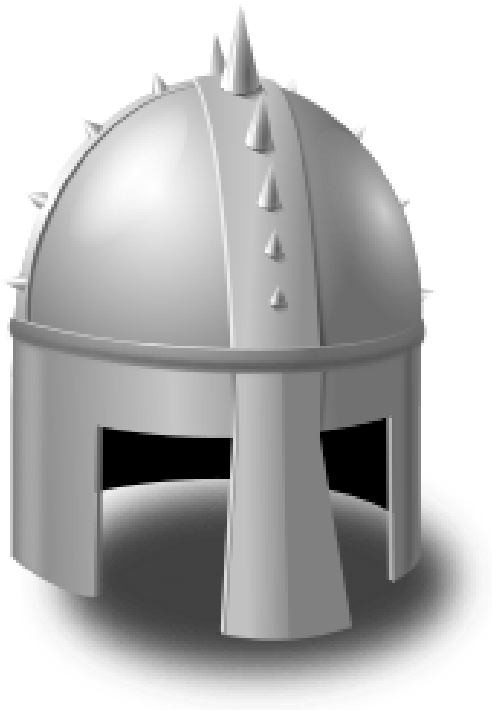
Beowulf

(translated by Seamus Heaney)



I

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
And the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
A wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
As his powers waxed and his worth was proved.
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
Beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
And begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield,
A cub in the yard, a comfort sent
By God to that nation. He knew what they had tholed,
The long times and troubles they'd come through
Without a leader; so the Lord of Life,
The glorious Almighty, made this man renowned.
Shield had fathered a famous son:
Beow's name was known through the north.
And a young prince must be prudent like that,
Giving freely while his father lives
So that afterwards in age when fighting starts
Steadfast companions will stand by him
And hold the line. Behavior that's admired
Is the path to power among people everywhere.

Shield was still thriving when his time came
And he crossed over into the Lord's keeping.
His warrior band did what he bade them
When he laid down the law among the Danes:
They shouldered him out to the sea's flood,
The chief they revered who had long ruled them.
A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbour,
Ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,
Laid out by the mast, amidships,
The great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures
Were piled upon him, and precious gear.
I never heard before of a ship so well furbished
With battle tackle, bladed weapons
And coats of mail. The massed treasure
Was loaded on top of him: it would travel far
On out into the ocean's sway.
They decked his body no less bountifully
With offerings than those first ones did
Who cast him away when he was a child

And launched him alone out over the waves.
And they set a gold standard up
High above his head and let him drift
To wind and tide, bewailing him
And mourning their loss. No man can tell,
No wise man in hall or weathered veteran
Knows for certain who salvaged that load.

Then it fell to Beow to keep the forts.
He was well regarded and ruled the Danes
For a long time after his father took leave
Of his life on earth. And then his heir,
The great Halfdane, held sway
For as long as he lived, their elder and warlord.
He was four times a father, this fighter prince:
One by one they entered the world,
Heorogar, Hrothgar, the good Halga
And a daughter, I have heard, who was Onela's queen,
A balm in bed to the battle-scarred Swede.

The fortunes of war favored Hrothgar.
Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,
Young followers, a force that grew
To be a mighty army. So his mind turned
To hall-building: he handed down orders
For men to work on a great mead-hall
Meant to be a wonder of the world forever;
It would be his throne-room and there he would dispense
His God-given goods to young and old---
But not the common land or people's lives.
Far and wide through the world, I have heard,
Orders for work to adorn that wall stead
Were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there,
Finished and ready, in full view,
The hall of halls. Heorot was the name
He had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
Nor did he renege, but doled out rings
And torques at the table. The hall towered,
Its gables wide and high and awaiting
A barbarous burning. That doom abided,
But in time it would come: the killer instinct
Unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.
Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
Nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
To hear the din of the loud banquet
Every day in the hall, the harp being struck
And the clear song of a skilled poet
Telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
How the Almighty had made the earth
A gleaming plain girdled with waters;

In His splendour He set the sun and moon
To be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
And filled the broad lap of the world
With branches and leaves; and quickened life
In every other thing that moved.

So times were pleasant for the people there
Until finally one, a fiend out of Hell,
Began to work his evil in the world.
Grendel was the name of this grim demon
Haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
And the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
In misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed
And condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
The Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
Cain got no good from committing that murder
Because the Almighty made him anathema
And out of the curse of his exile there sprang
Ogres and elves and evil phantoms
And the giants too who strove with God
Time and again until He gave them their reward.

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
For the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
Were settling into it after their drink,
And there he came upon them, a company of the best
Asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
And human sorrow. Suddenly then
The God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
Greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
From their resting places and rushed to his lair,
Flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
Blundering back with the butchered corpses.

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
Their wassail was over, they wept to heaven
And mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
The storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,
Humiliated by the loss of his guard,
Bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
And the demon's trail, in deep distress.
He was numb with grief, but got no respite
For one night later the merciless Grendel
Struck again with more gruesome murders.
Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.
It was easy then to meet with a man
Shifting himself to a safer distance
To bed in the bothies, for who could be blind

To the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
Of that hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
Kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
One against all, until the greatest house
In the world stood empty, a deserted wall stead.
For twelve winters, seasons of woe,
The lord of the Shieldings suffered under
His load of sorrow; and so, before long,
The news was known over the whole world.
Sad lays were sung about the beset king,
The vicious raids and ravages of Grendel,
His long and unrelenting feud,
Nothing but war; how he would never
Parley or make peace with any Dane
Nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.
No counsellor could ever expect
Fair reparation from those rabid hands.
All were endangered; young and old
Were hunted down by that dark death-shadow
Who lurked and swooped in the long nights
On the misty moors; nobody knows
Where these reavers from Hell roam on their errands.

So Grendel waged his lonely war,
Inflicting constant cruelties on the people,
Atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot,
Haunted the glittering hall after dark,
But the throne itself, the treasure-seat,
He was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast.

These were hard times, heart-breaking
For the prince of the Shieldings; powerful counselors,
The highest in the land, would lend advice,
Plotting how best the bold defenders
Might resist and beat off sudden attacks.
Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
Offering to idols, swore oaths
That the killer of souls might come to their aid
And save the people. That was their way,
Their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
They remembered Hell. The Almighty Judge
Of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
Was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
Who in time of trouble had to thrust his soul
In the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
He has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
Who after death can approach the Lord

And find friendship in the Father's embrace.

So that troubled time continued, woe
That never stopped, steady affliction
For Halfdane's son, too hard an ordeal.
There was panic after dark, people endured
Raids in the night, riven by the terror.

II

When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac's thane
Was on home ground, over in Geatland.
There was no one else like him alive.
In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
High-born and powerful. He ordered a boat
That would ply the waves. He announced his plan:
To sail the swan's road and search out that king,
The famous prince who needed defenders.
Nobody tried to keep him from going,
No elder denied him, dear as he was to them.
Instead, they inspected omens and spurred
His ambition to go, whilst he moved about
Like the leader he was, enlisting men,
The best he could find; with fourteen others
The warrior boarded the boat as captain,
A canny pilot along coast and currents.

Time went by, the boat was on water,
In close under the cliffs.
Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,
Sand churned in surf, warriors loaded a cargo of weapons.
Shining war-gear in the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
Away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.
Over the waves, with the wind behind her
And foam at her neck, she flew like a bird
Until her curved prow had covered the distance
And on the following day, at the due hour,
Those seafarers sighted land,
Sunlit cliffs, sheer crags
And looming headlands, the landfall they sought.
It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted
Over the side, out onto the sand,
And moored their ship. There was a clash of mail
And a thresh of gear. They thanked God
For that easy crossing on a calm sea.
When the watchman on the wall, the Shieldings' lookout
Whose job it was to guard the sea-cliffs,
Saw shields glittering on the gangplank
And battle-equipment being unloaded
He had to find out who and what

The arrivals were. So he rode to the shore,
This horseman of Hrothgar's, and challenged them
In formal terms, flourishing his spear:

"What kind of men are you who arrive
Rigged out for combat in coats of mail,
Sailing here over the sea lanes
In your steep-hulled boat? I have been stationed
As lookout on this coast for a long time.
My job is to watch the waves for raiders,
Any danger to the Danish shore.
Never before has a force under arms
Disembarked so openly---not bothering to ask
If the sentries allowed them safe passage
Or the clan had consented. Nor have I seen
A mightier man-at-arms on this earth
Than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken,
He is truly noble. This is no mere
Hanger-on in a hero's armour.
So now, before you fare inland
As interlopers, I have to be informed
About who you are and where you hail from.
Outsiders from across the water,
I say it again: the sooner you tell
Where you come from and why, the better."

The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard;
The distinguished one delivered this answer:
"We belong by birth to the Geat people
And owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.
In his day, my father was a famous man,
A noble warrior name Ecgtheow.
He outlasted many a long winter
And went on his way. All over the world
Men wise in council continue to remember him.
We come in good faith to find your lord
And nation's shield, the son of Halfdane.
Give us the right advice and direction.
We have arrived here on a great errand
To the lord of the Danes, and I believe therefore
There should be nothing hidden or withheld between us.
So tell us if what we have heard is true
About this threat, whatever it is,
This danger abroad in the dark nights,
This corpse-maker mongering death
In the Shieldings' country. I come to proffer
My wholehearted help and counsel.
I can show the wise Hrothgar a way
To defeat his enemy and find respite---
If any respite is to reach him, ever.

I can calm the turmoil and terror in his mind.
Otherwise, he must endure woes
And live with grief for as long as his hall
Stands at the horizon, on its high ground."

Undaunted, sitting astride his horse,
The coast-guard answered, "Anyone with gumption
And a sharp mind will take the measure
Of two things: what's said and what's done.
I believe what you have told me: that you are a troop
Loyal to our king. So come ahead
With your arms and your gear, and I will guide you.
What's more, I'll order my own comrades
On their word of honor to watch your boat
Down there on the strand---keep her safe
In her fresh tar, until the time comes
For her curved prow to preen on the waves
And bear this hero back to Geatland.
May one so valiant and venturesome
Come unharmed through the clash of battle."

So they went on their way. The ship rode the water,
Broad-beamed, bound by its hawser
And anchored fast. Boar-shapes flashed
Above their cheek-guards, the brightly forged
Work of goldsmiths, watching over
Those stern-faced men. They marched in step,
Hurrying on till the timbered hall
Rose before them, radiant with gold.
Nobody on earth knew of another
Building like it. Majesty lodged there,
And its light shone over many lands.
So their gallant escort guided them
To that dazzling stronghold and indicated
The shortest way to it; then the noble warrior
Wheeled on his horse and spoke these words:
"It is time for me to go. May the Almighty
Father keep you and in His kindness
Watch over your exploits. I'm away to the sea,
Back on alert against enemy raiders."

III

It was a paved track, a path that kept them
In marching order. Their mail-shirts glinted,
Hard and hand-linked; the high-gloss iron
Of their armour rang. So they duly arrived
In their grim war-graith and gear at the hall,
And, weary from the sea, stacked wide shields
Of the toughest hardwood against the wall,

Then collapsed on the benches; battle-dress
And weapons clashed. They collected their spears
In a seafarer's stook, a stand of grayish
Tapering ash. And the troops themselves
Were as good as their weapons.

Then a proud warrior
Questioned the men concerning their origins:
"Where do you come from, carrying these
Decorated shields and shirts of mail,
These cheek-hinged helmets and javelins?
I am Hrothgar's herald and officer.
I have never seen so impressive or large
An assembly of strangers. Stoutness of heart,
Bravery not banishment, must have brought you to Hrothgar."

The man whose name was known for courage,
The Geat leader, resolute in his helmet,
Answered in return: "We are retainers
From Hygelac's band. Beowulf is my name.
If your lord and master, the most renowned
Son of Halfdane, will hear me out
And graciously allow me to greet him in person,
I am ready and willing to report my errand."

Wulfgar replied, a Wendel chief
Renowned as a warrior, well known for his wisdom
And the temper of his mind: "I will take this message,
In accordance with your wish, to our noble king."
With that he turned to where Hrothgar sat,
Wulfgar addressed his dear lord:
"People from Geatland have put ashore.
They have sailed far over the wide sea.
They call the chief in charge of their band
By the name of Beowulf. They beg, my lord,
An audience with you, exchange of words
And formal greeting. Most gracious Hrothgar,
Do not refuse them, but grant them a reply.
From their arms and appointment, they appear well-born
And worthy of respect, especially the one
Who has led them this far: he is formidable indeed."

Hrothgar, protector of Shieldings, replied:
"I used to know him when he was a young boy.
His father before him was called Ecgtheow.
A crew of seamen who sailed for me once
With a gift-cargo across to Geatland
Returned with marvelous tales about him:
A thane, they declared, with the strength of thirty
In the grip of each hand. Now Holy God

Has, in His Goodness, guided him here
To the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel.
This is my hope; and for his heroism
I will recompense him with a rich treasure.
Go immediately, bid him and the Geats
He has is attendance to assemble and enter."
At the door of the hall, Wulfgar duly delivered the message:
"My lord, the conquering king of the Danes,
Bids me announce that he knows your ancestry;
Also that he welcomes you here to Heorot
And salutes your arrival from across the sea.
You are free now to move forward
To meet Hrothgar, in helmets and armor."
The hero arose, surrounded closely
By his powerful thanes. A party remained
Under orders to keep watch on the arms;
The rest proceeded, lead by their prince
Under Heorot's roof. And standing on the hearth
In webbed links that the smith had woven,
The fine-forged mesh of his gleaming mail shirt,
Resolute in his helmet, Beowulf spoke:
"Greetings to Hrothgar. I am Hygelac's kinsman,
One of his hall-troop. When I was younger,
I had great triumphs. Then news of Grendel,
Hard to ignore, reached me at home:
Sailors brought stories of the plight you suffer
In this legendary hall, how it lies deserted,
Empty and useless once the evening light
Hides itself under Heaven's dome.
So every elder and experienced councilman
Among my people supported my resolve
To come here to you, King Hrothgar,
Because all knew of my awesome strength.
And so, my request, O king of Bright-Danes,
Dear prince of the Shieldings, friend of the people
And their ring of defense, my one request
Is that you won't refuse me, who have come this far,
The privilege of purifying Heorot,
With my own men to help me, and nobody else.
I have heard moreover that the monster scorns
In his reckless way the use of weapons;
Therefore, to heighten Hygelac's fame
And gladden his heart, I hereby renounce
Sword and the shelter of the broad shield,
The heavy war-board: hand-to-hand
Is how it will be, a life-and-death
Fight with the fiend. Whichever one death fells
Must deem it a just judgment by God.
Fate goes ever as fate must."

Hrothgar, the helmet of the Shieldings, spoke:
"Beowulf, my friend, you have traveled here
To favour us with help and fight for us.
My household-guard are on the wane,
Fate sweeps them away into Grendel's clutches
But God can easily halt these raids and harrowing attacks!
Now take your place at the table, relish
The triumph of heroes to your heart's content."

Then a bench was cleared in that banquet hall
So the Geats could have room to be together
And the party sat, proud in their bearing,
Strong and stalwart. An attendant stood by
With a decorated pitcher, pouring bright
Helpings of mead. And the minstrel sang,
Filling Heorot with his head-clearing voice,
Gladdening that great rally of Geats and Danes.

Then the gray-haired treasure-giver was glad;
Far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes
And keeper of his people counted on Beowulf,
On the warrior's steadfastness and his word.
So the laughter started, the din got louder
And the crowd was happy. Wealhtheow came in,
Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies.
Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted
The men in the hall, then handed the cup to all ranks,
Treating the household and the assembled troop
Until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand.
With measured words she welcomed the Geat
And thanked God for granting her wish
That a deliverer she could believe in would arrive
To ease their afflictions. He accepted the cup,
A daunting man, dangerous in action
And eager for it always. He addressed Wealhtheow;
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, declared:
"I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea.
As I sat in the boat with my band of men,
I meant to perform to the uttermost
What your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
In the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfill that purpose,
Prove myself with a proud deed
Or meet my death here in the mead-hall."
This formal boast by Beowulf the Geat
Pleased the lady well and she went to sit
By Hrothgar, regal and arrayed with gold.

Then it was like old times in the echoing hall,
Proud talk and the people happy,
Loud and excited; until soon enough

Halfdane's heir had to be away
To his night's rest. He realized
That the demon was going to descend on the hall
That he had plotted all day, from dawn-light
Until darkness gathered again over the world
And stealthy night-shades came stealing forth
Under the cloud-murk. The company stood
As the two leaders took leave of each other:
Hrothgar wished Beowulf health and good luck,
Named him hall-warden and announced as follows:
"Never, since my hand could hold a shield
Have I entrusted or given control
Of the Dane's hall to anyone but you.
Ward and guard it, for it is the greatest of houses.
Be on your mettle now, keep in mind your fame,
Beware of the enemy. There's nothing you wish for
That won't be yours if you win through alive."

Hrothgar departed then with his house-guard.
The lord of the Shieldings, their shelter in war,
Left the mead-hall to lie with Wealhtheow,
His queen and his bedmate. The King of Glory
(as people learned) had posted a lookout
Who was a match for Grendel, a guard against monsters,
Special protection to the Danish prince.
And the Geat placed complete trust
In his strength of limb and the Lord's favor.
He began to remove his iron breast-mail,
Took off the helmet and handed his attendant
The patterned sword, a smith's masterpiece,
Ordering him to keep the equipment guarded.
And before he bedded down, Beowulf,
That prince of goodness, proudly asserted:
"When it comes to fighting, I count myself
As dangerous any day as Grendel.
So it won't be a cutting edge I'll wield
To mow him down, easily as I might.
He has no idea of the arts of war,
Of shield or sword-play, though he does possess
A wild strength. No weapons, therefore,
For either this night: unarmed he shall face me
If face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord
In His wisdom grant the glory of victory
To whichever side He sees fit."

Then down the brave man lay with his bolster
Under his head and his whole company
Of sea-rovers at rest beside him.
None of them expected he would ever see
His homeland again or get back

To his native place and the people who reared him.
They knew too well the way it was before,
How often the Danes had fallen prey
To death in the mead-hall. But the Lord was weaving
A victory on his war-loom for the Weather-Geats.
Through the strength of one they all prevailed;
They would crush their enemy and come through
In triumph and gladness. The truth is clear:
Almighty God rules over mankind, and always has.

IV

Then out of the night
Came the shadow-stalker, stealthy and swift;
The hall-guards were slack, asleep at their posts,
All except one; it was widely understood
That as long as the Lord forbade it,
The fiend could never bear them beyond his shadow-bourne.
One man, however, was in fighting mood,
Awake and on edge, spoiling for action.

In off the moors, down through the mist-bands
God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.
The bane of the race of men roamed forth,
Hunting for a prey in the high hall.
Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it
Until it shone above him, a sheer keep
Of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time
He had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar's dwelling---
Although never in his life, before or since,
Did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.
Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead
And arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door
Turned on its hinge when his hand touched it.
Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open
The mouth of the building, maddening for blood,
Pacing the length of the patterned floor
With his loathsome tread, while a baleful light,
Flame more than light, flared from his eyes.

He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping,
A ranked company of kinsmen and warriors
Quartered together. And his glee was demonic,
Picturing the mayhem: before morning
He would rip life from limb and devour them,
Feed on their flesh: but his fate that night
Was due to change, his days of ravening
Had come to an end.
Mighty and canny, Hygelac's kinsman was keenly watching
For the first move the monster would make.

Nor did the creature keep him waiting
But struck suddenly and started in;
He grabbed and mauled a man on his bench,
Bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood
And gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body
Utterly lifeless, eaten up
Hand and foot. Venturing closer,
his talon was raised to attack Beowulf
Where he lay on the bed; he was bearing in
With open claw when the alert hero's
Comeback and armlock forestalled him utterly.
The captain of evil discovered himself
In a handgrip harder than anything
He had ever encountered in any man
On the face of the earth. Every bone in his body
Quailed and recoiled, but he could not escape.
He was desperate to flee to his den and hide
With the devil's litter, for in all his days
He had never been clamped or cornered like this.
Then Hygelac's trusty retainer recalled
His bedtime speech, sprang to his feet
And got a firm hold. Fingers were bursting,
The monster back-tracking, the man overpowering.
The dread of the land was desperate to escape,
To take a roundabout road and flee
To his lair in the fens. The latching power
In his fingers weakened; it was the worst trip
The terror-monger had taken to Heorot.
And now the timbers trembled and sang,
A hall-session that harrowed every Dane
Inside the stockade: stumbling in fury,
The two contenders crashed through the building.
The hall clattered and hammered, but somehow
Survived the onslaught and kept standing:
It was handsomely structured, a sturdy frame
Braced with the best of blacksmith's work
Inside and out. The story goes
That as the pair struggled, mead benches were smashed
And sprung off the floor, gold fittings and all.
Before then, no Shielding elder would believe
There was any power or person on earth
Capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall
Unless the burning embrace of fire
Engulf it in flame. Then an extraordinary
Wail arose, and bewildering fear
Came over the Danes. Everyone felt it
Who heard that cry as it echoed off the wall,
A God-cursed scream and strain of catastrophe,
The howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf
Keening his wound. He was overwhelmed,

Manacled tight by the man who of all men
Was foremost and strongest in the days of this life.

But the earl troop's leader was not inclined
To allow his caller to depart alive:
He did not consider that life of much account
To anyone anywhere. Time and again,
Beowulf's warriors worked to defend
Their lord's life, laying about them
As best they could with their ancestral blades.
Stalwart in action, they kept striking out
On every side, seeking to cut
Straight to the soul. When they joined the struggle
There was something they could have not known at the time,
That no blade on earth, no blacksmith's art
Could ever damage their demon opponent.
He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge
Of every weapon. But his going away
Out of this world and the days of his life
Would be agony to him, and his alien spirit
would travel far into the fiends' keeping.

Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men
With pain and affliction in former times
And given offense also to God
Found that his bodily powers failed him.
Hygelac's kinsman kept him helplessly
Locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived
He was hateful to the other. The monster's whole
Body was in pain, a tremendous wound
Appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split
And the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted
The glory of winning; Grendel was driven
Under the fen banks, fatally hurt,
To his desolate lair. His days were numbered,
The end of his life was coming over him,
He knew it for certain; and one bloody clash
Had fulfilled the dearest wishes of the Danes.
The man who had lately landed among them,
Proud and sure, had purged the hall,
Kept it from harm; he was happy with his night-work
And the courage he had shown. The Geat captain
Had boldly fulfilled his boast to the Danes:
He had healed and relieved a huge distress,
Unremitting humiliations,
The hard fate they'd been forced to undergo,
No small affliction. Clear proof of this
Could be seen in the hand the hero displayed
High up near the roof: the whole of Grendel's
Shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.

Then morning came and many a warrior
Gathered, as I have heard, around the gift-hall,
Clan-chiefs flocking from far and near
Down wide-ranging roads, wondering greatly
At the monster's footprint. His fatal departure
Was regretted by no one who witnessed his trail,
The ignominious marks of his flight
Where he'd skulked away, exhausted in spirit
And beaten in battle, bloodying the path,
Hauling his doom to the demons' mere.
The bloodshot water wallowed and surged,
There were loathsome up throws and over turnings
Of waves and gore and would-slurry.
With his death upon him, he had dived deep
Into his marsh den, drowned out his life
And his heathen soul: hell claimed him there.

Then away they rode, the old retainers
With many a young man following after,
A troop on horseback, in high spirits
On their bay steeds. Beowulf's doings
Were praised over and over again.
Nowhere, they said, north or south
Between the two seas or under the tall sky
On the broad earth was there anyone better
To raise a shield or to rule a kingdom.
Yet there was no laying of blame on their lord,
The noble Hrothgar; he was a good king.

At times the war-band broke into a gallop,
Letting their chestnut horses race
Wherever they found the going good
On those well-known tracks. Meanwhile, a thane
Of the king's household, a carrier of tales,
A traditional singer deeply schooled
In the lore of the past, linked a new theme
To a strict metre. The man started
To recite with skill, rehearsing Beowulf's
Triumphs and feats in well-fashioned lines,
Entwining his words.

V

The light of day broke and kept brightening.
Bands of retainers galloped in excitement to
the gabled hall to see the marvel; and the king himself,
Guardian of the ring-hoard, goodness in person,
Walked in majesty from the women's quarters
With a numerous train, attended by his queen

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

When Hrothgar arrived at the hall, he spoke,
Standing on the steps, under the steep eaves,
Gazing at the roofwork and Grendel's talon:
"First and foremost, let the Almighty Father
Be thanked for this sight. I suffered a long
Harrowing by Grendel. But the Heavenly Shepherd
Can work his wonders always and everywhere.
Not long since, it seemed I would never
Be granted the slightest solace or relief
From any of my burdens: the best of houses
Glittered and reeked and ran with blood.
This one worry outweighed all others---
A constant distress to counselors entrusted
With defending the people's forts from assault
By monsters and demons. But now a man,
With the Lord's assistance, has accomplished something
None of us could manage before now
For all our efforts. Whoever she was
Who brought forth this flower of manhood,
If she is still alive, that woman can say
That in her labors the Lord of Ages
Bestowed a grace on her. So now, Beowulf,
I adopt you in my heart as a dear son.
Nourish and maintain this new connection,
You noblest of men; there'll be nothing you'll want for,
No worldly good that won't be yours.
I have often honored smaller achievements,
Recognized warriors not nearly as worthy,
Lavished rewards on the less deserving.
But you have made yourself immortal
By your glorious action. May the God of Ages
Continue to keep and requite you well."

Then Halfdane's son presented Beowulf
With gold standards as a victory gift,
An embroidered banner; also breast-mail
And a helmet; and a sword carried high,
That was both precious object and token of honor.
So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease;
It was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts
In front of the hall-troops. There haven't been many
Moments, I am sure, when men exchanged
Four such treasures at so friendly a sitting.
An embossed ridge, a band lapped with wire
Arched over the helmet: head-protection
To keep the keen-honed cutting edge
From damaging it when danger threatened
And the man was battling behind his shield.

Next the king ordered eight horses
With gold bridles to be brought through the yard
Into the hall. The harness of one
Included a saddle of sumptuous design,
The battle-seat where the son of Halfdane
Rode when he wished to join the sword-play:
Wherever the killing and carnage were the worst,
He would be to the fore, fighting hard.
Then the Danish prince, descendent of Ing,
Handed over both the arms and the horses,
Urging Beowulf to use them well.
And so their leader, the lord and guard
Of coffer and strong room, with customary grace
Bestowed upon Beowulf both sets of gifts.
A fair witness can see how well each one behaved.

The chieftain went on to reward the others:
Each man on the bench who had sailed with Beowulf
And risked the voyage received a bounty,
Some treasured possession. And compensation,
A price in gold, was settled for the Geat
Grendel had killed cruelly earlier--
As he would have killed more, had not mindful God
And one man's daring prevented that doom.
Past and present, God's will prevails.
Hence, understanding is always best
And a prudent mind. Whoever remains
For long here in this earthly life
Will enjoy and endure more than enough.

They sang then and played to please the hero,
Words and music for their warrior prince,
Harp tunes and tales of adventure:
There were high times on the hall benches
And the king's poet performed his part
With the saga of Finn and his sons, unfolding
The tale of that fierce attack in Friesland
Where Hnaef, king of the Danes, met death.
And his sister, Hildeburh, suffered cruelly.

"Son and brother,
She lost them both
On the battlefield.
They foredoomed, cut down
And spear-gored.
She, in shock,
Waylaid by grief,
Hoc's daughter--
How could she not
Lament her fate

When morning came
And the light broke
On her murdered dears?
And so farewell
Delight on earth,
War carried away
Finn's troop of thanes,
All but a few.
How then could Finn
Hold the line
Or fight on
To the end with Hengest,
How save
The rump of his force
From that enemy chief?
So a truce was offered
As follows: first
Separate quarters
To be cleared for the Danes,
Hall and throne
To be shared with the Frisians.
Then, second ;
Every day
At the dole-out of gifts
Finn, son of Focwald,
Should honor the Danes,
Bestow with an even
Hand to Hengest
And Hengest's men
The wrought-gold rings,
Bounty to match
The measure he gave
His own Frisians--
To keep morale
In the beer-hall high.
Both sides then
Sealed their agreement.
With oaths to Hengest
Finn swore
Openly, solemnly,
That the battle survivors
Would be guaranteed
Honor and status.
No infringement
By word or deed,
No provocation
Would be permitted.
Their own ring-giver was dead and gone,
They were leaderless
In forced allegiance

To his murderer.
A funeral pyre
Was then prepared,
Effulgent gold
Brought out from the hoard.
The pride and prince
Of the Shieldings lay
Awaiting the flame.
Everywhere
There were blood-plastered
Coats of mail.
The pyre was heaped
With boar-shaped helmets
Forged in gold,
With the gashed corpses
Of well-born Danes--
Many had fallen.
Then Hildeburh
Ordered her own
Son's body
To be burnt with Hnaef's,
The flesh on his bones
To sputter and blaze
Beside his uncle's.
The woman wailed
And sang keens,
The warrior went up.
Carcass flame
Swirled and fumed,
They stood round the burial
Mound and howled
As heads melted,
Crusted gashes
Spattered and ran
Bloody matter.
The glutton element
Flamed and consumed
The dead of both sides.
Their great days were gone.
Warriors scattered
To homes and forts
All over Friesland,
Fewer now, feeling
Loss of friends.
Hengest stayed,
Lived out that whole
Resentful, blood-sullen
Winter with Finn,
Homesick and helpless.
No ring-whorled prow

Could up then
And away on the sea.
Wind and water
Raged with storms,
Wave and shingle
Were shackled in ice
Until another year
Appeared in the yard
As it does to this day,
The seasons constant,
The wonder of light
Coming over us.
Then winter was gone,
Earth's lap grew lovely,
Longing woke
In the cooped-up exile
For a voyage home--
But more for vengeance,
Some way of bringing
Things to a head:
His sword arm hankered
To greet the Jutes.

Thus blood was spilled,
The gallant Finn
Slain in his home
The wildness in them
Had to brim over.
The hall ran red
With blood of enemies.
Finn was cut down,
The queen brought away
And everything
The Shieldings could find
Inside Finn's walls--
The Frisian king's
Gold collars and gemstones--
Swept off to the ship.
Over sea-lanes then
Back to Daneland
The warrior troop
Bore that lady home."

VI

The poem was over,
The poet had performed, a pleasant murmur
Started on the benches, stewards did the rounds
With wine in splendid jugs,
The queen spoke to Hrothgar:
"Enjoy this drink, my most generous lord;
Raise up your goblet, entertain the Geats

Duly and gently, discourse with them,
Be open-handed, happy and fond.
Relish their company, but recollect as well
All of the boons that have been bestowed upon you.
The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed
And now the word is that you want to adopt
This warrior as a son. So, while you may,
Bask in your fortune, then bequeath
Kingdom and nation to your kith and kin."
She turned then to the bench where her boys sat,
All the youth together; and that good man,
Beowulf the Geat, sat between the brothers.

The cup was carried to him, kind words
Spoken in welcome and wealth of gold
Given to the hero; two arm bangles,
A mail shirt and rings, and the most resplendent
Torque of gold I have ever heard tell of
Anywhere on earth or under heaven.

Then the queen pronounced in the presence of the company:
"Take delight in this torque, dear Beowulf,
Wear it for luck and also wear also this mail
From our people's armory: may you prosper in them!
Be acclaimed or strength, for kindly guidance
To these two boys, and your bounty will be sure.
You have won renown: you are known to all men
Far and near, now and forever.
Your sway is wide and the wind's home,
As the sea around cliffs. And so, my prince,
I wish you a lifetime's luck and blessings
To enjoy this treasure. Treat my sons
With tender care, be strong and kind.
Here each comrade is true to the other,
Loyal to lord, loving in spirit.
The thanes have one purpose, the people are ready:
Having drunk and pledged, the ranks do as I bid."

She moved then to her place. Men were drinking wine
At that rare feast; how could they know fate,
The grim shape of things to come,
The threat looming over many thanes
As night approached and king Hrothgar prepared
To retire to his quarters? Retainers in great numbers
Were posted on guard as so often in the past.
Benches were pushed back, bedding gear and bolsters
Spread across the floor, and one man
Lay down to his rest, already marked for death.
At their heads they placed their polished timber
Battle-shields; and on the bench over them,

Each man's kit was kept to hand:
A towering war-helmet, webbed mail-shirt
And great-shafted spear. It was their habit
Always and everywhere to be ready for action,
At home or in the camp, in whatever case
And at whatever time the need arose
To rally round their lord. They were a right people.

They went to sleep. And one paid dearly
For his night's ease, as had happened to them often,
Ever since Grendel occupied the gold-hall,
Committing evil until the end came,
Death after his crimes. Then it became clear,
Obvious to everyone once the fight was over,
That an avenger lurked and was still alive,
Grimly biding time. Grendel's mother,
Monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.
She had been forced down into fearful waters,
The cold depths, after Cain had killed
His father's son, felled his own
Brother with the sword. Branded an outlaw,
Marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds,
Shunned company and joy. And from Cain there sprang
Misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel,
The banished and accursed. But now his mother
Had sallied forth on a savage journey,
Grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.

VII

She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall,
Danes lay asleep, earls who would soon know
A great reversal once Grendel's mother
Attacked and entered.
Then in the hall, hard-honed swords
Were grabbed from the bench, many a broad shield
Lifted and braced; there was little thought of helmets
Or woven mail when they woke in terror.

The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out,
In mortal terror the moment she was found.
She had pounced and taken one of the retainers
In a tight hold, then headed for the fen.
To Hrothgar, this man was the most beloved
Of the friends he trusted between the two seas.
She had done away with a great warrior,
Ambushed him at rest.

Beowulf was elsewhere.

Earlier, after the reward of the treasure,
The Geat had been given another lodging.
There was an uproar in Heorot.
She had snatched their trophy,
Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow
To the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard,
Both parties having to pay
With the lives of friends. And the old lord,
The gray-haired warrior, was heartsore and weary
When he heard the news: his highest-placed advisor,
His dearest companion, was dead and gone.

Beowulf was quickly brought to the chamber:
The winner of fights, the arch-warrior,
Came first-footing in with his fellow troops
To where the king in his wisdom waited,
Still wondering whether Almighty God
Would even turn the tide of his misfortunes.
So Beowulf entered with his band in attendance
And the wooden floor-boards banged and rang
As he advanced, hurrying to address
The prince of the Ingwins, asking if he'd rested
Since the urgent summons had come as a surprise.

Then Hrothgar, the Shieldings' helmet, spoke:
"Rest? What is rest? Sorrow has returned.
Alas for the Danes! Aeschere is dead.
He was Yrmenlaf's elder brother
And a soul mate to me, a true mentor,
My right-hand man when the ranks clashed
And our boar-crests had to take a battering
In the line of action. Aechere was everything
The world admires in a wise man and a friend.
Then this roaming killer came in a fury
And slaughtered him in Heorot. Where she is hiding,
Glutting on the corpse and glorying in her escape,
I cannot tell; she has taken up the feud
Because of last night, when you killed Grendel,
Wrestled and racked him in ruinous combat
Since for too long he had terrorized us
With his depredations. He died in battle,
Paid with his life; and now this powerful
Other one arrives, this force for evil
Driven to avenge her kinsman's death.

I have heard it said by my people in hall,
Counselors who live in the upland country,
That they have seen two such creatures
Prowling the moors, huge marauders
From some other world. One of these things,

As far as anyone ever can ever discern,
Looks like a woman; the other, warped
In the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale
Bigger than any man, an unnatural birth
Called Grendel by the country people
In former days. They are fatherless creatures,
And their whole ancestry is hidden in a past
Of demons and ghosts. They dwell apart
Among wolves on hills, on windswept crags
And treacherous keshes, where cold streams
Pour down the mountain and disappear
Under mist and moorland.

A few miles from here
A frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch
Above a mere; the overhanging bank
Is a maze of tree roots mirrored in its surface.
At night there, something uncanny happens:
The water burns. And the mere bottom
Has never been sounded by the sons of men.
On its bank, the heather-stepper halts:
The hart in flight from pursuing hounds
Will turn to face them with firm-set horns
And die in the wood rather than dive
Beneath its surface. That is no good place.
When the wind blows up and stormy weather
Makes clouds scud and the skies weep,
Out of its depths a dirty surge
Is pitched towards the heavens. Now help depends
Again on you and on you alone.
The gap of danger where the demon waits
Is still unknown to you. Seek it if you dare.
I will compensate you for settling the feud
As I did last time with lavish wealth,
Coffers of coiled gold, if you come back."

Beowulf, the son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better
To avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.
For every one of us, living in this world
Means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
Win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
That will be his best and only bulwark.
So arise, my lord, and let us immediately
Set forth on the trail of this troll-dam.
I guarantee you: she will not get away,
Not to dens underground nor upland groves
Nor the ocean floor. She'll have nowhere to flee to.
Endure your troubles today. Bear up
And be the man I expect you to be."

With that the old lord sprang to his feet
And praised God for Beowulf's pledge.
Then a bit and halter were brought for his horse
With the plaited mane. The wise king mounted
The royal saddle and rode out in style
With a force of shield-bearers. The forest paths
Were marked all over with the monster's tracks,
Her trail on the ground wherever she had gone
Across the dark moors, dragging away
The body of that thane, Hrothgar's best
Counselor and overseer of the country.
So the noble prince proceeded undismayed
Up fells and screes, along narrow footpaths
And ways where they were forced into single file,
Ledges on cliffs above lairs of water-monsters.
He went in front with a few men,
Good judges of the lie of the land,
And suddenly discovered the dismal wood,
Mountain trees growing out at an angle
Above gray stones: the bloodshot water
Surged underneath. It was a sore blow
To all of the Danes, friends of the Shieldings,
A hurt to each and every one
Of that noble company when they came upon
Aechere's head at the foot of the cliff.

Everybody gazed as the hot gore
Kept wallowing up and an urgent war-horn
Repeated its notes: the whole party
Sat down to watch. The water was infested
With all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-dragons
And monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,
Serpents and wild things such as those that often
Surface at dawn to roam the sail-road
And doom the voyage. Down they plunged,
Lashing in anger at the loud call
Of the battle bugle. An arrow from the bow
Of the Geat chief got one of them
As he surged to the surface: the seasoned shaft
Went in deep and his freedom in the water
Got less and less. It was his last swim.
He was swiftly overwhelmed in the shallows,
Prodded by barbed boar-spears,
Cornered, beaten, pulled up on the bank,
A strange lake-birth, a loathsome catch
Men gazed at in awe.

Beowulf got ready,

Donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;
His mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail
Would soon meet with the menace under water.
It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:
No enemy's clasp could crush him in it,
No vicious arm lock choke his life out.
To guard his head, he had a glittering helmet
That was due to be muddied on the mere bottom
And blurred in the up swirl. It was of beaten gold,
Princely headgear hooped and hasped
By a weapon-smith who had worked wonders
In days gone by and embellished it with boar-shapes;
Since then it had resisted every sword.
And another item lent by Unferth
At that moment was of no small importance:
The brehon handed him a hilted weapon,
A rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.
The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns
Had been tempered in blood. It had never failed
The hand of anyone who had hefted it in battle,
Anyone who had fought and faced the worst
In the gap of danger. This was not the first time
It had been called to perform heroic feats.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"Wisest of kings, now that I have come
To the point of action, I ask you to recall
What we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane
And gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall
And suffer death while serving in your cause,
Would act like a father to me afterwards.
If this combat kills me, take care
Of my young company, my comrades in arms.
And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar,
To send Hygelac the treasures I received.
Let the lord of the Geats gaze on that gold,
Let Hrethel's son take note of it and see
That I found a ring-giver of rare magnificence
And enjoyed the good of his generosity.
And Unferth is to have what I inherited:
To that far-famed man I bequeath my own
Sharp-honed, wave-sheened wonder blade.
With Hrunting I shall gain glory or die.

(audiobook: Chapter 2)
After these words, the prince of the Weather-Geats
Was impatient to be away and plunged suddenly:
Without further ado, he dived into the heaving
Depths of the lake. It was the best part of a day

Before he could see the solid bottom.

The hero observed that swamp-thing from hell,
The tarn-hag in all her terrible strength,
Then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm:
The decorated blade came down ringing
And singing on her head. But he soon found
His battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade
Refused to bite. It spared her and failed
The man in his need. It had gone through many
Hand-to-hand fights, had hewed the armor
And helmets of the doomed, but here at last
The fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.
Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about
His name and fame: he never lost heart.
Then, in a fury, he flung his sword away.
The keen, inlaid, worm-looped-patterned steel
Was hurled to the ground: he would have to rely
On the might of his arm. So must a man do
Who intends to gain enduring glory
In a combat. Life doesn't cost him a thought.
Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to his fight
With Grendel's mother, gripped her shoulder
And laid about him in a battle frenzy:
He pitched his killer opponent to the floor
But she rose quickly and retaliated,
Grappled him tightly in her grim embrace.
The sure-footed fight felt suddenly daunted,
The strongest of warriors stumbled and fell.
So she pounced upon him and pulled out
A broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge
Her only child. But the mesh of the chain-mail
On Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life,
Turned the edge and tip of the blade.
The son of Ecgtheow would surely have perished
And the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth
Had the strong links and locks of his war-gear
Not helped to save him: Holy God
Decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,
The Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance
Once Beowulf got back on his feet.

Then he saw a blade that boded well,
A sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom
From the days of the giants, an ideal weapon,
One that any warrior would envy,
But so huge and heavy of itself
Only Beowulf could wield it in battle.
So the Shieldings' hero, hard-pressed and enraged,
Took a firm hold of the hilt and swung

The blade in an arc, a resolute blow
That bit deep into her neck bone
And severed it entirely, toppling the doomed
House of her flesh; she fell to the floor.
The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated.

The seafarers' leader made for land,
Resolutely swimming, delighted with his prize,
The mighty load he was lugging to the surface.
His thanes advanced in a troop to meet him,
Thanking God and taking great delight
In seeing their prince back safe and sound.
Quickly the hero's helmet and mail-shirt
Were loosed and unlaced. The lake settled,
Clouds darkened above the bloodshot depths.

With high hearts they headed away
Along footpath and trails through the fields,
Roads that they knew, each of them wrestling
With the head they were carrying from the lakeside cliff,
Men kingly in their courage and capable
Of difficult work. It was a task for four
To hoist Grendel's head on a spear
And bear it under strain to the bright hall.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"So, son of Halfdane, prince of the Shieldings,
We are glad to bring this booty from the lake.
It is a token of triumph and we tender it to you.
I barely survived the battle underwater.
It was hard-fought, a desperate affair
That could have gone badly; if God had not helped me,
The outcome would have been quick and fatal.
I have wrested the hilt
From the enemies' hand, avenged the evil
Done to the Danes; it is what was due.
And this I pledge, O prince of the Shieldings:
You can sleep secure with your company of troops
In Heorot Hall. Never need you fear
For a single thane of your sept or nation,
Young warriors or old, that laying waste of life
You and your people endured of yore."

Then the golden hilt was handed over
To the old lord, a relic from long ago
For the venerable ruler. That rare smith work
Was passed on to the prince of the Danes
When those devils perished; once death removed
That murdering, guilt-steeped, God-cursed fiend,
Eliminating his unholy life

And his mother's as well, it was willed to that king
Who of all the lavish gift-lords of the north
Was the best regarded between the two seas.

VIII

And soon all was restored, the same as before.
Happiness came back, the hall was thronged,
And a banquet set forth; black night fell
And covered them in darkness.
Then the company rose
For the old campaigner: the gray-haired prince
Was ready for bed. And a need for rest
Came over the brave shield-bearing Geat.
He was a weary sea-farer, far from home,
So immediately a house-guard guided him out,
One whose office entailed looking after
Whatever a thane on the road in those days
Might need or require. It was noble courtesy.

That great heart rested. The hall towered,
Gold-shingled and gabled, and the guest slept in it
Until the black raven with raucous glee
Announced heaven's joy, and a hurry of brightness
Overran the shadows. Warriors rose quickly,
Impatient to be off: their own country
Was beckoning the nobles; and the bold voyager
Longed to be aboard his distant boat.
Then that stalwart fighter ordered Hrunting
To be brought to Unferth, and bade Unferth
Take the sword and thanked him for lending it.
He said he had found it a friend in battle
And a powerful help; he put no blame
On the blade's cutting edge. He was a considerate man.

And there the warriors stood in their war-gear,
Eager to go, while their honored lord
Approached the platform where the other sat.
The undaunted hero addressed Hrothgar.
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"Now we who crossed the wide sea
Have to inform you that we feel a desire
To return to Hygelac. Here we have been welcomed
And thoroughly entertained. You have treated us well.
If there is any favor on earth I can perform
Beyond the deeds of arms I have done already,
Anything that would merit your affections more,
I shall act, my lord, with alacrity.
If ever I hear from across the ocean
That people on your borders are threatening battle
As attackers have done from time to time,

I shall land with a thousand thanes at my back
To help your cause. Hygelac may be young
To rule a nation, but this much I know
About the king of the Geats: he will come to my aid
And want to support me by word and action
In your hour of need, when honor dictates
That I raise a hedge of spears around you.
Then if Hrethric should think about traveling
As a king's son to the court of the Geats,
He will find many friends. Foreign places
Yield more to one who is himself worth meeting."

Hrothgar spoke and answered him:
"The Lord in his wisdom sent you those words
And they came from the heart. I have never heard
So young a man make truer observations.
You are strong in body and mature in mind,
Impressive in speech. If it should come to pass
That Hrethel's descendant dies beneath a spear,
If deadly battle or the sword blade or disease
Fells the prince who guards your people
And you are still alive, then I firmly believe
The seafaring Geats won't find a man
Worthier of acclaim as their king and defender
Than you, if only you would undertake
The lordship of your homeland. My liking for you
Deepens with time, dear Beowulf.
What you have done is to draw two peoples,
The Geat nation and us neighboring Danes,
Into shared peace and a pact of friendship
In spite of hatreds we have harbored in the past.
For as long as I rule this far-flung land
Treasures will change hands and each side will treat
The other with gifts; across the gannet's bath,
Over the broad sea, whorled prows will bring
Presents and tokens. I know your people
Are beyond reproach in every respect,
Steadfast in the old way with friend or foe."

Then the earl's defender furnished the hero
With twelve treasures and told him to set out,
To sail with those gifts safely home
To the people he loved, but to return promptly.
And so the good and gray-haired Dane,
That high-born king, kissed Beowulf
And embraced his neck, then broke down
In sudden tears. Two forebodings
Disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger:
Nevermore would they meet each other
Face to face. And such was his affection

That he could not help being overcome:
His fondness for the man was so deep-founded,
It warmed his heart and wound the heartstrings
Tight in his breast.

The embrace ended
And Beowulf, glorious in his gold regalia,
Stepped the green earth. Straining at anchor
And ready for boarding, his boat awaited him.
So they went on their journey, and Hrothgar's generosity
Was praised repeatedly. He was a peerless king
Until old age sapped his strength and did him
Mortal harm, as it has done so many.

Down to the waves then, dressed in the web
Of their chain-mail and war-shirts those young men
Marched in high spirits. The coast-guard spied them,
Thanes setting forth, the same as before.
His salute this time from the top of the cliff
Was far from unmannerly; he galloped to meet them
And as they took ship in their shining gear,
He said how welcome they would be in Geatland.
Then the broad hull was beached on the sand
To be cargoed with treasure, horses and war-gear.
The curved prow motioned; the mast stood high
Above Hrothgar's riches in the loaded hold.

The guard who had watched the boat was given
A sword with gold fittings and in future days
That present would make him a respected man
At his place on the mead-bench.

IX

Then the keel plunged
And shook in the sea; and they sailed from Denmark.
Right away the mast was rigged with its sea-shawl;
Sail ropes were tightened, timbers drummed
And stiff winds kept the wave-crosser
Skimming ahead; as she heaved forward,
Her foamy neck was fleet and buoyant,
A lapped prow loping over currents,
Until finally the Geats caught sight of coastline
And familiar cliffs. The keel reared up,
Wind lifted it home, it hit on the land.

The harbor guard came hurrying out
To the rolling water: he had watched the offing
Long and hard, on the lookout for those friends.
With the anchor cables, he moored their craft
Right where it had beached, in case a backwash

Might catch the hull and carry it away.
Then he ordered the prince's treasure-trove
To be carried ashore. It was a short step
From there to where Hrethel's son and heir,
Hygelac the gold-giver, makes his home
On a secure cliff, in the company of retainers.

Heroic Beowulf and his band of men
Crossed the wide strand, striding along
The sandy foreshore; the sun shone,
The world's candle warmed them from the south
As they hastened to where, as they had heard,
The young king, Ongentheow's killer
And his people's protector, was dispensing rings
Inside his bawn. Beowulf's return
Was reported to Hygelac as soon as possible,
News that the captain was now in the enclosure,
His battle-brother back from the fray
Alive and well, walking to the hall.
Room was quickly made, on the king's orders,
And the troops filed across the cleared floor.

After Hygelac had offered greetings
To his loyal thane in lofty speech,
He and his kinsman, that hale survivor,
Sat face to face. Haereth's daughter
Moved about with the mead-jug in her hand,
Taking care of the company, filling the cups
That warriors held out. Then Hygelac began
To put courteous questions to his old comrade
In the high hall. He hankered to know
Every tale the Sea-Geats had to tell.

"How did you fare on your foreign voyage,
Dear Beowulf, when you abruptly decided
To sail away across the salt water
And fight at Heorot? Did you help Hrothgar
Much in the end? Could you ease the prince
Of his well-known troubles? Your undertaking
Cast my spirits down, I dreaded the outcome
Of your expedition and pleaded with you
Long and hard to leave the killer be,
Let the South-Danes settle their own
Blood-feud with Grendel. So God be thanked
I am granted this sight of you, safe and sound."

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"What happened, lord Hygelac, is hardly a secret
Any more among men in this world--
Myself and Grendel coming to grips

On the very spot where he had visited destruction
On the Victory-Shieldings and violated
Life and limb, losses I avenged
So no earthly offspring of Grendel's
Need ever boast of that bout before dawn,
No matter how long the last of his evil
Family survives.

When I first landed
I proceeded to the ring-hall and saluted Hrothgar.
Once he discovered why I had come
The son of Halfdane sent me immediately
To sit with his own sons on the bench.
It was a happy gathering. In my whole life
I have never seen mead enjoyed more
In any hall on earth. Sometimes the queen
Herself appeared, peace-pledge between nations,
To hearten the young ones and hand out
A torque to a warrior, then take her place.
Sometimes Hrothgar's daughter distributed
Ale to older ranks, in order on the benches:
I heard the company call her Freawaru
As she made her rounds, presenting men
With the gem-studded bowl, young bride-to-be
To the gracious Ingeld, in her gold-rimmed attire.
The friend of the Shieldings favors her betrothal:
The guardian of the kingdom sees good in it
And hopes this woman will heal old wounds
And grievous feuds.

But generally the spear
Is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed,
No matter how admirable the bride may be.
"Think how the Heathobards will be bound to feel,
Their lord, Ingeld, and his loyal thanes,
When he walks in with that woman to the feast:
Danes are at the table, being entertained,
Honored guests in glittering regalia,
Burnished ring-mail that was their hosts' birthright,
Looted when the Heathobards could no longer wield
Their weapons in the shield-clash, when they went down
With their beloved comrades and forfeited their lives.
Then an old spearman will speak while they are drinking,
Having glimpsed some heirloom that brings alive
Memories of the massacre; his mood will darken
And heart-stricken, in the stress of his emotion,
He will begin to test a young-man's temper
And stir up trouble, starting like this:
"Now, my friend, don't you recognize
Your father's sword, his favorite weapon,

Then one he wore when he went out in his war-mask
To face the Danes on that final day?
After Wethergeld died and his men were doomed
The Shieldings quickly claimed the field,
And now here's the son of one or other
Of those same killers coming through our hall
Overbearing us, mouthing boasts,
And rigged in armor that by right is yours.'
And so he keeps on, recalling and accusing,
Working things up with bitter words
Until one of the lady's retainers lies
Spattered in blood, split open
On his father's account. The killer knows
The lie of the land and escaped with his life.
Then on both sides the oath-bound lords
Will break the peace, a passionate hate
Will build up in Ingeld and love for his bride
Will falter in him as the feud rankles.
I therefore suspect the good faith of the Heathobards,
The truth of their friendship and the trustworthiness
Of their alliance with the Danes.

But now, my lord,
I shall carry on with my account of Grendel,
The whole story of everything that happened
In the hand-to-hand fight.

After heaven's gem
Had gone mildly to earth, that maddened spirit,
The terror of those twilights, came to attack us
Where we stood guard, still safe inside the hall.
There deadly violence came down on Handscio
And he fell as fate ordained, the first to perish,
Rigged out for the combat. A comrade from our ranks
Had come to grief in Grendel's maw:
He ate up the entire body.
There was blood on his teeth, he was bloated and dangerous,
All roused up, yet still unready
To leave the hall empty-handed;
Renowned for his might, he matched himself against me,
Wildly reaching. He had this roomy pouch,
A strange accoutrement, intricately strung
And hung at the ready, a rare patchwork
Of devilishly fitting dragon-skins.
I had done him no wrong, yet the raging demon
Wanted to cram me and many another
Into this bag--but it was not to be
Once I got to my feet in a blind fury.

It would take too long to tell how I repaid

The terror of the land for every life he took
And so won credit for you, my king,
And for all your people. And although he got away
To enjoy life's sweetness for a while longer,
His right hand stayed behind him in Heorot,
Evidence of his miserable overthrow
As he dived into murk on the mere bottom.

"I got lavish rewards from the lord of the Danes
For my part in the battle, beaten gold
And much else, once morning came
And we took our places at the banquet table.
There was singing and excitement: an old reciter,
A carrier of stories, recalled the early days.
At times some hero made the timbered harp
Tremble with sweetness, or related true
And tragic happenings; at times the king
Gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale,
Or a battle-scarred veteran, bowed with age,
Would begin to remember the martial deeds
Of his youth and prime and be overcome
As the past welled up in his wintry heart.
"We were happy there the whole day long
And enjoyed our time until another night
Descended upon us. Then, with sudden dispatch,
The vehement mother avenged her son
And wreaked destruction. Death had robbed her;
Geats had slain Grendel, so his ghastly dam
Struck back and with bare-faced defiance
Laid a man low. Thus life departed
From the sage Auschere, an elder wise in council.
But afterwards, on the morning following,
The Danes could not burn the dead body
Nor lay the remains of the man they loved
On his funeral pyre. She had fled with the corpse
And taken refuge beneath torrents on the mountain.
It was a hard blow for Hrothgar to bear,
Harder than any he had undergone before.
And so the heartsore king beseeched me
In your royal name to take my chances
Underwater, to win glory
And prove my worth. He promised me rewards.
Hence, as is well known, I went to my encounter
With the terror-monger at the bottom of the tarn.
For a while it was hand-to-hand between us,
Then blood went curdling along the currents
And I beheaded Grendel's mother in the hall
With a mighty sword. I barely managed
To escape with my life; my time had not yet come.
But Halfdane's heir, the shelter of those earls,

Again endowed me with a multitude of gifts.

"Thus the king acted with due custom.
I was paid and recompensed completely,
Given full measure and the freedom to choose
From Hrothgar's treasures by Hrothgar himself.
These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present
To you as gifts. It is still upon your grace
That all favor depends. I have few kinsman
Who are close, my king, except for your kind self."
Then he order the boar-framed standard to be brought,
The battle-topping helmet, the mail-shirt gray as hoar-frost
And the precious war-sword;
I heard four horses were handed over next.
Beowulf bestowed four bay steeds
To go with the armor, swift gallopers,
All alike. So ought a kinsman act,
Instead of plotting and planning in secret
To bring people to grief, or conspiring to arrange
The death of comrades. The warrior king
Was uncle to Beowulf and honored by his nephew:
Each was concerned for the other's good.

I heard he presented Hygd with a gorget,
The priceless torque that the prince's daughter,
Wealhtheow, had given him; and three horses,
Supple creatures, brilliantly saddled.
The bright necklace would be luminous on Hygd's breast.

Thus Beowulf bore himself with valor;
He was formidable in battle yet behaved with honor
And took no advantage: never cut down
A comrade who was drunk, kept his temper
And, warrior that he was, watched and controlled
His God-sent strength and his outstanding
Natural powers. He had been poorly regarded
For a long time, was taken by the Geats
For less than he was worth: and their lord too
Had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall.
They firmly believed that he lacked force,
That the prince was a weakling; but presently
Every affront to his deserving was reversed.

The battle-famed king, bulwark of his earls,
Ordered a gold-chased heirloom of Hrethel's
To be brought in; it was the best example
Of a gem-studded sword in the Geat treasury.
This he laid on Beowulf's lap
And then rewarded him with land as well,
Seven thousand hides, and a hall and a throne.

Both owned land by birth in that country,
Ancestral ground; but the greater right
And sway were inherited by the higher born.

X

A lot was to happen in later days
In the fury of battle. Hygelac fell
And the shelter of Heardred's shield proved useless
Against the fierce aggression of the Shylfings:
Ruthless swordsmen, seasoned campaigners,
They came against him and his conquering nation,
And with cruel force cut him down
So that afterwards, the wide kingdom
Reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well
For fifty winters, grew old and wise
As warden of the land,
Until one began
To dominate the dark, a dragon on the prowl
From the steep vaults of a stone-roofed barrow
Where he guarded a hoard; there was a hidden passage,
Unknown to men, but someone managed
To enter by it and interfere
With the heathen trove. He had handled and removed
A gem-studded goblet; it gained him nothing,
Though with a thief's wiles he had outwitted
The sleeping dragon; that drove him into rage,
As the people of that country would soon discover.

The intruder who broached the dragon's treasure
And moved him to wrath had never meant to.
It was desperation on the part of a slave
Fleeing the heavy hand of some master,
Guilt-ridden and on the run,
Going to ground. But he soon began
To shake with terror, in shock,
The wretch panicked and ran
Away with the precious metalwork.
There were many other
Heirlooms heaped inside the earth-house,
Because long ago, with deliberate care,
Some forgotten person
Had deposited the whole rich inheritance of a high-born race
In that ancient cache. Death had come
And taken them all in times gone by
And the one surviving witness of their fate,
The last veteran, could envisage only
The same fate for himself: he foresaw that his joy
In the treasure would be brief.

A newly constructed

Barrow stood waiting, on a wide headland
Close to the waves, its entryway secured.
Into it the keeper of the hoard had carried
All the goods and golden ware
Worth preserving. His words were few:
"Now, earth, hold what earls once held
And heroes can no more; it was mined from you first
By honorable men. My own people
Have been ruined in war; one by one
They went down to death, looked their last
On sweet life in the hall. I am left with nobody
To bear a sword or burnish plated goblets,
Put a sheen on the cup. The companies have departed.
The hard helmet, hasped with gold,
Will be stripped of its hoops; and the helmet-shiner
Who should polish the metal of the war-mask sleeps;
The coat of mail that came through all fights,
Through shield-collapse and cut of sword,
Decays with the warrior. Nor may webbed mail
Range far and wide on a warlord's back
Beside his mustered troops. No trembling harp,
No tuned timber, no tumbling hawk
Swerving through the hall, no swift horse
Pawing the courtyard. Pillage and slaughter
Have emptied the earth of entire peoples."
And so he mourned as he moved about the world,
Deserted and alone, lamenting his unhappiness
Day and night, until death's flood
Brimmed up in his heart.

Then an old harrower of the dark
Happened to find the hoard open,
The burning one who hunts out barrows,
The slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky
With streamers of fire. People on the farms
Are in dread of him. He is driven to hunt out
Hoards under ground, to guard heathen gold
Through age-long vigils, though to little avail.
For three centuries, this scourge of the people
Had stood guard on that stoutly protected
Underground treasury, until the intruder
Unleashed its fury; he hurried to his lord
With the gold-plated cup and made his plea
To be reinstated. Then the vault was rifled,
The ring-hoard robbed, and the wretched man
Had his request granted. His master gazed
On that find from the past for the first time.

When the dragon awoke, trouble flared again.

He rippled down the rock, writhing with anger
When he saw the footprints of the prowler who had stolen
Too close to his dreaming head.
So may a man not marked by fate
Easily escape exile and woe
By the grace of God.

The hoard-guardian
Scorched the ground as he scoured and hunted
For the trespasser who had troubled his sleep.
Hot and savage, he kept circling and circling
The outside of the mound. No man appeared
In that desert waste, but he worked himself up
By imagining battle; then back in he'd go
In search of the cup, only to discover
Signs that someone had stumbled upon
The golden treasures. So,the guardian of the mound,
The hoard-watcher, waited for the gloaming
With fierce impatience; his pent-up fury
At the loss of the vessel made him long to hit back
And lash out in flames. Then, to his delight,
The day waned and he could wait no longer
Behind the wall, but hurtled forth
In a fiery blaze. The first to suffer
Were the people on the land, but before long
It was their treasure-giver who would come to grief.

The dragon began to belch out flames
And burn bright homesteads; there was a hot glow
That scared everyone, for the vile sky-winger
Would leave nothing alive in his wake.
Everywhere the havoc he wrought was in evidence.
Far and near, the Geat nation
Bore the brunt of his brutal assaults
And virulent hate. Then back to the hoard
He would dart before daybreak, to hide in his den.
He had swinged the land, swathed it in flame,
In fire and burning, and now he felt secure
In the vaults of his burrow; but his trust was unavailing.

Then Beowulf was given bad news,
A hard truth: his own home,
The best of buildings, had been burnt to a cinder,
The throne-room of the Geats. It threw the hero
Into deep anguish and darkened his mood:
The wise man thought he must have thwarted
Ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord,
Broken His commandment. His mind was in turmoil,
Unaccustomed anxiety and gloom
Confused his brain; the fire-dragon

Had rased the coastal region and reduced
Forts and earthworks to dust and ashes,
So the war-king planned and plotted his revenge.
The warriors' protector, prince of the hall-troop,
Ordered a marvelous all-iron shield
From his smithy works. He well knew
That linden boards would let him down
And timber burn. After many trials,
He was destined to face the end of his days
In this mortal world; as was the dragon,
For all his long leasehold on the treasure.

The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.
He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared
His hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart,
Unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.
His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain:
It would soon claim his coffered soul,
Part life from limb. Before long,
The prince's spirit would spin free from his body.

Beowulf spoke, made a formal boast
For the last time: "I risked my life
Often when I was young. Now I am old,
But as king of the people, I shall pursue this fight
For the glory of winning, if the evil one will
Abandon his earth-fort and face me in the open."

Then he addressed each dear companion
One final time, those fighters in their helmets,
Resolute and high-born: "I would rather not
Use a weapon if I knew another way
To grapple with the dragon and make good my boast
As I did against Grendel in days gone by.
But I shall be meeting molten venom
In the fire he breaths, so I go forth
In mail-shirt and shield. I won't shift a foot
When I meet the cave-guard: what occurs on the wall
Between the two of us will turn out as fate,
Overseer of men, decides. I am resolved.
I scorn further words against this sky-born foe.

"Men at arms, remain here on the barrow,
Safe in your armor, to see which one of us
Is better in the end at bearing wounds
In a deadly fray. This fight is not yours,
Nor is it up to any man except me
To measure his strength against the monster
Or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold
By my courage, or else mortal combat,

Doom of battle, will bear your lord away."

Then he drew himself up beside his shield.
The fabled warrior in his war-shirt and helmet
Trusted in his own strength entirely
And went under the crag. No coward path.
Hard by the rock-face that hale veteran,
A good man who had gone repeatedly
Into combat and danger and come through,
Saw a stone arch and a gushing stream
That burst from the barrow, blazing and wafting
A deadly heat. It would be hard to survive
Unscathed near the hoard, to hold firm
Against the dragon in those flaming depths.
Then he gave a shout. The lord of the Geats
Unburdened his breast and broke out
In a storm of anger. Under the gray stone
His voice challenged and resounded clearly.
Hate was ignited. The hoard-guard recognized
A human voice, the time was over
For peace and parleying. Pouring forth
In a hot battle-fume, the breath of the monster
Burst from the rock. There was a rumble underground.
Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior
Lifted his shield: the outlandish thing
Writhed and convulsed and vehemently
Turned on the king, whose keen-edged-sword,
And heirloom inherited by ancient right,
Was already in his hand. Roused to a fury,
Each antagonist struck terror in the other.
Unyielding, the lord of his people loomed
By his tall shield, sure of his ground,
While the serpent looped and unleashed itself.
Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing
And racing toward its fate. Yet his shield defended
The renowned leader's life and limb
For a shorter time than he meant it to:
That final day was the first time
When Beowulf fought and fate denied him
Glory in battle. So the king of the Geats
Raised his hand and struck hard
At the enameled scales, but scarcely cut through:
The blade flashed and slashed yet the blow
Was far less powerful than the hard-pressed king
Had need of at the moment. The mound-keeper
Went into a spasm and spouted deadly flames:
When he felt the stroke, battle-fire
Billowed and spewed. Beowulf was foiled
Of a glorious victory. The glittering sword,
Infallible before that day,

Failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should have.
For the son of Ecgtheow, it was no easy thing
To have to give ground like that and go
Unwillingly to inhabit another home
In a place beyond; so every man must yield
The leasehold of his days.

Sad at heart, addressing his companions,
Wiglaf spoke wise and fluent words:
"I remember that time, when mead was flowing,
How we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall,
Promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price,
Make good the gift of the war-gear,
These swords and helmets, as and when
His need required it.

Now the day has come
When this lord we serve needs sound men
To give him their support. Let us go to him,
Help our leader through the hot flame
And dread of the fire. As God is my witness,
I would rather my body were robed in the same
Burning blaze as my gold-giver's body
Than go back home bearing arms.
That is unthinkable, unless we have first
Slain the foe and defended the life
Of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I well know
That things he has done for us deserve better.
Why should he alone be left exposed
To fall in battle? We must bond together,
Shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword."
Then he wadded the dangerous reek and went
Under arms to his lord, saying only:
"Go on, dear Beowulf, do everything
You said you would when you were still young
And vowed you would never let your name and fame
Be dimmed while you lived. Your deeds are famous,
So stay resolute, my lord, defend your life now
With the whole of your strength. I shall stand by you."

After those words, a wildness rose
In the dragon again and drove it to attack,
Heaving up fire, hunting for enemies,
The humans it loathed. Flames lapped the shield,
Charred it to the boss, and the body armor
On the young warrior was useless to him.
But Wiglaf did well under the wide rim
Beowulf shared with him, once his own had shattered
In sparks and ashes.

Inspired again
By the thought of glory, the war-king threw
His whole strength behind a sword-stroke
And connected with the skull.
And Naegling snapped.
Beowulf's ancient iron-gray sword
Let him down in the fight. It was never his fortune
To be helped in combat by the cutting-edge
Of weapons made of iron. When he wielded a sword,
No matter how blooded and hard-edged the blade
His hand was too strong, the stroke he dealt
(I have heard) would ruin it. He could reap no advantage.

Then the bane of that people, the fire-breathing dragon,
Was mad to attack for a third time.
When a chance came, he caught the hero
In a rush of flame and clamped sharp fangs
Into his neck. Beowulf's body
Ran wet with his life-blood: it came welling out.

Next thing, they say, the noble son of Weohstan
Saw the king in danger at his side
And displayed his inborn bravery and strength.
He left the head alone, but his fighting hand
Was burned when he came to his kinsman's aid.
He lunged at the enemy lower down
So that his decorated sword sank into its belly
And the flames grew weaker.

Once again the king
Gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife
He carried on his belt, sharpened for battle.
He stuck it deep into the dragon's flank.
Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound.
They had killed the enemy, their courage quelled his life;
That pair of kinsmen, partners in nobility,
Had destroyed the foe. So every man should act,
Be at hand when needed; but now, for the king,
This would be the last of his many labors
And triumphs in the world.

Then the wound
Dealt by the ground-burner earlier began
To scald and swell; Beowulf discovered
Deadly poison suppurating inside him,
Surges of nausea, and so, in his wisdom,
The prince realized his state and proceeded
Towards a seat on the rampart. He steadied his gazed
On those gigantic stones, saw how the earthwork
Was braced with arches built over columns.

And now that thane, unequalled for goodness
With his own hands washed his lord's wounds,
Swabbed the weary prince with water,
Bathed him clean, unbuckled his helmet.

Beowulf spoke, in spite of his wounds,
Mortal wounds, he still spoke
For he well knew his days in the world
Had been lived out to the end: his allotted time
Was drawing to a close, death was very near.

"Now is the time when I would have wanted
To bestow this armor on my own son,
Had it been my fortune to have fathered an heir
And live on in his flesh. For fifty years
I ruled this nation. No king
Of any neighboring clan would dare
Face me with troops, none had the power
To intimidate me. I stood my ground and took what came,
Cared for things in my keeping,
Never fomented quarrels, never
Swore to a lie. All this consoles me,
Go now quickly,
Dearest Wiglaf, under the gray stone
Where the dragon is laid out, lost to his treasure;
Hurry to feast your eyes on the hoard.
Away you go: I want to examine
That ancient gold, gaze my fill
On those garnered jewels; my going will be easier
For having seen the treasure, a less troubled letting-go
Of the life and lordship I have long maintained."

And so, I have heard, the son of Weohstan
Quickly obeyed the command of his languishing
War-weary lord; he went in his chain-mail
Under the rock-piled roof of the barrow,
Exulting in his triumph, and saw beyond the seat
A treasure-trove of astonishing richness,
Wall-hangings that were a wonder to behold,
Glittering gold spread across the ground,
The old dawn-scorching serpent's den
Packed with goblets and vessels of the past,
Tarnished and corroding. Rusty helmets
All eaten away. Armbands everywhere,
Artfully wrought. How easily treasure
Buried in the ground, gold hidden
However skillfully, can escape from any man!

And he saw too a standard, entirely of gold,
Hanging high over the hoard,

A masterpiece of filigree; it glowed with light
So he could make out the ground at his feet
And inspect the valuables. Of the dragon there was no
Remaining sign: the sword had dispatched him.
The one who had for long
Minded the hoard, hovering over gold,
Unleashing fire, surging forth
Midnight after midnight, had been mown down.

Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back,
Excited by the treasure. Anxiety weighed
On his brave heart--he was hoping he would find
The leader of the Geats alive where he had left him
Helpless, earlier, on the open ground.
So he came to the place, carrying the treasure,
And found his lord bleeding profusely,
His life at an end: again he began
To swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance
Heaved up from the coffers of the king's heart.
The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.

"To the everlasting Lord of All,
To the King of Glory, I give thanks
That I behold this treasure here in front of me,
That I have been allowed to leave my people
So well endowed on the day I die.
Now that I have bartered my last breath
To own this fortune, it is up to you
To look after their needs. I can hold out no longer.
Order my troop to construct a barrow
On a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled.
It will loom in the horizon at Hronesness
And be a reminder among my people--
So that in coming times crews under sail
Will call it Beowulf's barrow, as they steer
Ships across the wide and shrouded waters."

Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped
The collar of gold from his neck and gave it
To his young thane, telling him to use
It and the war shirt and the gilded helmet.

"You are the last of us, the only one left
Of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,
Sent my whole brave high-born clan
To their final doom. Now I must follow."
That was the warrior's last word.
He had no more to confide. The furious heat
Of the pyre would assail him. His soul fled from his breast
To its destined place among the steadfast ones.

It was hard then on the young hero,
Having to watch the one he held so dear
There on the ground, going through
His death agony. The dragon from underearth,
His nightmarish destroyer, lay destroyed as well,
Utterly without life. He lay there rigid,
Brought low beside the treasure-lodge.
Never again would he glitter and glide
And show himself off in midnight air,
Exulting in his riches: he fell to earth
Through the battle-strength in Beowulf's arm.
The treasure had been won,
Bought and paid for by Beowulf's death.
Both had reached the end of the road
Through the life they had been lent.

Before long
The battle-dodgers abandoned the wood,
The ones who had let down their lord earlier,
The tail-turners, ten of them together.
When he needed them the most, they had made off.
Now they were ashamed and came behind shields,
In their battle-outfits, to where the old man lay.
They watched Wiglaf, sitting worn out,
A comrade shoulder to shoulder with his lord,
Trying in vain to bring him round with water.
Much as he wanted to, there was no way
He could preserve his lord's life on earth
Or alter in the least the Almighty's will.
What God judged right would rule what happened
To every man, as it does to this day.

Then a stern rebuke was bound to come
From the young warrior to the ones who had been cowards.
Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke,
He abraded the battle-dodgers, saying
"Beowulf had little cause to brag
About his armed guard; yet God who ordains,
Who wins or loses allowed him to strike
With his own blade when bravery was needed.
I could do little to protect his life
In the heat of the fray, yet I found new strength
Welling up when I went to help him.
Then my sword connected and the deadly assaults
Of our foe grew weaker, the fire coursed
Less strongly from his head. But when the worst happened
Too few rallied around the prince.

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

On your home-ground, the open-handedness,
The giving of war-swords. Every one of you
With freeholds of land, our whole nation,
Will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond
Get tidings of how you turned and fled
And disgraced yourselves. A warrior will die
Sooner than live a life of shame."

Then he ordered the outcome of the fight to be reported
To those camped on the ridge, that crowd of retainers
Who had sat all morning, sad at heart,
Shield-bearers wondering about
The man they loved: would this day be his last
Or would he return? He told the truth
And did not balk, the rider who bore
News to the cliff-top. He addressed them all:
"Now the people's pride and love,
The lord of the Geats, is laid on his deathbed,
Brought down by the dragon's attack.
Beside him lies the bane of his life,
Dead from knife-wounds. There was no way
Beowulf could manage to get the better
Of the monster with his sword. Wiglaf sits
At Beowulf's side, the son of Weohstan,
The living warrior watching by the dead,
Keeping weary vigil, holding a wake
For the loved and the loathed.

Now war is looming
Over our nation, soon it will be known
To Franks and Frisians, far and wide,
That the king is gone. Hostility has been great
Among the Franks since Hygelac sailed forth
At the head of a war-fleet into Friesland:
There the Hetware harried and attacked
And overwhelmed him with great odds.
The leader in his war-gear was bought low,
Fell amongst followers; that lord did not favor
His company with spoils. The Merovingian king
Has been an enemy to us ever since.

"Nor do I expect peace or pact-keeping
Of any sort from the Swedes. Remember:
At Ravenswood, Ongentheow
Slaughtered Haethcyn, Hrethel's son,
When the Geat people in their arrogance
Attacked first the fierce Shylfings.
The return blow was quickly struck
By Ohthere's father. Old and terrible,
He felled the sea-king

Then he kept hard on the heels of the foe
And drove them, leaderless, lucky to get away,
In a desperate route to Ravenswood.

"So this bad blood between us and the Swedes,
This vicious feud, I am convinced,
Is bound to revive; they will cross our borders
And attack in force when they find out
That Beowulf is dead. In days gone by
When our warriors fell and we were undefended,
He kept our coffers and our kingdoms safe.
He worked for the people, but as well as that
He behaved like a hero.

We must hurry now
To take a last look at the king
And launch him, lord and lavisher of rings,
On the funeral road. His royal pyre
Will melt no small amount of gold:
Heaped there in the hoard, it was bought at heavy cost,
And that pile of rings he paid for at the end
With his own life will go up in flames,
Be furled in fire: treasure no follower
Will wear in his memory, nor lovely woman
Link and attach as a torque around her neck--
But often, repeatedly, in the path of exile
They shall walk bereft, bowed under woe,
Now that their leader's laugh is silenced,
His spirits quenched. Many a spear
Dawn-cold to the touch will be taken down
And waved on high; the swept harp
Won't waken warriors, but the raven winging
Darkly over the doomed will have news,
Tidings for the eagle of how he hoked and ate,
How the wolf and he made short work of the dead."

Such was the drift of the dire report
That gallant man delivered. He got little wrong
In what he told and predicted.

The whole troop
Rose in tears, then took their way
To the uncanny scene under Earnaness.
There, on the sand, where his soul had left him,
They found him at rest, their ring-giver
From days gone by. The great man
Had breathed his last. Beowulf the King
Had indeed met with a marvelous death.

But what they saw first was far stranger:

The serpent on the ground, gruesome and vile,
Lying facing him. The fire-dragon
Was scaresomely burnt, scorched all colors.
From head to tail, his entire length
Was fifty feet. He had shimmered forth
On the night air once, then winged back
Down to his den; but death owned him now,
He would never enter his earth-gallery again.
Beside him stood pitchers and piled-up dishes,
Silent flagons, precious swords
Eaten through with rust, ranged as they had been
While they waited their thousand winters underground.
That huge cache, gold inherited
From an ancient race, was under a spell--
Which meant no one was ever permitted
To enter the ring-hall unless God himself,
Mankind's Keeper, True King of Triumphs,
Allowed some person pleasing to him--
And in his eyes worthy--to open the hoard.

Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke:
"Often when one man follows his own will
Many are hurt. This happened to us.
Nothing we advised could ever convince
The lord we loved, our land's guardian,
Not to aggravate the keepers of the gold,
Let him lie where he was long accustomed,
Lurk there under the earth until the end of the world.
He held to his high destiny. The hoard is laid bare,
But at a grave cost; it was too cruel a fate
That forced the king to that encounter.
I have been inside and seen everything
Amassed in the vault. I managed to enter
Although no great welcome awaited me
Under the earth wall. I quickly gathered up
A huge pile of the priceless treasures
Handpicked from the hoard and carried them here
Where the king could see them. He was still himself,
Alive, aware, and in spite of his weakness
He had many requests. He wanted me to greet you
And order the building of a barrow that would crown
The site of his pyre, serve as his memorial,
In a commanding position, since of all men
To have lived and thrived and lorded it on earth
His worth and due as a warrior were the greatest.

Now let us again go quickly
And feast our eyes on that amazing fortune
Heaped under the wall. I will show the way
And bring you close to those coffers packed with rings

And bars of gold. Let a bier be made
And got ready quickly when we come out
And then let us bring the body of our lord,
The man we loved, to where he will lodge
For a long time in the care of the Almighty."

Then Weohstan's son, stalwart to the end,
Had orders given to owners of dwellings,
Many people of importance in the land,
To fetch wood from far and wide
For the good man's pyre.
"Now shall flame consume
Our leader in battle, the blaze darken
Round him who stood his ground in the steel-hail,
When the arrow-storm shot from bowstrings
Pelted the shield-wall. The shaft hit home.
Feather-fledged, it finned the barb in flight."

Then the wise son of Weohstan
Called from among the king's thanes
A group of seven: he selected the best
And entered with them, the eighth of their number,
Under the God-cursed roof; one raised
A lighted torch and led the way.
No lots were cast for who should loot the hoard
For it was obvious to them that every bit of it
Lay unprotected within the vault,
There for the taking. It was no trouble
To hurry to work and haul out
The priceless store.

They pitched the dragon
Over the cliff top, let tide's flow
And backwash take the treasure-minder.
Then coiled gold was loaded on a cart
In great abundance, and the gray-haired leader,
The prince of his bier, was born to Hronesness.

The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,
Stacked and decked it until it stood four-square,
Hung with helmets, heavy war-shields
And shining armor, just as he had ordered.
Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,
Mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.
On a height they kindled the hugest of all
Funeral fires; fumes of wood smoke
Billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
And drowned out their weeping, wind died down
And flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
Burning it to the core. They were disconsolate

And wailed aloud for their lord's decease.
A Geat woman too sang out in grief:
With hair bound up, she unburdened herself
Of her worst fears, a wild litany
Of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
Enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
Slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

XI

Then the Geat people began to construct
A mound on a headland, high and imposing,
A marker that sailors could see from far away,
And in ten days they had done the work.
It was their hero's memorial; what remained from the fire
They housed inside it, behind a wall
As worthy of him as their workmanship could make it.
And they buried torques in the barrow, and jewels
And a trove of such things as trespassing men
Had once dared to drag from the hoard.
They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure,
Gold under gravel, gone to earth,
As useless to men now as it ever was.
Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
Chieftain's sons, champions in battle,
All of them distraught, chanting in dirges,
Mourning his loss as a man and a king.
They extolled his heroic nature and exploits
And gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,
For a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
And cherish his memory when that moment comes
When he has to be convoyed from his bodily home.

So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
Sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
They said that of all the kings upon the earth
He was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
Kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.