

1280 She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall,  
 Danes lay asleep, ears who would soon endure  
 a great reversal, once Grendel's mother  
 attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less  
 only by as much as an amazon warrior's  
 strength is less than an armed man's  
 when the hefted sword, its hammered edge  
 and gleaming blade slathered in blood,  
 razes the sturdy board-ridge off a helmet.  
 1285 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.  
 1290 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.  
 1295 To Hrothgar, this man was the most beloved  
 of the friends he trusted between the two seas.  
 She had done away with a great warrior,  
 ambushed him at rest.

Beowulf was elsewhere.

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

There was uproar in Heorot. She had snatched their trophy,  
 Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow  
 to the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard,  
 1305 both parties having to pay  
 with the lives of friends. And the old lord,  
 the gray-haired warrior, was heartsore and weary  
 when he heard the news: his highest-placed adviser,  
 his dearest companion, was dead and gone.

1310 Beowulf was quickly brought to the chamber:  
 the winner of fights, the arch-warrior,  
 came first-footing in with his fellow troops  
 to where the king in his wisdom waited,  
 still wondering whether Almighty God  
 1315 would ever turn the tide of his misfortunes.  
 So Beowulf entered with his band in attendance  
 and the wooden floorboards banged and rang  
 as he advanced, hurrying to address  
 the prince of the Ingwines, 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.  
 1320 Alas for the Danes! Aeschere is dead.

He was Yrmenlaf's elder brother  
 and a soul-mate to me, a true mentor,  
 1325 my right-hand man when the ranks clashed  
 and our boar-crests had to take a battering  
 in the line of action. Aeschere was everything  
 the world admires in a wise man and a friend.

1330 Then this roaming killer came in a fury  
 and slaughtered him in Heorot. Where she is hiding,  
 glutting on the corpse and glorying in her escape,  
 I cannot tell; she has taken up the feud  
 because of last night, when you killed Grendel,  
 1335 wrestled and racked him in ruinous combat  
 since for too long he had terrorized us  
 with his depredations. He died in battle,  
 paid with his life; and now this powerful  
 other one arrives, this force for evil  
 1340 driven to avenge her kinsman's death.

Or so it seems to thanes in their grief,  
 in the anguish every thane endures  
 at the loss of a ring-giver, now that the hand  
 that bestowed so richly has been stilled in death.

1345 "I have heard it said by my people in hall,  
 counselors who live in the upland country,  
 that they have seen two such creatures  
 prowling the moors, huge marauders  
 from some other world. One of these things,  
 1350 as far as anyone ever can discern,  
 looks like a woman; the other, warped  
 in the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale  
 bigger than any man, an unnatural birth  
 called Grendel by the country people

1355 in former days. They are fatherless creatures,  
 and their whole ancestry is hidden in a past  
 of demons and ghosts. They dwell apart  
 among wolves on the hills, on windswept crags  
 and treacherous keshes, where cold streams  
 1360 pour down the mountain and disappear  
 under mist and moorland.

A few miles from here  
 a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch  
 above a mere; the overhanging bank  
 is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface.  
 1365 At night there, something uncanny happens:  
 the water burns. And the mere bottom  
 has never been sounded by the sons of men.

1370 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 wind blows up and stormy weather  
 makes clouds scud and the skies weep,  
 1375 out of its depths a dirty surge  
 is pitched toward the heavens. Now help depends  
 again on you and on you alone.

The gap of danger where the demon waits  
 is still unknown to you. Seek it if you dare.  
 1380 I will compensate you for settling the feud

as I did the last time with lavish wealth,  
coffers of coiled gold, if you come back."

[BEOWULF FIGHTS GRENDEL'S MOTHER]

1385 Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:  
"Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better  
to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.  
For every one of us, living in this world  
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can  
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,  
that will be his best and only bulwark.  
1390 So arise, my lord, and let us immediately  
set forth on the trail of this troll-dam.  
I guarantee you: she will not get away,  
not to dens under ground nor upland groves  
nor to the ocean floor. She'll have nowhere to flee to.  
1395 Endure your troubles today. Bear up  
and be the man I expect you to be."

With that the old lord sprang to his feet  
and praised God for Beowulf's pledge.  
Then a bit and halter were brought for his horse  
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  
1420 Aeschere's head at the foot of the cliff.

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

1430 and doom the voyage. Down they plunged,  
lashing in anger at the loud call  
of the battle-bugle. An arrow from the bow  
of the Geat chief got one of them  
as he surged to the surface: the seasoned shaft  
1435 stuck deep in his flank and his freedom in the water  
got less and less. It was his last swim.  
He was swiftly overwhelmed in the shallows,  
prodded by barbed boar-spears,  
1440 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 underwater.  
1445 It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:  
no enemy's clasp could crush him in it,  
no vicious armlock choke his life out.  
To guard his head he had a glittering helmet  
that was due to be muddied on the mere bottom  
and blurred in the upswirl. It was of beaten gold,  
1450 princely headgear hooped and hasped  
by a weapon-smith who had worked wonders  
in days gone by and adorned it with boar-shapes;  
since then it had resisted every sword.

1455 And another item lent by Unferth  
at that moment of need was of no small importance:  
the brehon<sup>4</sup> handed him a hilted weapon,  
a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.  
The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns  
1460 had been tempered in blood. It had never failed  
the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle,  
anyone who had fought and faced the worst  
in the gap of danger. This was not the first time  
it had been called to perform heroic feats.

1465 When he lent that blade to the better swordsman,  
Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf,  
could hardly have remembered the ranting speech  
he had made in his cups. He was not man enough  
to face the turmoil of a fight under water  
1470 and the risk to his life. So there he lost  
fame and repute. It was different for the other  
rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:  
"Wiseest of kings, now that I have come  
to the point of action, I ask you to recall  
1475 what we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane  
and gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall

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

1480 and suffer death while serving your cause,  
 would act like a father to me afterward.  
 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.  
 1485 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.  
 1490 With Hrumting I shall gain glory or die."  
 After these words, the prince of the Weather-Geats  
 was impatient to be away and plunged suddenly:  
 without more ado, he dived into the heaving  
 1495 depths of the lake. It was the best part of a day  
 before he could see the solid bottom.  
 Quickly the one who haunted those waters,  
 who had scavenged and gone her gluttonous rounds  
 for a hundred seasons, sensed a human  
 1500 observing her outlandish lair from above.  
 So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him  
 in her brutal grip; but his body, for all that,  
 remained unscathed: the mesh of the chain-mail  
 saved him on the outside. Her savage talons  
 1505 failed to rip the web of his war-shirt.  
 Then once she touched bottom, that wolfish swimmer  
 carried the ring-mailed prince to her court  
 so that for all his courage he could never use  
 the weapons he carried; and a bewildering horde  
 1510 came at him from the depths, droves of sea-beasts  
 who attacked with tusks and tore at his chain-mail  
 in a ghastly onslaught. The gallant man  
 could see he had entered some hellish turn-hole  
 and yet the water there did not work against him  
 1515 because the hall-roofing held off  
 the force of the current; then he saw firelight,  
 a gleam and flare-up, a glimmer of brightness.  
 The hero observed that swamp-thing from hell,  
 the tarn-hag in all her terrible strength,  
 1520 then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm:  
 the decorated blade came down ringing  
 and singing on her head. But he soon found  
 his battle-torch extinguished; the shining blade  
 refused to bite. It spared her and failed  
 the man in his need. It had gone through many  
 hand-to-hand fight, had hewed the armor  
 and helmets of the doomed, but here at last  
 the fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.  
 Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about

1530 his name and fame: he never lost heart.  
 Then, in a fury, he flung his sword away.  
 The keen, inlaid, worm-loop-patterned steel  
 was hurled to the ground: he would have to rely  
 on the might of his arm. So must a man do  
 1535 who intends to gain enduring glory  
 in a combat. Life doesn't cost him a thought.  
 Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to this fight  
 with Grendel's mother, gripped her shoulder  
 and laid about him in a battle frenzy:  
 1540 he pitched his killer opponent to the floor  
 but she rose quickly and retaliated,  
 grappled him tightly in her grim embrace.  
 The sure-footed fighter felt daunted,  
 the strongest of warriors stumbled and fell.  
 1545 So she pounced upon him and pulled out  
 a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge  
 her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail  
 on Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life,  
 turned the edge and tip of the blade.  
 1550 The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished  
 and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth  
 had the strong links and locks of his war-gear  
 not helped to save him: holy God  
 1555 decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,  
 the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance  
 once Beowulf got back up on his feet.  
 Then he saw a blade that boded well,  
 a sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom  
 1560 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 a battle.  
 So the Shieldings' hero hard-pressed and enraged,  
 1565 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.  
 1570 A light appeared and the place brightened  
 the way the sky does when heaven's candle  
 is shining clearly. He inspected the vault:  
 with sword held high, its hilt raised  
 to guard and threaten, Hygelac's thane  
 1575 scouted by the wall in Grendel's wake.  
 Now the weapon was to prove its worth.  
 The warrior determined to take revenge  
 for every gross act Grendel had committed—  
 and not only for that one occasion  
 when he'd come to slaughter the sleeping troops,  
 fifteen of Hrothgar's house-guards

surprised on their benches and ruthlessly devoured,  
and as many again carried away,  
a brutal plunder. Beowulf in his fury  
now settled that score: he saw the monster  
in his resting place, war-weary and wrecked,  
a lifeless corpse, a casualty  
of the battle in Heorot. The body gaped  
at the stroke dealt to it after death:

1590 Beowulf cut the corpse's head off.

Immediately the counselors keeping a lookout  
with Hrothgar, watching the lake water,  
saw a heave-up and surge of waves  
and blood in the backwash. They bowed gray heads,  
spoke in their sage, experienced way  
about the good warrior, how they never again  
expected to see that prince returning  
in triumph to their king. It was clear to many  
that the wolf of the deep had destroyed him forever.

1600 The ninth hour of the day arrived.

The brave Shieldings abandoned the cliff-top  
and the king went home; but sick at heart,  
staring at the mere, the strangers held on.  
They wished, without hope, to behold their lord,  
Beowulf himself.

1605 Meanwhile, the sword

began to wilt into gory icicles  
to slather and thaw. It was a wonderful thing,  
the way it all melted as ice melts  
when the Father eases the fetters off the frost  
and unravels the water-ropes, He who wields power  
over time and tide: He is the true Lord.

The Geat captain saw treasure in abundance  
but carried no spoils from those quarters  
except for the head and the inlaid hilt  
embossed with jewels; its blade had melted  
and the scrollwork on it burned, so scalding was the blood  
of the poisonous fiend who had perished there.  
Then away he swam, the one who had survived  
the fall of his enemies, flailing to the surface.

1620 The wide water, the waves and pools,  
were no longer infested once the wandering fiend  
let go of her life and this unreliable world.

The seafarers' leader made for land,  
resolutely swimming, delighted with his prize,  
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.

1630 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

1635 along footpaths 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

1640 to hoist Grendel's head on a spear  
and bear it under strain to the bright hall.

But soon enough they neared the place,  
fourteen Geats in fine fettle,  
striding across the outlying ground  
in a delighted throng around their leader.

1645 In he came then, the thanes' commander,  
the arch-warrior, to address Hrothgar:

his courage was proven, his glory was secure.  
Grendel's head was hauled by the hair,  
dragged across the floor where the people were drinking,  
a horror for both queen and company to behold.  
They stared in awe. It was an astonishing sight.

[ANOTHER CELEBRATION AT HEOROT]

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

"So, son of Halfdane, prince of the Shieldings,  
we are glad to bring this booty from the lake.

1655 It is a token of triumph and we tender it to you.

I barely survived the battle under water.

It was hard-fought, a desperate affair

that could have gone badly; if God had not helped me,  
the outcome would have been quick and fatal.

1660 Although Hrumting is hard-edged,  
I could never bring it to bear in battle.

But the Lord of Men allowed me to behold—  
for He often helps the unbefriended—

an ancient sword shinning on the wall,

a weapon made for giants, there for the wielding.

1665 Then my moment came in the combat and I struck  
the dwellers in that den. Next thing the damascened  
sword blade melted; it bloated and it burned

in their rushing blood. I have wrested the hilt  
from the enemies' hand, avenged the evil

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

And this I pledge, O prince of the Shieldings:

you can sleep secure with your company of troops  
in Heorot Hall. Never need you fear

1675 for a single thane of your sept or nation,  
young warriors or old, that laying waste of life  
that you and your people endured of yore."

Then the gold hilt was handed over  
to the old lord, a relic from long ago

for the venerable ruler. That rare smithwork

1680 was passed on to the prince of the Danes  
when those devils perished; once death removed

that murdering, guilt-steeped, God-cursed fiend,  
 eliminating his unholy life  
 and his mother's as well, it was willed to that king  
 who of all the lavish gift-lords of the north  
 was the best regarded between the two seas.

1685

Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt,  
 that relic of old times. It was engraved all over  
 and showed how war first came into the world  
 and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants.

1690

They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord;  
 the Almighty made the waters rise,  
 drowned them in the deluge for retribution.

1695

In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards  
 there were rune-markings correctly incised,  
 stating and recording for whom the sword  
 had been first made and ornamented  
 with its scrollworked hilt. Then everyone hushed  
 as the son of Halfdane spoke this wisdom:

1700

"A protector of his people, pledged to uphold  
 truth and justice and to respect tradition,  
 is entitled to affirm that this man

was born to distinction. Beowulf, my friend,  
 your fame has gone far and wide,

1705

you are known everywhere. In all things you are even-tempered,  
 prudent and resolute. So I stand firm by the promise of friendship  
 we exchanged before. Forever you will be  
 your people's mainstay and your own warriors'  
 helping hand.

Heremod was different,

the way he behaved to Egwela's sons.

1710

His rise in the world brought little joy  
 to the Danish people, only death and destruction.  
 He vented his rage on men he caroused with,

killed his own comrades, a pariah king  
 who cut himself off from his own kind,

1715

even though Almighty God had made him  
 eminent and powerful and marked him from the start  
 for a happy life. But a change happened,  
 he grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings  
 to honor the Danes. He suffered in the end  
 for having plagued his people for so long:  
 his life lost happiness.

1720

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

It is a great wonder

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

1725

1730

and forts to command in his own country.  
 He permits him to lord it in many lands  
 until the man in his unthinkingness  
 forgets that it will ever end for him.

1735

He indulges his desires; illness and old age  
 mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled  
 by envy or malice or the thought of enemies  
 with their hate-honed swords. The whole world  
 conforms to his will; he is kept from the worst  
 until an element of overweening

1740

enters him and takes hold  
 while the soul's guard, its sentry, drowns,  
 grown too distracted. A killer stalks him,  
 an archer who draws a deadly bow.

1745

And then the man is hit in the heart,  
 the arrow flies beneath his defenses,  
 the devious promptings of the demon start.  
 His old possessions seem paltry to him now.

1750

He covets and resents; dishonors custom  
 and bestows no gold; and because of good things  
 that the Heavenly Powers gave him in the past  
 he ignores the shape of things to come.  
 Then finally the end arrives

1755

when the body he was lent collapses and falls  
 prey to its death; ancestral possessions  
 and the goods he hoarded are inherited by another  
 who lets them go with a liberal hand.

"O flower of warriors, beware of that trap.  
 Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,  
 eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride.

1760

For a brief while your strength is in bloom  
 but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow  
 illness or the sword to lay you low,

1765

or a sudden fire or surge of water  
 or jabbing blade or javelin from the air  
 or repellent age. Your piercing eye  
 will dim and darken; and death will arrive,  
 dear warrior, to sweep you away.

"Just so I ruled the Ring-Danes' country  
 for fifty years, defended them in wartime  
 with spear and sword against constant assaults  
 by many tribes: I came to believe

1770

my enemies had faded from the face of the earth.  
 Still, what happened was a hard reversal  
 from bliss to grief. Grendel struck  
 after lying in wait. He laid waste to the land  
 and from that moment my mind was in dread  
 of his depredations. So I praise God

1775

this heavenly glory that I lived to behold  
 this head dripping blood and that after such harrowing  
 I can look upon it in triumph at last.  
 Take your place, then, with pride and pleasure,

1780

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

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

1790 Then the company rose for the old campaigner: the gray-haired prince was ready for bed. And a need for rest came over the brave shield-bearing Geat. He was a weary seafarer, far from home, so immediately a house-guard guided him out, one whose office entailed looking after whatever a thane on the road in those days might need or require. It was noble courtesy.

[BEOWULF RETURNS HOME]

1800 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.

1805 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.

1810 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:

1820 "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 deeds of arms I have done already, anything that would merit your affections more, I shall act, my lord, with alacrity.

1825 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.

1835 Then if Hrethric should think about traveling as a king's son to the court of the Geats, he will find many friends. Foreign places yield more to one who is himself worth meeting."

1840 Hrothgar spoke and answered him: "The Lord in his wisdom sent you those words and they came from the heart. I have never heard so young a man make truer observations.

1845 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.

1855 What you have done is to draw two peoples, the Geat nation and us neighboring Danes, into shared peace and a pact of friendship in spite of hatreds we have harbored in the past. For as long as I rule this far-flung land 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."

1860 Then the earls' defender furnished the hero with twelve treasures and told him to set out, sail with those gifts safely home to the people he loved, but to return promptly.

1865 And so the good and gray-haired Dane, that highborn king, kissed Beowulf and embraced his neck; then broke down in sudden tears. Two forebodings disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger: nevermore would they meet each other face to face. And such was his affection that he could not help being overcome:

1870 his fondness for the man was so deep-founded, it warmed his heart and wound the heartstrings tight in his breast.

1880 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 the 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.

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-croser 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.

The building was magnificent, the king majestic, ensconced in his hall; and although Hygd, his queen, was young, a few short years at court, her mind was thoughtful and her manners sure. Haereth's daughter behaved generously and stinted nothing when she distributed bounty to the Geats.

Great Queen Modthryth

1935

perpetrated terrible wrongs.<sup>5</sup> If any retainer ever made bold to look her in the face, if an eye not her lord's<sup>6</sup> stared at her directly during daylight, the outcome was sealed: he was kept bound, in hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured until doom was pronounced—death by the sword, slash of blade, blood-gush, and death-qualms in an evil display. Even a queen outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that.

A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent with loss of life for imagined insults.

1945

But Hemming's kinsman<sup>7</sup> put a halt to her ways and drinkers round the table had another tale: she was less of a bane to people's lives, less cruel-minded, after she was married to the brave Offa, a bride arrayed in her gold finery, given away

1950

by a caring father, ferried to her young prince over dim seas. In days to come she would grace the throne and grow famous for her good deeds and conduct of life, her high devotion to the hero king

1955

who was the best king, it has been said, between the two seas or anywhere else on the face of the earth. Offa was honored far and wide for his generous ways, his fighting spirit and his farseeing defense of his homeland; from him there sprang Eomer, Garmund's grandson, kinsman of Hemming,<sup>8</sup> his warriors' mainstay and master of the field.

1960

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

1965

as they hastened to where, as they had heard, the young king, Ongentheow's killer and his people's protector,<sup>9</sup> was dispensing rings inside his bawn. Beowulf's return

1970

was reported to Hygelac as soon as possible,

5. The story of Queen Modthryth's vices is abruptly introduced as a foil to Queen Hygd's virtues. A transitional passage may have been lost, but the poet's device is similar to that of using the earlier reference to the wickedness of King Heremod to contrast with the good qualities of Sigemund and Beowulf.

6. This could refer to her husband or her father before her marriage. The story resembles folk-tales about a proud princess whose unsuccessful suitors are all put to death, although the unfortunate victims in this case seem to be guilty only of looking at her.

7. I.e., Offa I, a legendary king of the Angles. We know nothing about Hemming other than that

Offa was related to him. Offa II (757-96) was king of Mercia, and although the story is about the second Offa's ancestor on the Continent, this is the only English connection in the poem and has been taken as evidence to date its origins to 8th-century Mercia.

8. I.e., Eomer, Offa's son. See previous note. Garmund was presumably the name of Offa's father.

9. I.e., Hygelac. Ongentheow was king of the Swedish people called the Shyflings. This is the first of the references to wars between the Geats and the Swedes. One of Hygelac's war party named Eofer was the actual slayer of Ongentheow.

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 a 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 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 hastened 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,<sup>1</sup> in her gold-trimmed 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 Heatho-Bards are 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 Heatho-Bards 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,  
the one he wore when he went out in his war-mask  
to face the Danes on that final day?

After Withergeld<sup>2</sup> died and his men were doomed,  
the Shieldings quickly claimed the field;  
and now here's a 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.<sup>3</sup> The killer knows  
the lie of the land and escapes 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 Heatho-Bards,  
the truth of their friendship and the trustworthiness

1. King of the Heatho-Bards; his father, Froda, was killed by the Danes.

2. One of the Heatho-Bard leaders.

3. I.e., the young Danish attendant is killed because

his father killed the father of the young Heatho-Bard who has been egged on by the old veteran of that campaign.



of their alliance with the Danes.  
 2070 I shall carry on with my account of Grendel,  
 the whole story of everything that happened  
 in the hand-to-hand fight.  
 After heaven's gem  
 had gone mildly to earth, that maddened spirit,  
 2075 the terror of those twilights, came to attack us  
 where we stood guard, still safe inside the hall.  
 There deadly violence came down on Hondscio  
 and he fell as fate ordained, the first to perish,  
 rigged out for the combat. A comrade from our ranks  
 2080 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;  
 2085 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 fitted dragon-skins.  
 2090 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  
 2095 and so won credit for you, my king,  
 and for all your people. And although he got away  
 to enjoy life's sweetness for a while longer,  
 his right hand stayed behind him in Heorot,  
 evidence of his miserable overthrow  
 2100 as he dived into murk on the mere bottom.  
 "I got lavish rewards from the lord of the Danes  
 for my part in the battle, beaten gold  
 and much else, once morning came  
 and we took our places at the banquet table.  
 2105 There was singing and excitement: an old reciter,  
 a carrier of stories, recalled the early days.  
 At times some hero made the timbered harp  
 tremble with sweetness, or related true  
 and tragic happenings; at times the king  
 2110 gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale;  
 or a battle-scarred veteran, bowed with age,  
 would begin to remember the martial deeds  
 of his youth and prime and be overcome  
 as the past welled up in his wintry heart.  
 "We were happy there the whole day long  
 and enjoyed our time until another night  
 2115 descended upon us. Then suddenly  
 the vehement mother avenged her son

and wreaked destruction. Death had robbed her,  
 2120 Geats had slain Grendel, so his ghastly dam  
 struck back and with bare-faced defiance  
 laid a man low. Thus life departed  
 from the sage Aeschere, an elder wise in counsel.  
 2125 But afterward, 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.  
 2130 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.  
 2135 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 curling along the currents  
 and I beheaded Grendel's mother in the hall  
 2140 with a mighty sword. I barely managed  
 to escape with my life; my time had not yet come.  
 But Halfdane's heir, the shelter of those eals,  
 again endowed me with gifts in abundance.  
 "Thus the king acted with due custom.  
 2145 I was paid and recompensed completely,  
 given full measure and the freedom to choose  
 from Hrothgar's treasures by Hrothgar himself.  
 These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present  
 to you as gifts. It is still upon your grace  
 2150 that all favor depends. I have few kinsmen  
 who are close, my king, except for your kind self."  
 Then he ordered the boar-framed standard to be brought,  
 the battle-topping helmet, the mail-shirt gray as hoar-frost,  
 and the precious war-sword; and proceeded with his speech:  
 2155 "When Hrothgar presented this war-gear to me  
 he instructed me, my lord, to give you some account  
 of why it signifies his special favor.  
 He said it had belonged to his older brother,  
 King Heorogar, who had long kept it,  
 2160 but that Heorogar had never bequeathed it  
 to his son Heoroward, that worthy scion,  
 loyal as he was. Enjoy it well."  
 I heard four horses were handed over next.  
 Beowulf bestowed four bay steeds  
 2165 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  
 2170 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,  
Wealthew, 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;<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup>  
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 grounds; but the greater right  
and sway were inherited by the higher born.

#### [THE DRAGON WAKES]

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 Shyflings;<sup>6</sup>  
ruthless swordsmen, seasoned campaigners,  
they came against him and his conquering nation,  
and with cruel force cut him down

4. There is no other mention of Beowulf's upbringing and youth. This motif of the "Cinderella hero" and others, such as Grendel's magic pouch, are examples of folklore material, probably circulating orally, that made its way into the poem.

5. Hygelac's father and Beowulf's grandfather. There are several references, some of them lengthy, to the wars between the Geats and the Swedes. Because these are highly allusive and not in chronological order, they are difficult to follow and keep straight. This outline, along with the Genealogies (p. 32), may serve as a guide. Phase J: After the death of the Geat patriarch, King Hrethel (lines 2462-70), Ohthere and Omela, the sons of the Swedish king Ongentheow, invade Geat territory and inflict heavy casualties in a battle at Hreosnae hill (lines 2472-78). Phase 2: The Geats invade Sweden under Haethcyn, King Hrethel's son who

has succeeded him. At the battle of Ravenswood, the Geats capture Ongentheow's queen, but Ongentheow counterattacks, rescues the queen, and kills Haethcyn. Hygelac, Haethcyn's younger brother, arrives with reinforcements; Ongentheow is killed in savage combat with two of Hygelac's men; and the Swedes are routed (lines 2479-89 and 2922-90). Phase 3: Eanmund and Eadgils, the sons of Ohthere (presumably dead), are driven into exile by their uncle Omela, who is now king of the Swedes. They are given refuge by Hygelac's son Heardred, who has succeeded his father. Omela invades Geatland and kills Heardred; his retainer Weohstan kills Eanmund; and after the Swedes withdraw, Beowulf becomes king (lines 2204-8, which follow, and 2379-90). Phase 4: Eadgils, supported by Beowulf, invades Sweden and kills Omela (lines 2391-96).

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 prow  
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;<sup>8</sup> . . . . . 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 highborn race

in this ancient cache. Death had come  
and taken them all in times gone by  
and the only one left to tell their tale,  
the last of their line, could look forward to nothing  
but the same fate for himself; he foresaw that his joy  
in the treasure would be brief.

A newly constructed  
barrow stood waiting, on a wide headland  
close to the waves, its entryway secured.

Into it the keeper of the hoard had carried  
all the goods and golden ware  
worth preserving. His words were few:

"Now, earth, hold what earls once held  
and heroes can no more; it was mined from you first  
by honorable men. My own people  
have been ruined in war; one by one  
they went down to death, looked their last

7. The following section was damaged by fire. In lines 2215-31, entire words and phrases are missing or indicated by only a few letters. Editorial attempts to reconstruct the text are conjectural.

tural and often disagree.  
8. Lines 2227-30 are so damaged that they defy guesswork to reconstruct them.

on sweet life in the hall. I am left with nobody  
to bear a sword or to burnish plated goblets,  
put a sheen on the cup. The companies have departed.  
The hard helmet, hapsed 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 the 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 ripped 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 swung the land, swathed it in flame,  
in fire and burning, and now he felt secure  
in the vaults of his barrow; but his trust was unavailing.

Then Beowulf was given bad news,  
the hard truth: his own home,  
the best of buildings, had been burned 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 razed 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.

Yet the prince of the rings was too proud  
to line up with a large army  
against the sky-plague. He had scant regard  
for the dragon as a threat, no dread at all  
of its courage or strength, for he had kept going  
often in the past, through perils and ordeals  
of every sort; after he had purged  
Hrothgar's hall, triumphed in Heorot  
and beaten Grendel. He outgrappled the monster

and his evil kin. One of his crudest hand-to-hand encounters had happened when Hygelac, king of the Geats, was killed in Friesland: the people's friend and lord, Hrethel's son, slaked a swordblade's thirst for blood. But Beowulf's prodigious gifts as a swimmer guaranteed his safety: he arrived at the shore, shouldering thirty battle-dresses, the booty he had won. There was little for the Hetware<sup>9</sup> to be happy about as they shielded their faces and fighting on the ground began in earnest. With Beowulf against them, few could hope to return home.

Across the wide sea, desolate and alone, the son of Ecgtheow swam back to his people. There Hygd offered him throne and authority as lord of the ring-hoard: with Hygelac dead, she had no belief in her son's ability to defend their homeland against foreign invaders. Yet there was no way the weakened nation could get Beowulf to give in and agree to be elevated over Heardred as his lord or to undertake the office of kingship. But he did provide support for the prince, honored and minded him until he matured as the ruler of Geatland.

Then over sea-roads exiles arrived, sons of Ohthere.<sup>1</sup> They had rebelled against the best of all the sea-kings in Sweden, the one who held sway in the Shylfing nation, their renowned prince, lord of the mead-hall. That marked the end for Hygelac's son: his hospitality was mortally rewarded with wounds from a sword. Heardred lay slaughtered and Onela returned to the land of Sweden, leaving Beowulf to ascend the throne, to sit in majesty and rule over the Geats. He was a good king. In days to come, he contrived to avenge the fall of his prince; he befriended Eadgils when Eadgils was friendless, aiding his cause with weapons and warriors over the wide sea, sending him men. The feud was settled on a comfortless campaign when he killed Onela. And so the son of Ecgtheow had survived every extreme, excelling himself in daring and in danger, until the day arrived when he had to come face to face with the dragon. The lord of the Geats took eleven comrades

9. A tribe of the Franks allied with the Frisians. 1. See p. 88, n. 6, Phases 3 and 4.

and went in a rage to reconnoiter. By then he had discovered the cause of the affliction being visited on the people. The precious cup had come to him from the hand of the finder, the one who had started all this strife and was now added as a thirteenth to their number. They press-ganged and compelled this poor creature to be their guide. Against his will he led them to the earth-vault he alone knew, an underground barrow near the sea-billows and heaving waves, heaped inside with exquisite metalwork. The one who stood guard was dangerous and watchful, warden of the trove buried under earth: no easy bargain would be made in that place by any man.

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

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke: "Many a skirmish I survived when I was young and many times of war: I remember them well. At seven, I was fostered out by my father, left in the charge of my people's lord. King Hrethel kept me and took care of me, was openhanded, behaved like a kinsman. While I was his ward, he treated me no worse as a wean<sup>2</sup> about the place than one of his own boys, Herebeald and Haethcyn, or my own Hygelac. For the eldest, Herebeald, an unexpected deathbed was laid out, through a brother's doing, when Haethcyn bent his horn-tipped bow and loosed the arrow that destroyed his life. He shot wide and buried a shaft in the flesh and blood of his own brother. That offense was beyond redress; a wrongfooting of the heart's affections; for who could avenge the prince's life or pay his death-price? It was like the misery endured by an old man who has lived to see his son's body swing on the gallows. He begins to keen and weep for his boy, watching the raven gloat where he hangs: he can be of no help. The wisdom of age is worthless to him. Morning after morning, he wakes to remember that his child is gone; he has no interest

2. A young child [Northern Ireland; Translator's note].

in living on until another heir  
is born in the hall, now that his first-born  
has entered death's dominion forever.  
2455 He gazes sorrowfully at his son's dwelling,  
the banquet hall bereft of all delight,  
the windswept hearthstone; the horsemen are sleeping,  
the warriors under ground; what was is no more.  
2460 No tunes from the harp, no cheer raised in the yard.  
Alone with his longing, he lies down on his bed  
and sings a lament; everything seems too large,  
the steadings and the fields.

Such was the feeling  
of loss endured by the lord of the Geats  
after Herebeald's death. He was helplessly placed  
2465 to set to rights the wrong committed,  
could not punish the killer in accordance with the law  
of the blood-feud, although he felt no love for him.  
Heartsore, wearied, he turned away  
from life's joys, chose God's light  
2470 and departed, leaving buildings and lands  
to his sons, as a man of substance will.

"Then over the wide sea Swedes and Geats  
battled and feuded and fought without quarter.  
2475 Hostilities broke out when Hrethel died.<sup>3</sup>  
Ongentheow's sons were unrelenting,  
refusing to make peace, campaigning violently  
from coast to coast, constantly setting up  
terrible ambushes around Hreosnahl.

My own kith and kin avenged  
2480 these evil events, as everybody knows,  
but the price was high: one of them paid  
with his life. Haethcyn, lord of the Geats,  
met his fate there and fell in the battle.  
Then, as I have heard, Hygelac's sword  
2485 was raised in the morning against Ongentheow,  
his brother's killer. When Eofor cleft  
the old Swede's helmet, halved it open,  
he fell, death-pale; his feud-calloused hand  
could not stave off the fatal stroke.

"The treasures that Hygelac lavished on me  
2490 I paid for when I fought, as fortune allowed me,  
with my glittering sword. He gave me land  
and the security land brings, so he had no call  
to go looking for some lesser champion,  
2495 some mercenary from among the Gifthas  
or the Spear-Danes or the men of Sweden.  
I marched ahead of him, always there  
at the front of the line; and I shall fight like that  
for as long as I live, as long as this sword  
2500 shall last, which has stood me in good stead

3. See p. 88, n. 6, Phases 1 and 2.

late and soon, ever since I killed  
2505 Dayraven the Frank in front of the two armies.  
He brought back no looted breastplate  
to the Frisian king but fell in battle,  
their standard-bearer, highborn and brave.  
No sword blade sent him to his death:  
my bare hands stilled his heartbeats  
and wrecked the bone-house. Now blade and hand,  
sword and sword-stroke, will assay the hoard."

## [BEOWULF ATTACKS THE DRAGON]

2510 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 only  
2515 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 highborn: "I would rather not  
use a weapon if I knew another way  
2520 to grapple with the dragon and make good my boast  
as I did against Grendel in days gone by.  
But I shall be meeting molten venom  
in the fire he breathes, so I go forth  
in mail-shirt and shield. I won't shift a foot  
2525 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-borne foe.

2530 "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,  
2535 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.  
2540 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  
2545 a deadly heat. It would be hard to survive  
unscathed near the hoard, to hold firm  
against the dragon in those flaming depths.

2550 Then he gave a shout. The lord of the Geats  
unburdened his breast and broke out  
in a storm of anger. Under gray stone  
his voice challenged and resounded clearly.  
Hate was ignited. The hoard-guard recognized  
2555 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 under ground.  
2560 Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior  
lifted his shield: the outlandish thing  
writhed and convulsed and viciously  
turned on the king, whose keen-edged sword,  
an heirloom inherited by ancient right,  
2565 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,  
2570 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:  
2575 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  
2580 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 that moment. The mound-keeper  
went into a spasm and spouted deadly flames:  
2585 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.  
2590 For the son of Egtheow, 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.  
Before long  
the fierce contenders clashed again.  
2595 The hoard-guard took heart, inhaled and swelled up  
and got a new wind; he who had once ruled  
was furling in fire and had to face the worst.  
No help or backing was to be had then  
from his highborn comrades; that hand-picked troop  
broke ranks and ran for their lives  
to the safety of the wood. But within one heart  
2600 sorrow welled up: in a man of worth

the claims of kinship cannot be denied.

2605 His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's,  
a well-regarded *Shyfling* warrior  
tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,  
he remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him,  
how well he lived among the *Waegmundings*,  
the freehold he inherited from his father<sup>5</sup> before him.  
He could not hold back: one hand brandished  
the yellow-timbered shield, the other drew his sword—

2610 an ancient blade that was said to have belonged  
to Eanmund, the son of *Ohthere*, the one  
Weohstan had slain when he was an exile without friends.  
He carried the arms to the victim's kinfolk,  
2615 the burnished helmet, the webbed chain-mail  
and that relic of the giants. But Onela returned  
the weapons to him, rewarded Weohstan  
with Eanmund's war-gear. He ignored the blood-feud,  
the fact that Eanmund was his brother's son.<sup>6</sup>

2620 Weohstan kept that war-gear for a lifetime,  
the sword and the mail-shirt, until it was the son's turn  
to follow his father and perform his part.  
Then, in old age, at the end of his days  
2625 among the *Weather-Geats*, he bequeathed to Wiglaf  
innumerable weapons.

And now the youth  
was to enter the line of battle with his lord,  
his first time to be tested as a fighter.  
His spirit did not break and the ancestral blade  
would keep its edge, as the dragon discovered  
as soon as they came together in the combat.

2630 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,  
2635 promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price,  
make good the gift of the war-gear,  
those swords and helmets, as and when  
his need required it. He picked us out  
from the army deliberately, honored us and judged us  
fit for this action, made me these lavish gifts—

2640 and all because he considered us the best  
of his arms-bearing thanes. And now, although  
he wanted this challenge to be one he'd face  
by himself alone—the shepherd of our land,

4. Although Wiglaf is here said to be a *Shyfling* (i.e., a Swede), in line 2607 we are told his family are *Waegmundings*, a clan of the Geats, which is also Beowulf's family. It was possible for a family to owe allegiance to more than one nation and to shift sides as a result of feuds. Nothing is known of Aelfhere.

5. I.e., Weohstan, who, as explained below, was the slayer of Onela's nephew Eanmund. Possibly,

Weohstan joined the Geats under Beowulf after Eanmund's brother, with Beowulf's help, avenged the *Shyflings*. See p. 88, n. 6, Phase 2.

6. An ironic comment: since Onela wanted to kill Eanmund, he rewarded Weohstan for killing his nephew instead of exacting compensation or revenge.

2645 a man unequaled in the quest for glory  
and a name for daring—now the day has come  
to give this lord we serve needs sound men  
to help our leader through the hot flame  
and dread of the fire. As God is my witness,  
2650 I would rather my body were robbed in the same  
burning blaze as my gold-giver's body  
than go back home bearing arms.  
That is unthinkable, unless we have first  
2655 slain the foe and defended the life  
of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I well know  
the things he has done for us deserve better.  
Should he alone be left exposed  
to fall in battle? We must bond together,  
2660 shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword."  
Then he waded the dangerous reek and went  
under arms to his lord, saying only:  
"Go on, dear Beowulf, do everything  
2665 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  
2670 in the dragon again and drove it to attack,  
heaving up fire, hunting for enemies,  
the humans it loathed. Flames lapped the shield,  
charred it to the boss, and the body armor  
on the young warrior was useless to him.  
2675 But Wiglaf did well under the wide rim  
Beowulf shared with him once his own had shattered  
in sparks and ashes.  
Inspired again  
by the thought of glory, the war-king threw  
his whole strength behind a sword stroke  
2680 and connected with the skull. And Naegling snapped.  
Beowulf's ancient iron-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,  
2685 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  
2690 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  
2695 saw the king in danger at his side

2700 and displayed his inborn bravery and strength.  
He left the head alone,<sup>7</sup> 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.

2705 Once again the king  
gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife  
he carried on his belt, sharpened for battle.  
He stuck it deep in the dragon's flank.  
Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound.

2710 They had killed the enemy, courage quelled his life;  
that pair of kinsmen, partners in nobility,  
had destroyed the foe. So every man should act,  
be at hand when needed; but now, for the king,  
this would be the last of his many labors  
and triumphs in the world.

2715 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 struggled  
toward a seat on the rampart. He steadied his gaze  
on those gigantic stones, saw how the earthwork  
was braced with arches built over columns.  
2720 And now thatthane unequaled for goodness  
with his own hands washed his lord's wounds,  
swabbed the weary prince with water,  
bathed him clean, unbuckled his helmet.

2725 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.

2730 "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

2735 of any neighboring clan would dare  
face me with troops, none had the power  
to intimidate me. I took what came,  
cared for and stood by things in my keeping,  
never fomented quarrels, never  
swore to a lie. All this consoles me,  
doomed as I am and sickening for death;

2740 because of my right ways, the Ruler of mankind  
need never blame me when the breath leaves my body  
for murder of kinsmen. Go now quickly,

7. I.e., he avoided the dragon's flame-breathing head.

2745 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."  
 2750 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,  
 2755 exulting in his triumph, and saw beyond the seat  
 a treasure-trove of astonishing richness,  
 wall-hangings that were a wonder to behold,  
 glittering gold spread across the ground,  
 2760 the old dawn-scorching serpent's den  
 packed with goblets and vessels from the past,  
 tarnished and corroding. Rusty helmets  
 all eaten away. Armbands everywhere,  
 artfully wrought. How easily treasure  
 2765 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  
 2770 so he could make out the ground at his feet  
 and inspect the valuables. Of the dragon there was no  
 remaining sign: the sword had dispatched him.  
 Then, the story goes, a certain man  
 2775 plundered the hoard in that immemorial howe,  
 filled his arms with *flagon*s and plates,  
 anything he wanted; and took the standard also,  
 most brilliant of banners.  
 Already the blade  
 of the old king's sharp killing-sword  
 had done its worst: the one who had for long  
 2780 minded the hoard, hovering over gold,  
 unleashing fire, surging forth  
 midnight after midnight, had been mown down.  
 Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back,  
 excited by the treasure. Anxiety weighed  
 2785 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  
 2790 to swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance  
 broke out from the king's breast-cage.  
 The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.  
 "To the everlasting Lord of all,

2795 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  
 2800 to own this fortune, it is up to you  
 to look after their needs. I can hold out no longer.  
 Order my troop to construct a barrow  
 on a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled.  
 It will loom on the horizon at Hronesness<sup>8</sup>  
 2805 and be a reminder among my people—  
 so that in coming times crews under sail  
 will call it Beowulf's Barrow, as they steer  
 ships across the wide and shrouded waters."  
 Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped  
 2810 the collar of gold from his neck and gave it  
 to the young thane, telling him to use  
 it and the war-shirt and gilded helmet well.  
 "You are the last of us, the only one left  
 of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,  
 2815 sent my whole brave highborn clan  
 to their final doom. Now I must follow them."  
 That was the warrior's last word.  
 He had no more to confide. The furious heat  
 of the pyre would assail him. His soul fled from his breast  
 2820 to its destined place among the steadfast ones.

## [BEOWULF'S FUNERAL]

It was hard then on the young hero,  
 having to watch the one he held so dear  
 there on the ground, going through  
 2825 his death agony. The dragon from underneath,  
 his nightmarish destroyer, lay destroyed as well,  
 utterly without life. No longer would his snakefolds  
 ply themselves to safeguard hidden gold.  
 Hard-edged blades, hammered out  
 and keenly filed, had finished him  
 2830 so that the sky-roamer lay there rigid,  
 brought low beside the treasure-lodge.  
 Never again would he glitter and glide  
 and show himself off in midnight air,  
 exulting in his riches: he fell to earth  
 2835 through the battle-strength in Beowulf's arm.  
 There were few, indeed, as far as I have heard,  
 big and brave as they may have been,  
 few who would have held out if they had had to face  
 the outpourings of that poison-breather  
 or gone foraging on the ring-hall floor  
 2840 and found the deep barrow-dweller

8. A headland by the sea. The name means "Whaleness."



on guard and awake.  
 The treasure had been won,  
 bought and paid for by Beowulf's death.  
 Both had reached the end of the road  
 through the life they had been lent.

2845 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 most, they had made off.  
 2850 Now they were ashamed and came behind shields,  
 in their battle-outfits, to where the old man lay.  
 They watched Wiglaf, sitting worn out,  
 a comrade shoulder to shoulder with his lord,  
 trying in vain to bring him round with water.  
 2855 Much as he wanted to, there was no way  
 he could preserve his lord's life on earth  
 or alter in the least the Almighty's will.  
 What God judged right would rule what happened  
 to every man, as it does to this day.

2860 Then a stern rebuke was bound to come  
 from the young warrior to the ones who had been cowards.  
 Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke  
 disdainfully and in disappointment:  
 "Anyone ready to admit the truth  
 2865 will surely realize that the lord of men  
 who showered you with gifts and gave you the armor  
 you are standing in—when he would distribute  
 helmets and mail-shirts to men on the mead-benches,  
 a prince treating his thanes in hall  
 2870 to the best he could find, far or near—  
 was throwing weapons uselessly away.  
 It would be a sad waste when the war broke out.  
 Beowulf had little cause to brag  
 2875 about his armed guard, yet God who ordains  
 who wins or loses allowed him to strike  
 with his own blade when bravery was needed.  
 There was little I could do to protect his life  
 in the heat of the fray, but I found new strength  
 welling up when I went to help him.  
 2880 Then my sword connected and the deadly assaults  
 of our foe grew weaker, the fire coursed  
 less strongly from his head. But when the worst happened  
 too few rallied around the prince.  
 "So it is good-bye now to all you know and love  
 2885 on your home ground, the open-handedness,  
 the giving of war-swords. Every one of you  
 with freeholds of land, our whole nation,  
 will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond  
 get tidings of how you turned and fled  
 2890 and disgraced yourselves. A warrior will sooner  
 die than live a life of shame."

Then he ordered the outcome of the fight to be reported  
 to those camped on the ridge, that crowd of retainers  
 who had sat all morning, sad at heart,  
 2895 shield-bearers wondering about  
 the man they loved: would this day be his last  
 or would he return? He told the truth  
 and did not balk, the rider who bore  
 news to the cliff-top. He addressed them all:  
 2900 "Now the people's pride and love,  
 the lord of the Geats, is laid on his deathbed,  
 brought down by the dragon's attack.  
 Beside him lies the bane of his life,  
 dead from knife-wounds. There was no way  
 2905 Beowulf could manage to get the better  
 of the monster with his sword. Wiglaf sits  
 at Beowulf's side, the son of Weohstan,  
 the living warrior watching by the dead,  
 keeping weary vigil, holding a wake  
 2910 for the loved and the loathed.  
 Now war is looming  
 over our nation, soon it will be known  
 to Franks and Frisians, far and wide,  
 that the king is gone. Hostility has been great  
 among the Franks since Hygelac sailed forth  
 2915 at the head of a war-fleet into Friesland:  
 there the Hetware harried and attacked  
 and overwhelmed him with great odds.  
 The leader in his war-gear was laid low,  
 fell among followers: that lord did not favor  
 2920 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,<sup>9</sup> Ongentheow  
 2925 slaughtered Haethcyn, Hrethel's son,  
 when the Geat people in their arrogance  
 first attacked the fierce Shyflings.  
 The return blow was quickly struck  
 by Oathere's father! Old and terrible,  
 he felled the sea-king and saved his own  
 2930 aged wife, the mother of Onela  
 and of Othhere, bereft of her gold rings.  
 Then he kept hard on the heels of the foe  
 and drove them, leaderless, lucky to get away  
 2935 in a desperate rout into Ravenswood.  
 His army surrounded the weary remnant  
 where they nursed their wounds; all through the night  
 he howled threats at those huddled survivors,  
 promised to axe their bodies open

9. The messenger describes in greater detail the Battle of Ravenswood. See the outline of the Swedish wars on p. 88 n. 6. I. e., Ongentheow.

2940 when dawn broke, dangle them from gallows  
to feed the birds. But at first light  
when their spirits were lowest, relief arrived.  
They heard the sound of Hygelac's horn,  
his trumpet calling as he came to find them,  
the hero in pursuit, at hand with troops.  
2945 "The bloody swathe that Swedes and Geats  
cut through each other was everywhere.  
No one could miss their murderous feuding.  
Then the old man made his move,  
2950 pulled back, barred his people in:  
Ongentheow withdrew to higher ground.  
Hygelac's pride and prowess as a fighter  
were known to the earl; he had no confidence  
that he could hold out against that horde of seamen,  
2955 defend his wife and the ones he loved  
from the shock of the attack. He retreated for shelter  
behind the earthwall. Then Hygelac swooped  
on the Swedes at bay, his banners swarmed  
into their refuge, his Geat forces  
drove forward to destroy the camp.  
2960 There in his gray hairs, Ongentheow  
was cornered, ringed around with swords.  
And it came to pass that the king's fate  
was in Eofor's hands,<sup>2</sup> and in his alone.  
2965 Wulf, son of Wonred, went for him in anger,  
split him open so that blood came spurting  
from under his hair. The old hero  
still did not flinch, but parried fast,  
hit back with a harder stroke:  
2970 the king turned and took him on.  
Then Wonred's son, the brave Wulf,  
could land no blow against the aged lord.  
Ongentheow divided his helmet  
so that he buckled and bowed his bloodied head  
and dropped to the ground. But his doom held off.  
2975 Though he was cut deep, he recovered again.  
"With his brother down, the undaunted Eofor,  
Hygelac's thane, hefted his sword  
and smashed murderously at the massive helmet  
2980 past the lifted shield. And the king collapsed,  
the shepherd of people was sheared of life.  
Many then hurried to help Wulf,  
bandaged and lifted him, now that they were left  
masters of the blood-soaked battle-ground.  
2985 One warrior stripped the other,  
looted Ongentheow's iron mail-coat,  
his hard sword-hilt, his helmet too,  
and carried the graith<sup>3</sup> to King Hygelac,

2. I.e., he was at Eofor's mercy. Eofor's slaying of Ongentheow was described in lines 2486-89, where no mention is made of his brother Wulf's part

in the battle. They are the sons of Wonred. Eofor means boat; Wulf is the Old English spelling of wolf.

3. Possessions, apparel.

2990 he accepted the prize, promised fairly  
that reward would come, and kept his word.  
For their bravery in action, when they arrived home,  
Eofor and Wulf were overloaded  
by Hrethel's son, Hygelac the Geat,  
with gifts of land and linked rings  
that were worth a fortune. They had won glory,  
2995 so there was no gainsaying his generosity.  
And he gave Eofor his only daughter  
to bide at home with him, an honor and a bond.  
"So this bad blood between us and the Swedes,  
3000 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,  
3005 he kept our coffers and our kingdom 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,  
3010 on the funeral road. His royal pyre  
will melt no small amount of gold:  
heaped there in a 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 with the flame,  
3015 be furl'd 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,  
3020 now that their leader's laugh is silenced,  
high 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  
3025 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."<sup>4</sup>  
Such was the drift of the dire report  
that gallant man delivered. He got little wrong  
3030 in what he told and predicted.  
The whole troop  
rose in tears, then took their way  
to the uncanny scene under Earnaness.<sup>5</sup>  
There, on the sand, where his soul had left him,  
they found him at rest, their ring-giver

4. The raven, eagle, and wolf—the scavengers who will feed on the slain—are "the beasts of battle," a common motif in Germanic war poetry. "Hoked":

rooted about (Northern Ireland, Translator's note).  
5. The site of Beowulf's fight with the dragon. The name means "Eaglefiness."

3035 from days gone by. The great man  
had breathed his last. Beowulf the king  
had indeed met with a marvelous death.

3040 But what they saw first was far stranger:  
the serpent on the ground, gruesome and vile,  
lying facing him. The fire-dragon  
was scarsomely burned, scorched all colors.  
From head to tail, his entire length  
3045 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,  
3050 silent flagons, precious swords  
eaten through with rust, ranged as they had been  
while they waited their thousand winters under ground.  
That huge cache, gold inherited  
from an ancient race, was under a spell—  
3055 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.

3060 What came about brought to nothing  
the hopes of the one who had wrongly hidden  
riches under the rock-face. First the dragon slew  
that man among men, who in turn made fierce amends  
and settled the feud. Famous for his deeds  
a warrior may be, but it remains a mystery  
3065 where his life will end, when he may no longer  
dwell in the mead-hall among his own.  
So it was with Beowulf, when he faced the cruelty  
and cunning of the mound-guard. He himself was ignorant  
of how his departure from the world would happen.  
3070 The highborn chiefs who had buried the treasure  
declared it until doomsday so accursed  
that whoever robbed it would be guilty of wrong  
and grimly punished for their transgression,  
hasped in hell-bonds in heathen shrines.  
Yet Beowulf's gaze at the gold treasure  
3075 when he first saw it had not been selfish.  
Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke:  
"Often when one man follows his own will  
many are hurt. This happened to us.  
Nothing we advised could ever convince  
3080 the prince we loved, our land's guardian,  
not to vex the custodian of the gold,  
let him lie where he was long accustomed,  
lurk there under 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  
3085 that forced the king to that encounter.

3090 I have been inside and seen everything  
amassed in the vault. I managed to enter  
although no great welcome awaited me  
under the earthwall. 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  
3095 he had many requests. He wanted me to greet you  
and order the building of a barrow that would crown  
the site of his pyre, serve as his memorial,  
in a commanding position, since of all men  
to have lived and thrived and lorded it on earth  
3100 his worth and due as a warrior were the greatest.  
Now let us again go quickly  
and feast our eyes on that amazing fortune  
heaped under the wall. I will show the way  
and take you close to those coffers packed with rings  
3105 and bars of gold. Let a bier be made  
and got ready quickly when we come out  
and then let us bring the body of our lord,  
the man we loved, to where he will lodge  
for a long time in the care of the Almighty."

3110 Then Weohstan's son, 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  
3115 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 fanned the barb in flight."

3120 Next the wise son of Weohstan  
called from among the king's thanes  
a group of seven: he selected the best  
and entered with them, the eighth of their number,  
under the God-cursed roof; one raised  
3125 a lighted torch and led the way.  
No lots were cast for who should loot the hoard  
for it was obvious to them that every bit of it  
lay unprotected within the vault,  
there for the taking. It was no trouble  
3130 to hurry to work and haul out  
the priceless store. They pitched the dragon  
over the cliff-top, let tide's flow  
and backwash take the treasure-minder.  
Then coiled gold was loaded on a cart  
3135 in great abundance, and the gray-haired leader,  
the prince on his bier, borne to Hronesness.  
The Great people built a pyre for Beowulf,

stacked and decked it until it stood foursquare,  
 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.

3140

On a height they kindled the hugest of all  
 funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke

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.

3145

A Geat woman too sang out in grief;  
 with hair bound up, she unburdened herself  
 of her worst fears, a wild litany

3150

of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,  
 enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,  
 slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

3155

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

3160

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.

3165

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,  
 chieftains' sons, champions in battle,  
 all of them distraught, chanting in dirges,  
 mourning his loss as a man and a king.

3170

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

3175

when he has to be conveyed 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 earth  
 he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,  
 kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

3180

## JUDITH

**B**iblical narrative inspired Anglo-Saxon poetry from its earliest recorded beginnings: the poet Caedmon (p. 32) is said, for example, to have composed poetry on biblical subjects from Genesis to the Last Judgment. Although those texts do not survive, up to one third of surviving Anglo-Saxon poetic texts are translations of biblical material. Prose writers also produced ambitious biblical translations: at the end of the tenth century Ælfric, Abbot of Eynsham (died ca. 1010), made partial translations of many texts that he worked into sermon material; an Anglo-Saxon version of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) was compiled at about the same time. The prose translations are more or less faithful to the biblical text. The poetic translations, on the other hand, are much freer: they take liberties with the narrative and style of the biblical sources, reshaping narratives and placing the stories within a recognizably Germanic cultural setting.

One of the biblical books from which Ælfric drew material was the Book of Judith. This book was regarded as apocryphal (i.e., not authentically a part of the Old Testament) by Protestant churches from the sixteenth century, but for all pre- and post-Reformation Catholic readers it was an authentic part of the Hebrew Bible. The narrative recounts the campaign of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar to punish many subject peoples who had refused to join him in his successful war against Media (another ancient empire). Nebuchadnezzar's general Holofernes plunders and razes many cities that resist his army, and others capitulate to him. He lays siege to the strategic Israelite town of Bethulia, which blocks his route to Jerusalem (Bethulia no longer exists, and its location in biblical times is uncertain). The leaders of the suffering and thirsty population of Bethulia are almost ready to surrender, but the pious, wealthy, and beautiful widow Judith rebukes them for their faintness of heart and promises to liberate them if they will hold out a few days longer. After praying to God in sackcloth and ashes, Judith dresses and adorns herself sumptuously. With only one servant she enters the enemy camp, where all, and especially Holofernes himself, are amazed at her beauty. She pretends to be fleeing a doomed people and persuades Holofernes that she will lead him to victory over all the Israelite cities. The Old English text begins four days after Judith's arrival, with Holofernes's invitation to his principal warriors to a banquet, after which he plans to go to bed with the beautiful Israelite. Judith, however, has other plans.

The poet of *Judith* translated from the Latin text of the Bible (the so-called "Vulgate" Bible, produced in the late fourth century). We do not know the date for this rendering of the Book of Judith into Anglo-Saxon poetry, but it was probably composed sometime in the tenth century (the one surviving text appears in the same late tenth-century manuscript that contains *Beowulf*). Neither do we know the motives for this translation. Ælfric, writing in the late tenth century, made his translation of Judith to encourage the Anglo-Saxons in defense of their territory against the invading Vikings. The text is, he says, "set down in our manner in English, as an example to you people that you should defend your land with weapons against the invading army."

The opening of the poem is lost (scholars estimate that some one hundred lines are missing), but from the remainder we can see that the poet has freely reshaped the biblical source and set the narrative within terms intelligible to an Anglo-Saxon audience. The poet has stripped the geographical, historical, and political complexity of

\**The Old English Pentateuch*, ed. S. J. Crawford, Early English Text Society 160 (London, 1922), p. 48.