surges of war; the time was not yet near
 that the sword-hate of sworn in-laws
 85 should arise after ruthless violence.³

A bold demon who waited in darkness
 wretchedly suffered all the while,
 for every day he heard the joyful din
 loud in the hall, with the harp's sound,
 90 the clear song of the scop.⁴ He said
 who was able to tell of the origin of men
 that the Almighty created the earth,
 a bright and shining plain, by seas embraced,
 and set, triumphantly, the sun and moon
 95 to light their beams for those who dwell on land,
 adorned the distant corners of the world
 with leaves and branches, and made life also,
 all manner of creatures that live and move.

¹ *a great ... forever* Or "a greater meadhall / than the sons of men had ever heard of." The reading adopted here is that of Mitchell and Robinson.

² *Heorot* "Hart." An object recovered from the burial-mound at Sutton Hoo, perhaps a royal insignia, is surmounted by the image of a hart.

³ *it awaited ... violence* The hall Heorot is apparently fated to be destroyed in a battle between Hrothgar and his son-in-law Ingeld the Heathobard, a conflict predicted by Beowulf at 2024–69. The battle itself happens outside the action of the poem.

⁴ *scop* Poet-singer.

— Thus this lordly people lived in joy,
 100 blessedly, until one began
 to work his foul crimes—a fiend from Hell.
 This grim spirit was called Grendel,
 mighty stalker of the marches, who held
 the moors and fens; this miserable man
 105 lived for a time in the land of giants,
 after the Creator had condemned him
 among Cain's race—when he killed Abel⁵
 the eternal Lord avenged that death.
 No joy in that feud—the Maker forced him
 110 far from mankind for his foul crime.
 From thence arose all misbegotten things,
 trolls and elves and the living dead,
 and also the giants who strove against God
 for a long while—He gave them their reward for that.

2

115 When night descended he went to seek out
 the high house, to see how the Ring-Danes
 had bedded down after their beer-drinking.
 He found therein a troop of nobles
 asleep after the feast; they knew no sorrow
 120 or human misery. The unholy creature,
 grim and ravenous, was ready at once,
 ruthless and cruel, and took from their rest
 thirty thanes;⁶ thence he went
 rejoicing in his booty, back to his home,
 125 to seek out his abode with his fill of slaughter.
 When in the dim twilight just before dawn
 Grendel's warfare was made known to men,
 then lamentation was lifted up after the feasting,
 a great mourning-sound. Unhappy sat
 130 the mighty lord, long-good nobleman,
 suffered greatly, grieved for his thanes,
 once they beheld that hostile one's tracks,
 the accursed spirit; that strife was too strong,
 loathsome and long.

It was not longer
 135 than the next night until he committed
 a greater murder, mourned not at all
 for his feuds and sins—he was too fixed in them.

⁵ *Cain ... Abel* See Genesis 4.1–16.

⁶ *thanes* Companions of a king.

Then it was easy to find a thane
 who sought his rest elsewhere, farther away,
 140 a bed in the outbuildings,¹ when was pointed out—
 truly announced with clear tokens—
 that hall-thane's hate; he kept himself afterwards
 farther and safer, who escaped the fiend.
 So he ruled, and strove against right,
 145 one against all, until empty stood
 the best of houses. And so for a great while—
 for twelve long winters the lord of the Scyldings
 suffered his grief, every sort of woe,
 great sorrow, for to the sons of men
 150 it became known, and carried abroad
 in sad tales, that Grendel strove
 long with Hrothgar, bore his hatred,
 sins and feuds, for many seasons,
 perpetual conflict; he wanted no peace
 155 with any man of the Danish army,
 nor ceased his deadly hatred, nor settled with money,
 nor did any of the counselors need to expect
 bright compensation from the killer's hands,²
 for the great ravager relentlessly stalked,
 160 a dark death-shadow, lurked and struck
 old and young alike, in perpetual night
 held the misty moors. Men do not know
 whither such whispering demons wander about.
 Thus the foe of mankind, fearsome and solitary,
 165 often committed his many crimes,
 cruel humiliations; he occupied Heorot,
 the jewel-adorned hall, in the dark nights—
 he saw no need to salute the throne,
 he scorned the treasures; he did not know their love.³
 170 That was deep misery to the lord of the Danes,
 a breaking of spirit. Many a strong man sat

¹ *outbuildings* Hrothgar's hall is apparently surrounded by smaller buildings, including the women's quarters (see lines 662–5, 920–4). Under normal circumstances the men sleep together in the hall, ready for battle (1239–50).

² *bright compensation* Germanic and Anglo-Saxon law allowed that a murderer could make peace with the family of his victim by paying compensation, or *wergild*. The amount of compensation varied with the rank of the victim.

³ *Thus the foe... love* This is a much-disputed passage; this reading follows a suggestion made by Fred C. Robinson in "Why is Grendel's Not Greeting the *giftol a wrac micel?*" and repeated in Mitchell and Robinson's *Beowulf*.

in secret counsel, considered advice,
 what would be best for the brave at heart
 to save themselves from the sudden attacks.
 175 At times they offered honor to idols
 at pagan temples, prayed aloud
 that the soul-slayer⁴ might offer assistance
 in the country's distress. Such was their custom,
 the hope of heathens—they remembered Hell
 180 in their minds, they did not know the Maker,
 the Judge of deeds, they did not know the Lord God,
 or even how to praise the heavenly Protector,
 Wielder of glory. Woe unto him
 who must thrust his soul through wicked force
 185 in the fire's embrace, expect no comfort,
 no way to change at all! It shall be well for him
 who can seek the Lord after his deathday
 and find security in the Father's embrace.

3

With the sorrows of that time the son of Healfdene⁵
 190 seethed constantly; nor could the wise hero
 turn aside his woe—too great was the strife,
 long and loathsome, which befell that nation,
 violent, grim, cruel, greatest of night-evils.
 Then from his home the thane of Hygelac,⁶
 195 a good man among the Geats, heard of Grendel's deeds—
 he was of mankind the strongest of might
 in those days of this life,
 noble and mighty. He commanded to be made
 a good wave-crosser, said that that war-king
 200 he would seek out over the swan's-riding,
 the renowned prince, when he was in need of men.
 Wise men did not dissuade him at all
 from that journey, though he was dear to them;
 they encouraged his bold spirit, inspected the omens.
 205 From the Geatish nation that good man
 had chosen the boldest champions, the best
 he could find; one of fifteen,
 he sought the sea-wood. A wise sailor
 showed the way to the edge of the shore.
 210 The time came—the craft was on the waves,

⁴ *soul-slayer* The Devil.

⁵ *son of Healfdene* I.e., Hrothgar.

⁶ *thane of Hygelac* I.e., Beowulf.

moored under the cliffs. Eager men
 climbed on the prow—the currents eddied,
 sea against sand—the soldiers bore
 into the bosom of the ship their bright gear,
 215 fine polished armor; the men pushed off
 on their wished-for journey in that wooden vessel.
 Over the billowing waves, urged by the wind,
 the foamy-necked floater flew like a bird,
 until in due time on the second day
 220 the curved-prowed vessel had come so far
 that the seafarers sighted land,
 shining shore-cliffs, steep mountains,
 wide headlands—then the waves were crossed,
 the journey at an end. Thence up quickly
 225 the people of the Weders¹ climbed onto the plain,
 moored their ship, shook out their mail-shirts,
 their battle-garments; they thanked God
 that the sea-paths had been smooth for them.

When from the wall the Scyldings' watchman,
 230 whose duty it was to watch the sea-cliffs,
 saw them bear down the gangplank bright shields,
 ready battle-gear, he was bursting with curiosity
 in his mind to know who these men were.
 This thane of Hrothgar rode his horse
 235 down to the shore, and shook mightily
 his strong spear, and spoke a challenge:
 "What are you, warriors in armor, wearing
 coats of mail, who have come thus sailing
 over the sea-road in a tall ship,
 240 hither over the waves? Long have I been
 the coast-warden, and kept sea-watch
 so that no enemies with fleets and armies
 should ever attack the land of the Danes.
 Never more openly have there ever come
 245 shield-bearers here, nor have you heard
 any word of leave from our warriors
 or consent of kinsmen. I have never seen
 a greater earl on earth than that one among you,
 a man in war-gear; that is no mere courtier,
 250 honored only in weapons—unless his looks belie him,
 his noble appearance! Now I must know
 your lineage, lest you go hence
 as false spies, travel further
 into Danish territory. Now, you sea-travelers

255 from a far-off land, listen to my
 simple thought—the sooner the better,
 you must make clear from whence you have come."

4

The eldest one answered him,
 leader of the troop, unlocked his word-board:
 260 "We are men of the Geatish nation
 and Hygelac's hearth-companions.
 My father was well-known among men,
 a noble commander named Ecgtheow;
 he saw many winters before he passed away,
 265 ancient, from the court; nearly everyone
 throughout the world remembers him well.
 With a friendly heart have we come
 seeking your lord, the son of Healfdene,
 guardian of his people; be of good counsel to us!
 270 We have a great mission to that famous man,
 ruler of the Danes; nor should any of it be
 hidden, I think. You know, if things are
 as we have truly heard tell,
 that among the Scyldings some sort of enemy,
 275 hidden evildoer, in the dark nights
 manifests his terrible and mysterious violence,
 shame and slaughter. With a generous spirit
 I can counsel Hrothgar, advise him how,
 wise old king, he may overcome this fiend—
 280 if a change should ever come for him,
 a remedy for the evil of his afflictions,
 and his seething cares turn cooler;
 or forever afterwards a time of anguish
 he shall suffer, his sad necessity, while there stands
 285 in its high place the best of houses."

The watchman spoke, as he sat on his horse,
 a fearless officer: "A sharp shield-warrior
 must be a judge of both things,
 words and deeds, if he would think well.
 290 I understand that to the Scylding lord
 you are a friendly force. Go forth, and bear
 weapons and armor—I shall guide your way;
 and I will command my young companions
 to guard honorably against all enemies
 295 your ship, newly-tarred, upon the sand,
 to watch it until the curved-necked wood
 bears hence across the ocean-streams

¹ *Weders* I.e., Geats.

a beloved man to the borders of the Weders—
 and such of these good men as will be granted
 300 that they survive the storm of battle.”
 They set off—their vessel stood still,
 the roomy ship rested in its riggings,
 fast at anchor. Boar-figures shone
 over gold-plated cheek-guards,¹
 305 gleaming, fire-hardened; they guarded the lives
 of the grim battle-minded. The men hastened,
 marched together, until they could make out
 the timbered hall, splendid and gold-adorned—
 the most famous building among men
 310 under the heavens—where the high king waited;
 its light shone over many lands.
 Their brave guide showed them the bright court
 of the mighty ones, so that they might go
 straight to it; that fine soldier
 315 wheeled his horse and spoke these words:
 “Time for me to go. The almighty Father
 guard you in his grace,
 safe in your journeys! I must to the sea,
 and hold my watch against hostile hordes.”

5

320 The road was stone-paved, the path led
 the men together. Their mail coats shone
 hard, hand-linked, bright rings of iron
 rang out on their gear, when right to the hall
 they went trooping in their terrible armor.
 325 Sea-weary, they set their broad shields,
 wondrously-hard boards, against the building’s wall;
 they sat on a bench—their byrnies rang out,
 their soldiers’ war-gear; their spears stood,
 the gear of the seamen all together,
 330 a gray forest of ash. That iron troop
 was worthy of its weapons.

Then a proud warrior²

¹ *Boar-figures ... cheek-guards* The boar was a sacred animal in Germanic mythology; in his *Germania* the Roman historian Tacitus mentions warriors wearing boar-images into battle (ch. 45). Images of boars may have been placed on helmets to protect the wearer from the “bite” of a sword, which was often quasi-personified as a serpent. Archaeologists have unearthed several Anglo-Saxon helmets with various kinds of boar-images on them.

² *proud warrior* I.e., Wulfgar.

asked those soldiers about their ancestry:
 “From whence do you carry those covered shields,
 gray coats of mail and grim helmets,
 335 this troop of spears? I am herald and servant
 to Hrothgar; never have I seen
 so many foreign men so fearless and bold.
 For your pride, I expect, not for exile,
 and for greatness of heart you have sought out Hrothgar.”
 340 The courageous one answered him,
 proud prince of the Weders, spoke words
 hardy in his helmet: “We are Hygelac’s
 board-companions—Beowulf is my name.
 I wish to explain my errand
 345 to the son of Healfdene, famous prince,
 your lord, if he will allow us,
 in his goodness, to greet him.”
 Wulfgar spoke—a prince of the Wendels,
 his noble character was known to many,
 350 his valor and wisdom: “I will convey
 to the friend of the Danes, lord of the Scyldings,
 giver of rings, what you have requested,
 tell the famous prince of your travels,
 and then quickly announce to you the answer
 355 which that good man sees fit to give me.”

He hastily returned to where Hrothgar sat
 old and gray-haired, with his band of earls;
 he boldly went, stood by the shoulder
 of the Danish king—he knew the noble custom.
 360 Wulfgar spoke to his friend and lord:
 “There have arrived here over the sea’s expanse,
 come from afar, men of the Geats;
 the oldest among them, the fighting men
 call Beowulf. They have requested
 365 that they, my lord, might be allowed
 to exchange words with you—do not refuse them
 your reply, gracious Hrothgar!
 In their war-trappings they seem worthy
 of noble esteem; notable indeed is that chief
 370 who has shown these soldiers the way hither.”

6

Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings:
 “I knew him when he was nothing but a boy—
 his old father was called Ecgtheow,

to whom Hrethel the Geat¹ gave in marriage
 375 his only daughter; now his daring son
 has come here, sought a loyal friend.
 Seafarers, in truth, have said to me,
 those who brought to the Geats gifts and money
 as thanks, that he has thirty
 380 men's strength, strong in battle,
 in his handgrip. Holy God
 in His grace has guided him to us,
 to the West-Danes, as I would hope,
 against Grendel's terror. To this good man
 385 I shall offer treasures for his true daring.
 Be hasty now, bid them enter
 to see this troop of kinsmen all assembled;
 and tell them in your words that they are welcome
 to the Danish people.”

390 He announced from within:²
 “My conquering lord commands me to tell you,
 ruler of the East-Danes, that he knows your ancestry,
 and you are to him, hardy spirits,
 welcome hither from across the rolling waves.
 395 Now you may go in your war-gear
 under your helmets to see Hrothgar,
 but let your battle-shields and deadly spears
 await here the result of your words.”

The mighty one arose, and many a man with him,
 400 powerful thanes; a few waited there,
 guarded their battle-dress as the bold man bid them.
 They hastened together as the man led them,
 under Heorot's roof; [the warrior went]³
 hardy in his helmet, until he stood on the hearth.
 405 Beowulf spoke—his byrnie gleamed on him,
 war-net sewn by the skill of a smith—:
 “Be well, Hrothgar! I am Hygelac's kinsman
 and young retainer; in my youth I have done
 many a glorious deed. This business with Grendel
 410 was made known to me on my native soil;
 seafarers say that this building stands,

¹ *Hrethel the Geat* Father of Hygelac and grandfather of Beowulf.

² *people ... within* There is no gap in the manuscript, but the two halves of the line do not alliterate, and something is probably missing from the text at this point. Most editors add two half-lines with the sense “Then Wulfgar went to the door.”

³ [*the warrior went*] A half-line is missing; the translation follows the most innocuous conjecture.

most excellent of halls, idle and useless
 to every man, after evening's light
 is hidden under heaven's gleaming dome.
 415 Then my own people advised me,
 the best warriors and the wisest men,
 that I should, lord Hrothgar, seek you out,
 because they knew the might of my strength;
 they themselves had seen me, bloodstained from battle,
 420 come from the fight, when I captured five,
 slew a tribe of giants, and on the salt waves
 fought sea-monsters by night, survived that tight spot,
 avenged the Weders' affliction—they asked for trouble!—
 and crushed those grim foes; and now with Grendel,
 425 that monstrous beast, I shall by myself have
 a word or two with that giant. From you now I wish,
 ruler of the Bright-Danes, to request,
 protector of the Scyldings, a single favor,
 that you not refuse me, having come this far,
 430 protector of warriors, noble friend to his people—
 that I might alone, O my own band of earls
 and this hardy troop, cleanse Heorot.
 I have also heard that this evil beast
 in his wildness does not care for weapons,
 435 so I too will scorn—so that Hygelac,
 my liege-lord, may be glad of me—
 to bear a sword or a broad shield,
 a yellow battle-board, but with my grip
 I shall grapple with the fiend and fight for life,
 440 foe against foe. Let him put his faith
 in the Lord's judgment, whom death takes!
 I expect that he will, if he is allowed to win,
 eat unafraid the folk of the Geats
 in that war-hall, as he has often done,
 445 the host of the Hrethmen.⁴ You'll have no need
 to cover my head—he will have done so,
 gory, bloodstained, if death bears me away;
 he will take his kill, think to taste me,
 will dine alone without remorse,
 450 stain his lair in the moor; no need to linger
 in sorrow over disposing of my body!
 Send on to Hygelac, if battle should take me,
 the best battledress, which my breast wears,
 finest of garments; it is Hrethel's heirloom,

⁴ *Hrethmen* I.e., Geats.

455 the work of Weland.¹ *Wyrð* always goes as it must!”²

7

Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings:
 “For past favors, my friend Beowulf,
 and for old deeds, you have sought us out.
 Your father struck up the greatest of feuds,
 460 when he killed Heatholaf by his own hand
 among the Wylfings. When the *Weder* tribe
 would not harbor him for fear of war,
 thence he sought the South-Dane people
 over the billowing seas, the Honor-Scyldings;
 465 then I first ruled the Danish folk
 and held in my youth this grand kingdom,
 city of treasure and heroes—then Heorogar
 was dead, my older brother unliving,
 Healfdene’s firstborn—he was better than I!
 470 Later I settled that feud with fee-money;
 I sent to the Wylfings over the crest of the waves
 ancient treasures; he swore oaths to me.³
 It is a sorrow to my very soul to say
 to any man what Grendel has done to me—
 475 humiliated Heorot with his hateful thoughts,
 his sudden attacks. My hall-troop,
 my warriors, are decimated; *wyrð* has swept them away
 into Grendel’s terror. God might easily
 put an end to the deeds of this mad enemy!
 480 Often men have boasted, drunk with beer,
 officers over their cups of ale,
 that they would abide in the beerhall
 Grendel’s attack with a rush of sword-terror.
 Then in the morning this meadhall,
 485 lordly dwelling, was drenched with blood,
 when daylight gleamed, the benches gory,

¹ *Weland* Legendary blacksmith of the Norse gods. The antiquity of weapons and armor added to their value.

² *Wyrð* The Old English word for “fate” is sometimes quasi-personified, though apparently not to the extent that the goddess *Fortuna* was in Roman poetic mythology. The word survives, via Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, as the Modern English word “weird.”

³ *I sent . . . me* Hrothgar pays the *wergild* for the man Ecgtheow killed, and Ecgtheow swears an oath of loyalty and support. It is this oath, passed on to the next generation, that Beowulf is fulfilling (at least this is Hrothgar’s public sentiment; his thoughts in the privacy of his council are somewhat different).

the hall spattered and befouled; I had fewer
 dear warriors when death took them away.
 Now sit down at my feast, drink mead in my hall,⁴
 490 men’s reward of victory, as your mood urges.”

Then a bench was cleared in the beerhall
 for the men of the Geats all together;
 the strong-minded men went to sit down,
 proud in their strength. A thane did his service,
 495 bore in his hands the gold-bright ale-cup,
 poured the clear sweet drink. The scop sang
 brightly in Heorot—there was the joy of heroes,
 no small gathering of Danes and Geats.

8

Unferth⁵ spoke, son of Ecglaf,
 500 who sat at the feet of the Scylding lord,
 unbound his battle-runes⁶—Beowulf’s journey,
 that brave seafarer, sorely vexed him,
 for he did not wish that any other man
 on this middle-earth should care for glory
 505 under the heavens, more than he himself:
 “Are you the Beowulf who strove with Breca
 in a swimming contest on the open sea,
 where in your pride you tried the waves
 and for a foolish boast risked your life
 510 in the deep water? No man, whether
 friend or foe, could dissuade you two
 from that sad venture, when you swam in the sea;
 there you seized in your arms the ocean-streams,
 measured the sea-ways, flailed your hands
 515 and glided over the waves—the water roiled,
 wintry surges. In the keeping of the water
 you toiled for seven nights, and he outswam you,
 and had more strength. Then in the morning
 the swells bore him to the Heathoream shore;
 520 from thence he sought his own sweet land,
 beloved by his people, the land of the Brondings,
 the fair fortress, where he had his folk,

⁴ *Now sit . . . hall* The meaning of this line in Old English is disputed.

⁵ *Unferth* Unferth’s name, which may be significant, means either “un-peace” or “un-reason.” In the manuscript it is always spelled “Hunferth,” though it alliterates with a vowel. His position at Hrothgar’s feet appears to be one of honor.

⁶ *unbound his battle-runes* Or “unleashed his hostile secret thoughts.” *Run* in Old English often means “secret.”

his castle and treasure. He truly fulfilled,
the son of Beanstan, his boast against you.

525 So I expect a worse outcome from you—
though you may have survived the storm of battle,
some grim combats—if for Grendel you dare
to lie in wait the whole night long.”

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:

530 “What a great deal, Unferth my friend,
drunk with beer, you have said about Breca,
told his adventures! I will tell the truth—
I had greater strength on the sea,
more ordeals on the waves than any other man.
535 When we were just boys we two agreed
and boasted—we were both still
in our youth—that out on the great ocean
we would risk our lives, and we did just that.
We had bare swords, when we swam in the sea,
540 hard in our hands; we thought to protect
ourselves from whales. Not for anything
could he swim far from me on the sea-waves,
more swiftly on the water, nor would I go from him.
We two were together on the sea
545 for five nights, until the flood drove us apart,
surging waves, coldest of weathers,
darkening night, and a northern wind,
knife-sharp, pushed against us. The seas were choppy;
the fishes of the sea were stirred up by it.
550 There my coat of armor offered help,
hard, hand-locked, against those hostile ones,
my woven battle-dress lay on my breast
adorned with gold. Down to the ocean floor
a grisly foe dragged me, gripped me fast
555 in his grim grasp, yet it was given to me
to stab that monster with the point of my sword,
my war-blade; the storm of battle took away
that mighty sea-beast, through my own hand.

9

560 “Time and again those terrible enemies
sorely threatened me. I served them well
with my dear sword, as they deserved.
They got no joy from their gluttony,
those wicked man-eaters, when they tasted me,
sat down to their feast on the ocean floor—
565 but in the morning, wounded by my blade,

they were washed ashore by the ocean waves,
dazed by sword-blows, and since that day
they never hindered the passage of any
sea-voyager. Light shone from the east,
570 God’s bright beacon; the waves grew calm,
so that I could see the sea-cliffs,
the windswept capes. *Wyrd* often spares
an undoomed man, when his courage endures!
And so it came about that I was able to kill
575 nine of these sea-monsters. I have never heard
of a harder night-battle under heaven’s vault,
nor a more wretched man on the water’s stream;
yet I escaped alive from the clutches of my enemies,
weary from my journey. Then the sea washed me up,
580 the currents of the flood, in the land of the Finns,
the welling waters. I have never heard a word
about any such contest concerning you,
such sword-panic. In the play of battle
Breca has never—nor you either—
585 done a deed so bold and daring
with his decorated blade—I would never boast of it!—
though you became your brothers’ killer,
your next of kin; for that you needs must suffer
punishment in Hell, no matter how clever you are.¹
590 I will say it truly, son of Ecglaaf,
that never would Grendel have worked such terror,
that gruesome beast, against your lord,
or shames in Heorot, if your courage and spirit
were as fierce as you yourself fancy they are;
595 but he has found that he need fear no feud,
no storm of swords from the Victory-Scyldings,
no resistance at all from your nation;
he takes his toll, spares no one
in the Danish nation, but indulges himself,
600 hacks and butchers and expects no battle
from the Spear-Danes. But I will show him
soon enough the strength and courage
of the Geats in war. Afterwards, let him who will

¹ *though you became ... you are* Unferth’s fratricide brings the general theme of kin-slaying, represented by Grendel’s descent from Cain, inside Hrothgar’s hall. In reality—at least in the reality of the heroic world depicted in poetry—it may not have been unthinkable for kinsmen to find themselves on opposite sides of a battle; loyalty to one’s lord was supposed to outweigh the claims of blood-relation. The word “Hell” is not in the manuscript, but it is attested by one of the early transcriptions. Some scholars read *healle*, i.e., “hall.”

605 go bravely to mead, when the morning light
of a new day, the sun clothed in glory
shines from the south on the sons of men!"

Then the giver of treasure was greatly pleased,
gray-haired and battle-bold; the Bright-Danes' chief
had faith in his helper; that shepherd of his folk
610 recognized Beowulf's firm resolution.

There was man's laughter, lovely sounds
and winsome words. Wealhtheow went forth,
Hrothgar's queen, mindful of customs;
adorned with gold, she greeted the men in the hall,
615 then that courteous wife offered the full cup
first to the guardian of the East-Danes' kingdom,
bid him be merry at his beer-drinking,
beloved by his people; with pleasure he received
the feast and cup, victorious king.

620 The lady of the Helmings then went about
to young and old, gave each his portion
of the precious cup, until the moment came
when the ring-adorned queen, of excellent heart,
bore the mead-cup to Beowulf;
625 she greeted the Geatish prince, thanked God
with wise words that her wish had come to pass,
that she could rely on any earl for relief
from those crimes. He took the cup,
the fierce warrior, from Wealhtheow,
630 and then eager for battle he made his announcement.

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
"I resolved when I set out over the waves,
sat down in my ship with my troop of soldiers,
that I would entirely fulfill the wishes
635 of your people, or fall slain,
fast in the grip of my foe. I shall perform
a deed of manly courage, or in this meadhall
I will await the end of my days!"
These words well pleased that woman,
640 the boasting of the Geat; she went, the gold-adorned
and courteous folk-queen, to sit beside her lord.

Then, as before, there in that hall were
strong words spoken, the people happy,
the sounds of a victorious nation, until shortly
645 the son of Healfdene wished to seek
his evening rest; he knew that the wretched beast
had been planning to do battle in the high building
from the time they could first see the sunrise

until night fell darkening over all,
650 and creatures of shadow came creeping about
pale under the clouds. The company arose.
One warrior greeted another there,
Hrothgar to Beowulf, and wished him luck,
gave him control of the wine-hall in these words:
655 "I have never entrusted to any man,
ever since I could hold and hoist a shield,
the great hall of the Danes—except to you now.
Have it and hold it, protect this best of houses,
be mindful of glory, show your mighty valor,
660 watch for your enemies! You will have all you desire,
if you emerge from this brave undertaking alive."

10

Then Hrothgar and his troop of heroes,
protector of the Scyldings, departed from the hall;
the war-chief wished to seek Wealhtheow,
665 his queen's bedchamber. The glorious king¹
had set against Grendel a hall-guardian
— as men had heard said—who did special service
for the king of the Danes, kept a giant-watch.
Surely the Geatish prince greatly trusted
670 his mighty strength, the Maker's favor,
when he took off his iron byrnie,
undid his helmet, and gave his decorated iron,
best of swords, to his servant
and bid him hold his battle-gear.
675 The good man, Beowulf the Geat,
spoke a few boasting words before he lay down:
"I consider myself no poorer in strength
and battle-deeds than Grendel does himself;
and so I will not kill him with a sword,
680 put an end to his life, though I easily might;
he knows no arts of war, no way to strike back,
hack at my shield-boss, though he be brave
in his wicked deeds; but tonight we two will
forgo our swords, if he dare to seek out
685 a war without weapons—and then let the wise Lord
grant the judgment of glory, the holy God,
to whichever hand seems proper to Him."

He lay down, battle-brave; the bolster took
the earl's cheek, and around him many

¹ *The glorious king* Or "King of Glory," i.e., God?

690 a bold seafarer sank to his hall-rest.
 None of them thought that he should thence
 ever again seek his own dear homeland,
 his tribe or the town in which he was raised,
 for they had heard it said that savage death
 695 had swept away far too many of the Danish folk
 in that wine-hall. But the Lord gave them
 a web of victory, the people of the Weders,
 comfort and support, so that they completely,
 through one man's craft, overcame their enemy,
 700 by his own might. It is a well-known truth
 that mighty God has ruled mankind
 always and forever.

In the dark night he came
 creeping, the shadow-goer. The bowmen slept
 who were to hold that horned hall—
 705 all but one. It was well-known to men
 that the demon foe could not drag them under
 the dark shadows if the Maker did not wish it;
 but he, wakeful, keeping watch for his enemy,
 awaited, enraged, the outcome of battle.

II

710 Then from the moor, in a blanket of mist,
 Grendel came stalking—he bore God's anger;
 the evil marauder meant to ensnare
 some of human-kind in that high hall.
 Under the clouds he came until he clearly knew
 715 he was near the wine-hall, men's golden house,
 finely adorned. It was not the first time
 he had sought out the home of Hrothgar,
 but never in his life, early or late,
 did he find harder luck or a hardier hall-thane.
 720 To the hall came that warrior on his journey,
 bereft of joys. The door burst open,
 fast in its forged bands, when his fingers touched it;
 bloody-minded, swollen with rage, he swung open
 the hall's mouth, and immediately afterwards
 725 the fiend strode across the paved floor,
 went angrily; in his eyes stood
 a light not fair, glowing like fire.
 He saw in the hall many a soldier,
 a peaceful troop sleeping all together,
 730 a large company of thanes—and he laughed inside;
 he meant to divide, before day came,

this loathsome creature, the life of each
 man from his body, when there befell him
 the hope of a feast. But it was not his fate
 735 to taste any more of the race of mankind
 after that night. The kinsman of Hygelac,
 mighty one, beheld how that man-eater
 planned to proceed with his sudden assault.
 Not that the monster¹ meant to delay—
 740 he seized at once at his first pass
 a sleeping man, slit him open suddenly,
 bit into his joints, drank the blood from his veins,
 gobbled his flesh in gobbets, and soon
 had completely devoured that dead man,
 745 feet and fingertips. He stepped further,
 and took in his hands the strong-hearted
 man in his bed; the monster reached out
 towards him with his hands—he quickly grabbed him
 with evil intent, and sat up against his arm.
 750 As soon as that shepherd of sins discovered
 that he had never met on middle-earth,
 in any region of the world, another man
 with a greater handgrip, in his heart he was
 afraid for his life, but none the sooner could he flee.
 755 His mind was eager to escape to the darkness,
 seek out a host of devils—his habit there
 was nothing like he had ever met before.
 The good kinsman of Hygelac remembered then
 his evening speech, and stood upright
 760 and seized him fast. His fingers burst;
 the giant turned outward, the earl stepped inward.
 The notorious one meant—if he might—
 to turn away further and flee, away
 to his lair in the fen; he knew his fingers
 765 were held in a hostile grip. That was an unhappy journey
 that the harm-doer took to Heorot!
 The great hall resounded; to the Danes it seemed,
 the city's inhabitants, and every brave earl,
 like a wild ale-sharing.² Both were angry,

¹ *monster* The OE word *æglæca*, which literally means “awesome one” or “terror,” is elsewhere applied to the dragon-slaying Sigemund (line 892, where it is translated “fierce creature”) and to Beowulf himself. Its translation here is admittedly tendentious. The word appears elsewhere, variously translated, in lines 159, 433, 732, 556, etc.

² *wild ale-sharing* The general sense of the OE word *ealuscerwen* is “panic” or “terror,” but its precise meaning (probably “a dispensing of ale”) is unclear; did the Danes think a wild party was going on? Or

770 fierce house-wardens—the hall echoed.
 It was a great wonder that the wine-hall
 withstood their fighting and did not fall to the ground,
 that fair building—but it was fastened
 inside and out with iron bands,
 775 forged with skill. From the floor there flew
 many a mead-bench, as men have told me,
 gold-adorned, where those grim foes fought.
 The Scylding elders had never expected
 that any man, by any ordinary means,
 780 could break it apart, beautiful, bone-adorned,
 or destroy it with guile, unless the embrace of fire
 might swallow it in flames. The noise swelled
 new and stark—among the North-Danes was
 horrible terror, in each of them
 785 who heard through the wall the wailing cry—
 God's adversary shrieked a grisly song
 of horror, defeated, the captive of Hell
 bewailed his pain. He pinned him fast,
 he who among men was the strongest of might
 790 in those days of this life.

12

That protector of earls would not for anything
 let that murderous visitor escape alive—
 he did not consider his days on earth
 of any use at all. Many an earl
 795 in Beowulf's troop drew his old blade,
 longed to protect the life of his liege-lord,
 the famous captain, however they could.
 But they did not know as they entered the fight,
 those stern-minded men of battle,
 800 and thought to strike from all sides
 and seek his soul, that no sword,
 not the best iron anywhere in the world,
 could even touch that evil sinner,
 for he had worked a curse on weapons,
 805 every sort of blade. His separation from the world
 in those days of this life
 would have to be miserable, and that alien spirit
 would travel far into the keeping of fiends.
 Then he discovered, who had done before

were they dismayed by the loss of their mead-hall? Or does *OE calu*
 mean "luck"?

810 so much harm to the race of mankind,
 so many crimes—he was marked by God—
 that his body could bear it no longer,
 but the courageous kinsman of Hygelac
 had him in hand—hateful to each
 815 was the life of the other. The loathsome creature felt
 great bodily pain; a gaping wound opened
 in his shoulder-joint, his sinews sprang apart,
 his joints burst asunder. Beowulf was given
 glory in battle—Grendel was forced
 820 to flee, mortally wounded, into the fen-slopes,
 seek a sorry abode; he knew quite surely
 that the end of his life had arrived,
 the sum of his days. The will of the Danes
 was entirely fulfilled in that bloody onslaught!
 825 He who had come from afar had cleansed,
 wise and stout-hearted, the hall of Hrothgar,
 warded off attack. He rejoiced in his night-work,
 his great courage. That man of the Geats
 had fulfilled his boast to the East-Danes,
 830 and entirely remedied all their distress,
 the insidious sorrows they had suffered
 and had to endure from sad necessity,
 no small affliction. It was a clear sign,
 when the battle-brave one laid down the hand,
 835 arm and shoulder—there all together
 was Grendel's claw—under the curved roof.

13

Then in the morning was many a warrior,
 as I have heard, around that gift-hall,
 leaders of the folk came from far and near
 840 throughout the wide land to see that wonder,
 the loathsome one's tracks. His parting from life
 hardly seemed sad to any man
 who examined the trail of that inglorious one,
 how he went on his weary way,
 845 defeated by force, to a pool of sea-monsters,
 doomed, put to flight, and left a fatal trail.
 The water was welling with blood there—
 the terrible swirling waves, all mingled together
 with hot gore, heaved with the blood of battle,
 850 concealed that doomed one when, deprived of joys,
 he laid down his life in his lair in the fen,
 his heathen soul—and Hell took him.

Then the old retainers returned from there,
 and many a youth on the joyful journey,
 855 bravely rode their horses back from the mere,
 men on their steeds. There they celebrated
 Beowulf's glory: it was often said
 that south or north, between the two seas,¹
 across the wide world, there was none
 860 better under the sky's expanse
 among shield-warriors, nor more worthy to rule—
 though they found no fault with their own friendly lord,
 gracious Hrothgar, but said he was a good king.
 At times the proud warriors let their horses prance,
 865 their fallow mares fare in a contest,
 wherever the footpaths seemed fair to them,
 the way tried and true. At times the king's thane,
 full of grand stories, mindful of songs,
 who remembered much, a great many
 870 of the old tales, found other words
 truly bound together; he began again
 to recite with skill the adventure of Beowulf,
 adeptly tell an apt tale,
 and weave his words. He said nearly all
 875 that he had heard said of Sigemund's
 stirring deeds,² many strange things,
 the Volsung's strife, his distant voyages
 obscure, unknown to all the sons of men,
 his feuds and crimes—except for Fitela,
 880 when of such things he wished to speak to him,
 uncle to nephew³—for always they were,

¹ *between the two seas* A conventional expression like Modern English “coast to coast”; probably it originally referred to the North and Baltic seas.

² *He said . . . deeds* Beowulf is praised indirectly, by being compared first to Sigemund, another famous monster-slayer (a different version of whose story is told in the Old Norse *Volsungasaga* and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*; there the dragon-slaying is attributed to Sigemund's son Siegfried), and then contrasted to Heremod, an earlier king of the Danes who descended into tyranny (it is sometimes assumed that the disastrous ending of Heremod's reign is the cause of the Danes' lordlessness and distress mentioned at the beginning of the poem). The implication is that Beowulf's deeds place him in the ranks of other exemplary figures. The method of narration is allusive and indirect, as though the audience were expected to know the details of the story and appreciate an elliptical reference to them.

³ *uncle to nephew* Fitela is actually Sigemund's son by his own sister—either the poet is being discreet, or his version of the story differs from the Norse.

in every combat, companions at need;
 a great many of the race of giants
 they slaughtered with their swords. For Sigemund
 885 no small fame grew after his final day,
 after that hardened soldier, prince's son,
 had killed a dragon, keeper of a hoard;
 alone, he dared to go under gray stones,
 a bold deed—nor was Fitela by his side;
 890 yet so it befell him that his sword pierced
 the wondrous serpent, stood fixed in the wall,
 the manly iron; the dragon met his death.
 That fierce creature had gone forth in courage
 so that he could possess that store of rings
 895 and use them at his will; the son of Wæls
 loaded his sea-boat, bore the bright treasure
 to the ship's hold. The serpent melted in its own heat.

He was the most famous of exiles, far and wide,
 among all people, protector of warriors,
 900 for his noble deeds—he had prospered for them—
 since the struggles of Heremod had ceased,
 his might and valor. Among the Eotens⁴
 he was betrayed into his enemies' hands,
 quickly dispatched. The surging of cares
 905 had crippled him too long; he became a deadly burden
 to his own people, to all noblemen;
 for many a wise man had mourned
 in earlier times over his headstrong ways
 who had looked to him for relief from affliction,
 910 hoped that that prince's son would prosper,
 receive his father's rank, rule his people,
 hoard and fortress, a kingdom of heroes,
 the Scylding homeland. The kinsman of Hygelac
 became to all of the race of mankind
 915 a more pleasant friend; sin possessed him.⁵

Sometimes, competing, the fallow paths
 they measured on horseback. When morning's light
 raced on and hastened away, many a retainer,
 stout-hearted, went to see the high hall
 920 to see the strange wonder; the king himself,
 guard of the treasure-hoard, strode glorious
 from the woman's chambers with a great entourage,

⁴ *Eotens* Perhaps “Jutes.” The word literally means “giants” and may be a tribal name, or an epithet, or may in fact refer to an actual race of giants.

⁵ *sin possessed him* I.e., Heremod.

a chosen retinue, and his royal queen with him
measured the meadhall-path with a troop of maidens.

14

925 Hrothgar spoke—he went to the hall,
stood on the steps, beheld the steep roof
plated with gold, and Grendel's hand:
“For this sight let us swiftly offer thanks
to the Almighty! Much have I endured
930 of dire grief from Grendel, but God may always
work, Shepherd of glory, wonder upon wonder.
It was not long ago that I did not expect
ever in my life to experience relief
from any of my woes, when, stained with blood,
935 this best of houses stood dripping, gory,
a widespread woe to all wise men
who did not expect that they might ever
defend the people's fortress from its foes,
devils and demons. Now a retainer has done
940 the very deed, through the might of God,
which we all could not contrive to do
with all our cleverness. Lo, that woman could say,
whosoever has borne such a son
into the race of men, if she still lives,
945 that the God of Old was good to her
in childbearing. Now I will cherish you,
Beowulf, best of men, like a son
in my heart; hold well henceforth
your new kinship. You shall have no lack
950 of the worldly goods which I can bestow.
Often have I offered rewards for less,
honored with gifts a humbler man,
weaker in battle. Now by yourself
you have done such deeds that your fame will endure
955 always and forever—may the Almighty
reward you with good, as He has already done!”

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
“Freely and gladly have we fought this fight,
done this deed of courage, daringly faced
960 this unknown power. I would much prefer
that you might have seen the foe himself
decked in his finery,¹ fallen and exhausted!

¹ *in his finery* Literally “in his adornments,” a peculiar phrase since Grendel is notoriously not armed and unadorned. Perhaps Beowulf means “covered in a garment of blood?”

With a hard grip I hoped to bind him
quickly and keenly on the killing floor,
965 so that for my handgrasp he would have to
lie squirming for life, unless he might slip away;
I could not—the Creator did not wish it—
hinder his going, no matter how hard I held
that deadly enemy; too overwhelming was
970 that fiend's flight. Yet he forfeited his hand,
his arm and shoulder, to save his life,
to guard his tracks—though he got thereby,
pathetic creature, little comfort;
the loathsome destroyer will live no longer,
975 rotten with sin, but pain has seized him,
grabbed him tightly in its fierce grip,
its baleful bonds—and there he shall abide,
guilty of his crimes, the greater judgment,
how the shining Maker wishes to sentence him.”

980 Then the son of Ecgla² was more silent
in boasting words about his battle-works
after the noblemen, through the earl's skill,
looked on the hand over the high roof,
the enemy's fingers; at the end of each nail
985 was a sharp tip, most like steel,
heathen talons, the terrible spikes
of that awful warrior; each of them agreed
that not even the hardest of ancient and honorable
irons could touch him, or injure at all
990 the bloody battle-paw of that baleful creature.

15

Then it was quickly commanded that Heorot
be adorned by hands inside; many there,
men and women, prepared that wine-hall,
the guest-house. Gold-dyed tapestries
995 shone on the walls, many wonderful sights
to any man who might look on them.
That shining building was nearly shattered
inside, entirely, fast in its iron bands,
its hinges sprung; the roof alone survived
1000 unharmed, when that horrible creature,
stained with foul deeds, turned in his flight,
despairing of life. Death is not an easy
thing to escape—try it who will—

² *son of Ecgla²* I.e., Unferth.

but compelled by necessity all must come
 1005 to that place set aside for soul-bearers,
 children of men, dwellers on earth,
 where the body, fast on its bed of death,
 sleeps after the feast.

Then was the set time
 that the son of Healfdene went to the hall;
 1010 the king himself wished to share in the feast.
 I have never heard of a greater host
 who bore themselves better before their treasure-giver.
 Those men in their glory moved to their benches,
 rejoiced in the feast; fairly those kinsmen
 1015 took many a full mead-cup,
 stouthearted in the high hall,
 Hrothgar and Hrothulf. Heorot within was
 filled with friends—no false treacheries
 did the people of the Scyldings plot at that time.¹
 1020 He gave to Beowulf the blade of Healfdene,²
 a golden war-standard as a reward for victory,
 the bright banner, a helmet and byrnie,
 a great treasure-sword—many saw them
 borne before that man. Beowulf received
 1025 the full cup in the hall, he felt no shame
 at that gift-giving before his bowmen;
 never have I heard tell of four treasures
 given more graciously, gold-adorned,
 from one man to another on the ale-benches.
 1030 On the crown of the helmet as a head-protector
 a ridge, wound with wire, stood without,
 so that the file-sharp swords might not terribly
 harm him, shower-hard, when shield-fighters
 had to go against hostile forces.
 1035 The protector of earls ordered eight horses
 with ornamented bridles led into the building,
 in under the eaves; on one sat

¹ Implicit in this statement is the idea that, at some later time, the people of the Scyldings did plot false treacheries; from other sources it is possible to infer that after the death of Hrothgar, his nephew Hrothulf ruled rather than Hrethric, Hrothgar's son. Many scholars assume that the story of some sort of treacherous usurpation was known to the audience; this gives a special urgency to much of what happens in these scenes of feasting, especially the speeches of Wealhtheow.

² *He gave ... Healfdene* The translation follows the reading of Mitchell and Robinson, and see Bruce Mitchell, "Beowulf, line 1020b: *brand* or *bearn*?" The manuscript is usually emended to mean "The son of Healfdene gave to Beowulf."

a saddle, skillfully tooled, set with gemstones;
 that was the warseat of the high-king
 1040 when the son of Healfdene sought to perform
 his swordplay—the widely-known warrior
 never failed at the front, when the slain fell about him.
 And the lord of the Ingwines³ gave ownership
 of both of them to Beowulf,
 1045 the horses and weapons, bid him use them well.
 So manfully did the mighty prince,
 hoard-guard of warriors, reward the storm of battle
 with such steeds and treasures that none who will speak
 the truth rightfully could ever reproach them.

16

1050 Then the lord of earls, to each of those
 on the meadbenches who had made with Beowulf
 a sea-journey, gave jeweled treasures,
 antique heirlooms, and then ordered
 that gold be paid for the man whom Grendel
 1055 had wickedly slain—he would have done more,
 if wise God and one man's courage
 had not prevented that fate. The Maker ruled all
 of the race of mankind, as He still does.
 Therefore understanding is always best,
 1060 spiritual foresight—he must face much,
 both love and hate, who long here
 endures this world in these days of strife.

Noise and music mingled together
 before the leader of Healfdene's forces,
 1065 the harp was touched, tales often told,
 when Hrothgar's scop was set to recite
 among the mead-tables his hall-entertainment
 about the sons of Finn, surprised in ambush,
 when the hero of the Half-Danes, Hnæf the Scylding
 1070 had to fall in a Frisian slaughter.⁴

³ *Ingwines* I.e., Danes.

⁴ *the sons of Finn ... Frisian slaughter* The story is obscure; the survival of a fragment of another poem ("The Fight at Finnsburg") telling the same story helps clarify the action somewhat. Hnæf, prince of the Danes, is visiting his sister Hildeburh at the home of her husband Finn, king of the Frisians. While there, the Danish party is treacherously attacked (perhaps by a Jutish contingent among Finn's troops, unless the "Jutes" and Frisians are one and the same people); after five days of fighting Hnæf lies dead, along with many casualties on either side. Hnæf's retainer Hengest is left to lead the remnant of Danish survivors.

Hildeburh, indeed, had no need to praise the good faith of the Jutes.¹ Guiltless, she was deprived of her dear ones in that shieldplay, her sons and brothers—sent forth to their fate, dispatched by spears; she was a sad lady!
 1075 Not without cause did she mourn fate's decrees, the daughter of Hoc, after daybreak came and she could see the slaughter of her kin under the very skies where once she held the greatest worldly joys. War took away
 1080 all of the thanes of Finn, except a few, so that he could not continue at all a fight with Hengest on the battlefield, nor could that woeful remnant drive away the prince's thane—so they offered them terms:² they would clear out another hall for them, a house and high-seat, of which they should have half the control with the sons of the Jutes, and Folcwalda's son,³ with feasting and gifts, should honor the Danes each and every day, gladden the troops of Hengest with gold rings and ancient treasures, ornamented gold, just as often as he would encourage the hosts of the Frisians in the beerhall.
 1095 They swore their pledges then on either side, a firm compact of peace. With unfeigned zeal Finn swore his oaths to Hengest, pledged that he, with the consent of his counselors, would support with honor those sad survivors, and that none should break their pact in word or deed,
 1100 nor through malice should ever make mention, though they should serve their ring-giver's slayer, without a lord, as they were led by need— and if, provoking, any Frisian spoke
 1105 reminding them of all their murderous hate, then with the sword's edge they should settle it. The oath⁴ was made ready, and ancient gold

¹ *Jutes* I.e., Frisians.

² *them terms* The referent of this pronoun is not entirely clear—who offers what to whom? The terms of the truce are unthinkable—no hero could honorably follow the killer of his lord. In the following line “they” refers to the Frisians, “them” to the Danes.

³ *Folcwalda's son* I.e., Finn.

⁴ *oath* Some editors emend to *ad*, “pyre.”

was brought from the hoard; the Battle-Scyldings' best fighting-man was ready for the fire.
 1110 It was easy to see upon that pyre the bloodstained battle-shirt, the gilded swine, iron-hard boar-images, the noblemen with fatal wounds—so many felled by war! Then Hildeburh commanded at Hnæf's pyre
 1115 that her own son be consigned to the flames to be burnt, flesh and bone, placed on the pyre at his uncle's shoulder; the lady sang a sad lament. The warrior ascended; to the clouds coiled the mighty funeral fire,
 1120 and roared before their mound; their heads melted, their gashes burst open and spurted blood, the deadly body-bites. The flame devoured, most greedy spirit, those whom war destroyed of both peoples—their glory departed.

17

1125 The warriors left to seek their native lands, bereft of friends, to behold Frisia, their homes and high fortresses. Hengest still stayed there with Finn that slaughter-stained winter, unwilling, desolate. He dreamt of home,
 1130 though on the frozen sea he could not⁵ steer his ring-prowed ship—the ocean raged with storms, strove with the wind, and winter locked the waves in icy bonds, until there came another year to the courtyard—as it yet does,
 1135 always observing its seasons and times, bright glorious weather. Gone was the winter, and fair the bosom of earth; the exile burned to take leave of that court, yet more he thought of stern vengeance than of sea-voyages,
 1140 how he might arrange a hostile meeting, remind the Jutish sons of his iron sword. So he did not refuse the world's custom when the son of Hunlaf⁶ placed a glinting sword,

⁵ *not* OE *ne* “not” is not in the manuscript; most editors and translators add it to make better sense of the passage and of Hengest's character.

⁶ *the son of Hunlaf* It is not clear who this is: perhaps Guthlaf or Osulf (mentioned a few lines later), perhaps not; apparently some retainers remained with Hengest in Finn's hall, nursing their resentment throughout the winter. Some scholars take the OE word

the best of battle-flames, upon his lap;
 1145 its edge was not unknown among the Jutes.
 And so, in turn, to the bold-minded Finn
 befell cruel sword-evil in his own home,
 when Guthlaf and Oslaf spoke of their grief,
 the fierce attack after their sea voyage,
 1150 and cursed their wretched lot—the restless heart
 could not restrain itself. The hall was stained
 with the lifeblood of foes, and Finn was slain,
 the king among his host; the queen was seized.
 The Scylding bowmen carried to their ships
 1155 all the house property of that earth-king,
 whatever they could find in Finn’s homestead,
 brooches and bright gems. On their sea journey
 they bore that noble queen back to the Danes
 and led her to her people.

The lay was sung,
 1160 the entertainer’s song. Glad sounds rose again,
 the bench-noise glittered, cupbearers gave
 wine from wondrous vessels. Wealththeow came forth
 in her golden crown to where the good two
 sat, nephew and uncle; their peace was still whole then,
 1165 each true to the other. Likewise Unferth, spokesman,¹
 sat at the foot of the Scylding lord; everyone trusted
 his spirit,
 that he had great courage, though to his kinsmen he
 had not been
 merciful in sword-play. Then the lady of the Scyldings
 spoke:

“Take this cup, my noble courteous lord,
 1170 giver of treasure! Be truly joyful,
 gold-friend of men, and speak to the Geats
 in mild words, as a man should do!
 Be gracious to the Geats, mindful of the gifts
 which you now have from near and far.
 1175 I have been told that you would take this warrior
 for your son. Heorot is cleansed,
 the bright ring-hall—use your many rewards
 while you can, and leave to your kinsmen
 the folk and kingdom, when you must go forth

¹ *hunlafing* as the name of a sword.

¹ *spokesman* The Old English word *thyle* has been variously interpreted, from “court jester” to “official speechmaker.” The present translation grants Unferth a measure of dignity and position to which, perhaps, he is not entitled.

1180 to face the Maker’s decree. I know that my own
 dear gracious Hrothulf will hold in honors
 these youths, if you should give up the world
 before him, friend of the Scyldings;
 I expect that he would wish to repay
 1185 both our sons kindly, if he recalls all
 the pleasures and honors that we have shown him,
 in our kindness, since he was a child.”
 She turned to the bench where her boys sat,
 Hrethric and Hrothmund, and the hero’s son,
 1190 all the youths together; the good man,
 Beowulf the Geat, sat between the brothers.

18

The flagon was borne to him, a friendly greeting
 conveyed with words, and wound gold
 offered with good will, two armlets,
 1195 garments and rings, and the greatest neck-collar
 ever heard of anywhere on earth.
 Under heaven I have not heard tell of a better
 hoard-treasure of heroes, since Hama carried off
 to the bright city the Brosinga necklace,²
 1200 the gem and its treasures; he fled the treachery
 of Eormanric, chose eternal counsel.

Hygelac the Geat on his last journey
 had that neck-ring,³ nephew of Swerting,
 when under the banner he defended his booty,
 1205 the spoils of slaughter. Fate struck him down
 when in his pride he went looking for woe,
 a feud with the Frisians. He wore that finery,
 those precious stones, over the cup of the sea,
 that powerful lord, and collapsed under his shield.
 1210 Into Frankish hands came the life of that king,
 his breast-garments, and the great collar too;
 a lesser warrior looted the corpses
 mown down in battle; Geatish men

² *Brosinga necklace* The Brosinga necklace had apparently been worn by the Norse goddess Freya. Nothing much is known of Hama, who apparently stole the necklace from Eormanric, famous king of the Goths. The “bright city” and “eternal counsel” may refer to his retreat into a monastery and Christianity (a story told in the Old Norse *Thidrekssaga*), though this is not entirely certain.

³ *Hygelac ... neck-ring* The first of several mentions of Hygelac’s ill-fated raid against the Frisians. Later we are told that Beowulf gives the necklace to Hygd, Hygelac’s wife; she apparently let him borrow it when he went on his piratical raid.

held that killing field.

The hall swallowed the noise.

1215 Wealhtheow stood before the company and spoke:
 “Beowulf, beloved warrior, wear this neck-ring
 in good health, and enjoy this war-garment,
 treasure of a people, and prosper well,
 be bold and clever, and to these boys be
 1220 mild in counsel—I will remember you for that.
 You have made it so that men will praise you
 far and near, forever and ever,
 as wide as the seas, home of the winds,
 surround the shores of earth. Be while you live
 1225 blessed, o nobleman! I wish you well
 with these bright treasures. Be to my sons
 kind in your deeds, keeping them in joys!
 Here each earl is true to the other,
 mild in his heart, loyal to his liege-lord,
 1230 the thanes united, the nation alert;
 the troop, having drunk at my table, will do as I bid.”

She went to her seat. The best of feasts it was—
 the men drank wine, and did not know *wyrd*,
 the cruel fate which would come to pass
 1235 for many an earl once evening came,
 and Hrothgar departed to his own dwelling,
 the mighty one to his rest. Countless men
 guarded that hall, as they often had before.
 They cleared away bench-planks, spread cushions
 and bedding on the floor. One of those beer-drinkers
 1240 lay down to his rest fated, ripe for death.
 They set at their heads their round battle-shields,
 bright boards; there on the bench was
 easily seen over the noblemen
 1245 the high battle-helmet, the ringed byrnie,
 the mighty wooden spear. It was their custom
 to be always ready, armed for battle,
 at home or in the field, every one of them,
 on whatever occasion their overlord
 1250 had need of them; that was a good troop.

19

They sank into sleep—one paid sorely
 for his evening rest, as had often happened
 when Grendel guarded that gold-hall,
 committed his wrongs until he came to his end,
 1255 died for his sins. It was clearly seen,

obvious to all men, that an avenger still
 lived on after that enemy for a long time
 after that grim battle—Grendel’s mother,
 monster-woman, remembered her misery,
 1260 she who dwelt in those dreadful waters,
 the cold streams, ever since Cain
 killed with his blade his only brother,
 his father’s kin; he fled bloodstained,
 marked for murder, left the joys of men,
 1265 dwelled in the wasteland. From him awoke
 many a fateful spirit—Grendel among them,
 hateful accursed foe, who found at Heorot
 a wakeful warrior waiting for battle.
 There the great beast began to seize him,
 1270 but he remembered his mighty strength,
 the ample gifts which God had given him,
 and trusted the Almighty for mercy,
 favor and support; thus he overcame the fiend,
 subdued the hellish spirit. He went away wretched,
 1275 deprived of joy, to find his place of death,
 mankind’s foe. But his mother still
 greedy, grim-minded, wanted to go
 on her sorrowful journey to avenge her son’s death.

She reached Heorot, where the Ring-Danes
 1280 slept throughout the building; sudden turnabout
 came to men, when Grendel’s mother
 broke into the hall. The horror was less
 by as much as a maiden’s strength,
 a woman’s warfare, is less than an armed man’s
 1285 when a bloodstained blade, its edges strong,
 hammer-forged sword, slices through
 the boar-image on a helmet opposite.¹
 Then in the hall was the hard edge drawn,
 swords over seats, many a broad shield
 1290 raised in hands—none remembered his helmet
 or broad mail-shirt when that terror seized them.
 She came in haste and meant to hurry out,
 save her life, when she was surprised there,
 but she had quickly seized, fast in her clutches,
 1295 one nobleman when she went to the fens.
 He was the dearest of heroes to Hrothgar
 among his comrades between the two seas,
 mighty shield-warrior, whom she snatched from his rest,

¹ *The horror ... opposite* In fact Grendel’s mother is a much more dangerous opponent for Beowulf; the point of these lines is not clear.

1300 a glorious thane. Beowulf was not there,
 but another place had been appointed
 for the famous Geat after the treasure-giving.
 Heorot was in an uproar—she took the famous hand,
 covered in gore; care was renewed,
 come again to the dwellings. That was no good exchange,
 1305 that those on both sides should have to bargain
 with the lives of friends.

Then the wise old king,
 gray-bearded warrior, was grieved at heart
 when he learned that he no longer lived—
 the dearest of men, his chief thane, was dead.
 1310 Quickly Beowulf was fetched to the chambers,
 victory-blessed man. Just before dawn
 that noble champion came with his companions,
 went with his men to where the old king waited
 wondering whether the Almighty would ever
 1315 work a change after his tidings of woe.
 Across the floor walked the worthy warrior
 with his small troop—the hall-wood resounded—
 and with his words he addressed the wise one,
 lord of the Ingwines, asked him whether
 1320 the night had been agreeable, after his urgent summons.

20

Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings:
 “Ask not of joys! Sorrow is renewed
 for the Danish people. Æschere is dead,
 elder brother of Yrmenlaf,
 1325 my confidant and my counselor,
 my shoulder-companion in every conflict
 when we defended our heads when the footsoldiers
 clashed
 and struck boar-helmets. As a nobleman should be,
 always excellent, so Æschere was!
 1330 In Heorot he was slain by the hand
 of a restless death-spirit; I do not know
 where that ghoulish went, gloating with its carcass,
 rejoicing in its feast. She avenged that feud
 in which you killed Grendel yesterday evening
 1335 in your violent way with a crushing vice-grip,
 for he had diminished and destroyed my people
 for far too long. He fell in battle,
 it cost him his life, and now has come another

mighty evil marauder who means to avenge
 1340 her kin, and too far has carried out her revenge,
 as it may seem to many a thane
 whose spirit groans for his treasure-giver,
 a hard heart’s distress—now that hand lies dead
 which was wont to give you all good things.
 1345 I have heard countrymen and hall-counselors
 among my people report this:
 they have seen two such creatures,
 great march-stalkers holding the moors,
 alien spirits. The second of them,
 1350 as far as they could discern most clearly,
 had the shape of a woman; the other, misshapen,
 marched the exile’s path in the form of a man,
 except that he was larger than any other;
 in bygone days he was called ‘Grendel’
 1355 by the local folk. They knew no father,
 whether before him had been begotten
 any more mysterious spirits. That murky land
 they hold, wolf-haunted slopes, windy headlands,
 awful fenpaths, where the upland torrents
 1360 plunge downward under the dark crags,
 the flood underground. It is not far hence
 —measured in miles—that the mere stands;
 over it hangs a grove hoar-frosted,
 a firm-rooted wood looming over the water.
 1365 Every night one can see there an awesome wonder,
 fire on the water. There lives none so wise
 or bold that he can fathom its abyss.
 Though the heath-stepper beset by hounds,
 the strong-horned hart, might seek the forest,
 1370 pursued from afar, he will sooner lose
 his life on the shore than save his head
 and go in the lake—it is no good place!
 The clashing waves climb up from there
 dark to the clouds, when the wind drives
 1375 the violent storms, until the sky itself droops,
 the heavens groan. Now once again all help
 depends on you alone. You do not yet know
 this fearful place, where you might find
 the sinful creature—seek it if you dare!
 1380 I will reward you with ancient riches
 for that feud, as I did before,
 with twisted gold, if you return alive.”

21

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:

1385 “Sorrow not, wise one! It is always better
to avenge one’s friend than to mourn overmuch.
Each of us shall abide the end
of this world’s life; let him who can
bring about fame before death—that is best
for the unliving man after he is gone.
1390 Arise, kingdom’s guard, let us quickly go
and inspect the path of Grendel’s kin.
I promise you this: he¹ will find no protection—
not in the belly of the earth nor the bottom of the sea,
nor the mountain groves—let him go where he will!
1395 For today, you must endure patiently
all your woes, as I expect you will.”
The old man leapt up, thanked the Lord,
the mighty God, for that man’s speech.

Then for Hrothgar a horse was bridled
1400 with plaited mane. The wise prince
rode in full array; footsoldiers marched
with shields at the ready. The tracks were seen
far and wide on the forest paths,
a trail through the woods, where she went forth
1405 over the murky moor, bore the young man’s
lifeless body, the best of all those
who had held watch over Hrothgar’s home.
The son of nobles crossed over
the steep stone cliffs, the constricted climb,
1410 a narrow solitary path, a course unknown,
the towering headlands, home of sea-monsters.
He went before with just a few
wise men to see the way,
until suddenly he saw mountain-trees,
1415 stunted and leaning over gray stone,
a joyless wood; the water went under,
turbid and dreary. To all the Danes,
the men of the Scyldings, many a thane,
it was a sore pain at heart to suffer,
1420 a grief to every earl, when on the seacliff
they came upon the head of Æschere.
The flood boiled with blood—the folk gazed on—
and hot gore. At times a horn sang

¹ *he* I.e., Grendel’s mother. The hero does not note carefully enough the gender of Grendel’s mother, or else the pronoun *he* refers to OE *magan* “kinsman,” a masculine noun.

its eager war-song. The footsoldiers sat down.
1425 They saw in the water many kinds of serpents,
strange sea-creatures testing the currents,
and on the sloping shores lay such monsters
as often attend in early morning
a sorrowful journey on the sail-road,
1430 dragons and wild beasts. They rushed away
bitter, enraged; they heard the bright noise,
the sound of the battle-horn. A Geatish Bowman
cut short the life of one of those swimmers
with a bow and arrow, so that in his body stood
1435 the hard war-shaft; he was a slower swimmer
on the waves, when death took him away.
At once in the water he was assailed
with the barbed hooks of boar-pikes,
violently attacked and dragged ashore,
1440 the strange wave-roamer; the men inspected
this grisly visitor.

Beowulf geared up
in his warrior’s clothing, cared not for his life.
The broad war-shirt, woven by hand,
cunningly made, had to test the mere—
1445 it knew well how to protect his bone-house
so that a battle-grip might not hurt his breast
nor an angry malicious clutch touch his life.
The shining helmet protected his head,
set to stir up the sea’s depths,
1450 seek that troubled water, decorated with treasure,
encircled with a splendid band, as a weapon-smith
in days of old had crafted it with wonders,
set boar-images, so that afterwards
no blade or battle-sword might ever bite it.
1455 Not the smallest of powerful supports was that
which Hrothgar’s spokesman lent him at need;
that hilted sword was named Hrunting,
unique among ancient treasures—
its edge was iron, etched with poison-stripes,
1460 hardened with the blood of war; it had never failed
any man who grasped it in his hands in battle,
who dared to undertake a dreadful journey
into the very home of the foe—it was not the first time
that it had to perform a work of high courage.
1465 Truly, the son of Ecglaf, crafty in strength,
did not remember what he had said before,
drunk with wine, when he lent that weapon

to a better swordsman; he himself did not dare
to risk his life under the rushing waves,
1470 perform a lordly act; for that he lost honor,
his fame for courage. Not so with the other,
when he had geared himself up for battle.

22

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:

1475 “Consider now, famous kinsman of Healfdene,
wise prince, now that I am eager to depart,
gold-friend to men, what we spoke of before:
if ever in your service I should
lose my life, that you would always be
in a father’s place to me when I have passed away.
1480 Be a protector to my band of men,
my boon-companions, if battle should take me,
and send on to Hygelac, beloved Hrothgar,
the gifts of treasure which you have given me.
The lord of the Geats will understand by that gold,
1485 the son of Hrethel will see by that treasure,
that I found a ring-giver who was good
in ancient customs and, while I could, enjoyed it.
And let Unferth have that ancient heirloom,
that well-known man have my wave-patterned sword,
1490 hard-edged, splendid; with Hrunting I shall
win honor and fame, or death will take me!”

After these words the Weder-Geat man
hastened boldly, by no means wished to
stay for an answer; the surging sea received
1495 the brave soldier. It was the space of a day¹
before he could perceive the bottom.
Right away she who held that expanse of water,
bloodthirsty and fierce, for a hundred half-years,
grim and greedy, perceived that some man
1500 was exploring from above that alien land.
She snatched at him, seized the warrior
in her savage clutches, but none the sooner
injured his sound body—the ring-mail encircled him,
so that she could not pierce that war-dress,
1505 the locked coat of mail, with her hostile claws.
Then that she-wolf of the sea swam to the bottom,
and bore the prince of rings into her abode,
so that he might not—no matter how strong—

¹ *It was the space of a day* Or “it was daylight.”

wield his weapons, but so many wonders
1510 set upon him in the water, many a sea-beast
with battle-tusks tearing at his war-shirt,
monsters pursuing him.²

Then the earl perceived
that he was in some sort of battle-hall
where no water could harm him in any way,
1515 and, for the hall’s roof, he could not be reached
by the flood’s sudden rush—he saw a fire-light,
a glowing blaze shining brightly.
Then the worthy man saw that water-witch,
a great mere-wife; he gave a mighty blow
1520 with his battle-sword—he did not temper that stroke—
so that the ring-etched blade rang out on her head
a greedy battle-song. The guest discovered then
that the battle-flame would not bite,
or wound her fatally—but the edge failed
1525 the man in his need; it had endured many
hand-to-hand meetings, often sheared through helmets,
fated war-garments. It was the first time
that the fame of that precious treasure had fallen.

Again he was stalwart, not slow of zeal,
1530 mindful of glory, that kinsman of Hygelac—
the angry challenger threw away that etched blade,
wrapped and ornamented, so that it lay on the earth,
strong, steel-edged. He trusted his strength,
the might of his handgrip—as a man should do
1535 if by his warfare he thinks to win
long-lasting praise: he cares nothing for his life.
The man of the War-Geats grabbed by the shoulder
Grendel’s mother—he had no regret for that feud;
battle-hardened, enraged, he swung her around,
1540 his deadly foe, so she fell to the ground.
Quickly she gave him requital for that
with a grim grasp, and grappled him to her—
weary, he stumbled, strongest of warriors,
of foot-soldiers, and took a fall.
1545 She set upon her hall-guest and drew her knife,
broad, bright-edged; she would avenge her boy,
her only offspring. On his shoulders lay
the linked corselet; it defended his life,
prevented the entrance of point and blade.
1550 There the son of Ecgtheow would have ended his life

² *pursuing him* Or “attacked their adversary.” The Old English word *æglæcan* may refer here to Beowulf or to the sea-monsters.

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.

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

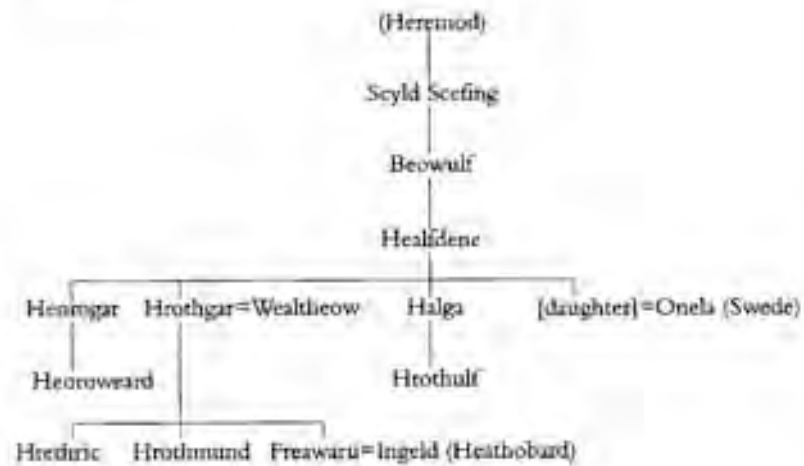
Abel	slain by his brother Cain ; the story is told in Genesis 4.1–16
Ælfhere	kinsman of Wiglaf
Æschere	a prominent Dane, advisor to Hrothgar ; slain by Grendel's mother
Battle-Scyldings	see Scyldings
Battle-Scylfings	see Scylfings
Beanstan	father of Breca
Beowulf	(prologue) Danish king, son of Scyld
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

Freawaru	daughter of Hrothgar , betrothed to Ingeld
Frisians	a Germanic tribe; Finn 's people
Froda	chief of the Heathobards , father of Ingeld
Garmund	father of Offa
Geats	Hygelac 's people and Beowulf 's; a Germanic tribe; also called War-Geats, Hrethmen, Hrethlings, Weders
Gifthas	an East-Germanic tribe
Grendel	descendent of Cain ; monstrous marauder of the Danes
Guthlaf	a Danish warrior, companion of Hengest
Hæreth	father of Hygd
Hæthcyn	Geatish prince, second son of Hrethel
Half-Danes	see Danes
Halga	Danish prince, younger brother of Hrothgar
Hama	legendary Goth; stole Brosinga necklace
Healfdene	king of the Danes , father of Hrothgar
Heardred	king of the Geats , son of Hygelac
Heathobards	Ingeld 's people; a Germanic tribe
Heatholaf	a Wylfing slain by Ecgtheow
Heathoream	a Scandinavian tribe; Norwegians, more or less
Helmings	the family of Wealththeow
Hemming	kinsman of Offa and Eomer
Hengest	leader of the Danes ; killed Finn in Frisia
Heorogar	Dane, eldest brother of Hrothgar
Heorot	the great hall of Hrothgar
Heorowearð	Dane; son of Heorogar
Herebeald	Geatish prince, eldest son of Hrethel ; killed by his brother Hæthcyn
Heremod	king of the Danes in the poem's distant past, before the Scylding dynasty
Hereric	brother of Hygd , uncle of Heardred
Hetware	a Frankish tribe, allied with the Frisians ; fought against Hygelac
Hildeburh	sister of the Danish Hnæf , wife of the Frisian Finn
Hnæf	chief of the Half-Danes , brother of Hildeburh ; killed by Finn
Hoc	Dane, father of Hildeburh and Hnæf
Hondscio	Geatish warrior, comrade of Beowulf ; slain by Grendel
Honor-Scyldings	see Scyldings
Hrethel	king of the Geats , father of Hygelac , grandfather of Beowulf
Hrethlings	sons of Hrethel , i.e., the Geats
Hrethmen	the Geats
Hrethric	Dane, son of Hrothgar
Hrothgar	aged king of the Danes beset by Grendel ; helped by Beowulf
Hrothmund	Dane, son of Hrothgar
Hrothulf	Dane, son of Halga , nephew of Hrothgar ; not to be trusted
Hrunting	the sword of Unferth
Hugas	the Franks , allies of the Frisians
Hunlaf	father of one of the warriors in Hengest 's troop
Hygd	queen of the Geats , wife of Hygelac , daughter of Hæreth
Hygelac	king of the Geats , uncle of Beowulf
Ingeld	prince of the Heathobards , son of Froda , betrothed to Freawaru ; after the events narrated in the poem he burns down the great hall of Heorot

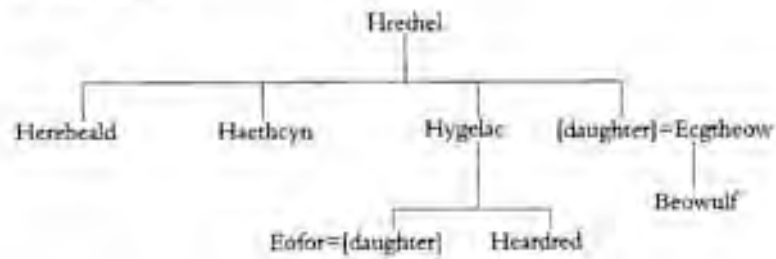
Ingwines	the “friends of Ing”: the Danes
Jutes	allies of the Frisians ; see Eotens
Merovingians	the Franks
Nægling	Beowulf’s sword
North-Danes	see Danes
Offa	king of the Angles, husband of Thryth
Ohthere	Swede, son of Ongentheow
Onela	Swede, son of Ongentheow ; usurped throne
Ongentheow	Swedish king; killed by Wulf and Eofor
Oslaf	a Danish warrior, companion of Hengest
Ring-Danes	see Danes
Scyld Scefing	legendary founder of the Danish royal family
Scyldings	the Danes; also called Battle-, Honor-, Victory-Scyldings
Scylfings	the Swedes
Sigemund	legendary Germanic hero, son of Wæls
South-Danes	see Danes
Spear-Danes	see Danes
Swerting	uncle of Hygelac
Thryth	(often construed as Modthryth) wife of Offa
Unferth	Danish spokesman (“thyle”) and courtier of Hrothgar
Victory-Scyldings	see Scyldings
Volsung	another name for Sigemund , son of Wæls
Wægmundings	the family of Weohstan , Wiglaf , and Beowulf
Wæls	father of Sigemund
War-Geats	see Geats
Wealhtheow	Danish queen, wife of Hrothgar
Weders	the Geats
Weland	legendary Germanic smith
Wendels	a Germanic tribe; perhaps the Vandals, perhaps not
Weohstan	father of Wiglaf ; killed Eanmund
West-Danes	see Danes
Wiglaf	son of Weohstan , young retainer of Beowulf
Withergyld	a dead Heathobard
Wonred	a Geat , father of Wulf and Eofor
Wulf	a warrior of the Geats , brother of Eofor ; assisted in killing Ongentheow
Wulfgar	a warrior of the Danes ; herald at the court of Hrothgar
Wylfings	a Germanic tribe of which Heatholaf was a member, until Ecgtheow killed him
Yrmenlaf	a Dane, younger brother of Æschere

Genealogies

1. The Danes (Scyldings)



2. The Geats



3. The Swedes (Scylfings)

