

Beowulf

Hear! Listen! We have heard of the thriving of the throne of Denmark, how the folk-kings flourished in former days, how those royal athelings earned that glory. Was it not **Scyld Shefing** that shook the halls, took mead-benches, taught encroaching foes to fear him – who, found in childhood, lacked clothing? Yet he lived and prospered, grew in strength and stature under the heavens. He was a good king.

A boy child was afterwards born to Scyld, a young child in hall-yard, a hope for the people, sent them by God – the life-bestowing Wielder of Glory granted them this blessing, and through the northern lands his name sprang widely. For in youth, an **atheling** should so use his virtue that in old age, when his enemies gather, established friends shall stand by him and serve him gladly. It is by glorious action that a man comes by honor in any people.

At the hour shaped for him, Scyld departed. The hero crossed into the keeping of his Lord. A boat with a ringed neck rode in the haven, icy, out-eager, the atheling's vessel, and there they laid out their lord and master, giver of wound gold, in the waist of the ship, in majesty by the mast. A mound of treasures from far countries was fetched aboard her, and it is said that no boat was ever more bravely fitted out with the weapons of a warrior, war accoutrement, swords and body-armor.

High over head they hoisted and fixed a gold **signum**; gave him to the **flood**, let the seas take him. Men under heaven's shifting skies, though skilled in counsel, cannot say surely just where this freight was washed up on shore.

Then for a long space there lodged in the stronghold three generations, ending with king **Hroethgar**, the son of **Haelfdenae**. And to this Hrothgar was granted glory in battle, mastery of the field; so friends and kinsmen gladly obeyed him, and his band increased to a great company.

It came into his mind that he would command the construction of a huge **mead-hall**, a house greater than men on earth ever had heard of, and share the gifts God had bestowed on him upon its floor with folk young and old.

Far and wide (as I heard it) the work was given out in many a tribe over middle earth, for the making of the mead-hall. And, as men reckon, the day of readiness dawned very soon for this best of houses. He named it **Heorot** – hall of the **stag**. He made good his boast, gave out rings and arm-bands at the banquet. Boldly the hall reared its arched **gables**. The time was not yet when the blood-feud should bring out again sword-hatred in sworn **kindred**.

It was with pain that a powerful spirit dwelling in darkness endured that time, hearing daily the hall filled with loud amusement; there was the music of the harp, sweet minstral singing, perfect in his telling of the remote first making of the race of man. The minstral told how, long ago, the Lord formed Earth. (Old English) It was a plain bright to look on, locked in ocean. Exulting, the Lord established the sun and the moon as lamps to illumine the land-dwellers, loaded the acres of the world with the dual work of branch and leaf, bringing then to life each kind of creature that creeps and moves.

So the company of men led a careless life. All was well with them till this one spirit – hell in his mind, his malice began. Grendel – the fiend’s name: grim, infamous, the wasteland stalker, master of the **moors** and the **fen** fortress.

This unhappy being had long lived in the land of monsters since the Creator cast them out as kindred of **Cain**. Far from mankind God drove out Cain for his deed of shame! From Cain came down all kinds misbegotten – cobolls, gogmegrogs, and lemures and zombies, and – and the brood of titans who battled with God for ages long. He gave them *their* reward.

With the coming of night came Grendel also. He found in Herorot the nobles after **carousing** slept after supper, far from the sorrows and miseries of men. Mad with rage, he struck quickly, this creature of evil. Grim and greedy, savage and unsparing, he grasped thirty warriors, and away he was homeward, glut lusty with booty, laden with the slain. (Old English)

As the day broke, with the dawn’s light, Grendel’s outrage was openly to be seen. Then weeping arose where feasting had been. Loud morning and crying! Lord Hrothgar sat silent then; the strong man mourned, glorious king, he wept for his thanes as they saw the footprints of a terrible foe, the cursed fiend. Nor did he

let them rest but the next night brought new horrors, more murder, manslaughter and outrage, and shrank not from it.

It was not remarkable then if a man looked for sleeping-quarters quieter, less central, among the outer buildings; now openly shown, the new **hall-thane's** hatred was manifest and unmistakable. Each survivor then kept at safer distance.

So **Grendel** became ruler. Empty then stood that best of houses, and for no brief space; for twelve long winters torment sat on the Lord of the Scyldings. Songs were sung, how Grendel warred long on Hrothgar, the wrongs he did him, how abominable he watched and waited for them – walked nightlong in the misty moorland. And what man's knowledge can map the gliding ground of demon and damned.

The council lords sat daily to devise some plan, what might be best against these terror-raids, promising sometimes on the altars of their idols unholy sacrifices if the **Slayer of Souls** would bring relief to the suffering people. Hell possessed their hearts and minds. The Lord God was unknown to them, that Wielder of Glory.

This season rocked the son of Healfdene with **swingeing** sorrows; too cruel the strife too strong and long-lasting. Night frightfulness unequalled! (Old English)

This Grendel feud was heard of by one of King **Hygelac's** warriors, brave among the **Geats** from over the seas. He was for main strength of all men foremost that trod the earth at that time – great framed and great heart. (Old English) He had a seaworthy **wave-cutter** be fitted out for him; the warrior king Hrothgar he would seek, he said, over swan's riding, that lord of great name, desperate for men.

The prince picked his men from the flower of his folk, the fiercest among them that might be found. Fourteen of them! Sea-skilled Beowulf led them right down to the beach's fringe. Time running on, the boat rode the waves, hard in by headland. Harnessed warriors leapt on **prow**, surf was swirling, sand was stirring, bright **mail-coats** to the mast's foot were carried, war-gear well-wrought. Willingly they shoved her out, their tight timbered craft, on the craved voyage.

Away she went over the wavy ocean, boat like a bird, breaking seas, wind-whetted, white-throated, till the curved prow had ploughed so far that after a space that on the second day they might see land loom on the skyline, the shimmer of cliffs, sheer **fells** behind, ample promontories. The crossing was at an end. The Geatish men stepped on **strand**, moved briskly up; a rope going ashore, **ring-mail** clashed, battle-girdings.

A watchman saw them. From the wall where he stood, posted by the Scyldings to patrol the cliffs, he saw the polished shields pass along the gangway and curiosity moved him to know who these men were. Hrothgar's thane, when his horse had picked its way down to the shore, shook his spear fiercely at arm's length, framed the challenge:

‘Strangers, you have steered this steep craft through the sea-ways, sought our coast. I see you are warriors. I must ask who you are. In all the years I have lived as look-out at land's end here, **shield-carriers** have never come ashore more openly. You had no word of leave from our great lord Hrothgar. I have not in my life set eyes on a man with more might in his frame than this helmed lord. He's no hall-fellow no mere retainer dressed out in armor, unless his looks **belie** him; he has the head of a hero. I'll have your names now and the names of your fathers, or further you shall not go. Stay where you are, strangers! Say where you are from, why you have come.’

The captain gave him a clear answer:

‘We here are come from the country of the Geats and are hearth-companions to the great **King Hygelac**. My noble father was known as **Edgetheow**, a fighter famous among nations. All the wiser men in the world remember him readily. It is with loyal and true intention that we come to seek your lord, the son of **Healfdene**. We have a great errand to that glorious hero, the Shepherd of the **Danes**.

‘But the drift of it shall not be kept from you. You must know, if indeed there is truth in what is told in my country – Geatland – that among you Scyldings some strange enemy, an obscure assailant in the opaque night times, makes spectacles of spoil and slaughter in hideous feud. To Hrothgar I would openheartedly unfold a plan how the old commander may overcome his foe, if indeed an easing is ever to slacken these

besetting sorrows. Otherwise he must miserably live out this lamentable time, for as long as Heorot, hall of halls, bulks to the sky.’

The mounted coast guard made reply:

‘I accept what I am told, that this troop is loyal to the Scyldings’ Protector. Pass forward – I’ll guide you, commanding meanwhile the men under me to guard with care this craft of yours, this ship on the sand, fresh from its **tarring** until again it bear its beloved captain with curve-necked **keel** to the coasts of the Geat.’

The vessel was still as they set forward, the deep-chested ship stayed at its mooring, fast at its anchor. Briskly the men went marching together, each helmet sparkling with glancing boar emblems, patterned and fire-tempered, brilliant with gold, till they made out at last the home of the king, the most illustrious hall under Heaven, its radiance lighting the lands of the world.

Their guide pointed up to the shining palace, then brought his horse about, and said in a quiet:

‘Here I must leave you. May the Lord Almighty afford you His grace in your undertakings and bring you in safety back to the seashore.’

The path that brought the war-band on its way was paved with stone. Their war-coats shone as they stepped along in their gear of grim aspect, going to the hall. Sea-wearied, they then set against the wall their polished shields. The weapons of the seamen stood in the spear-rack, an ash-wood, grey-tipped. These iron-shirted men were handsomely armed!

A nobleman there – Wulfgar – said:

‘I am spokesman here, herald to Hrothgar. It is not exile but adventure, I am thinking, that brings you to Herrot. And from whence did you bring these embellished shields, grey mail-shirts, masked helmets, this...this...this stack of spears?’

The gallant Geat gave answer then, (Old English) valour-renowned, hard under helmet:

‘At Hygelac’s table we are sharers in the feast; Beowulf is my name. I shall set out to Hrothgar the cause of my journey, so tell him.’

Then Wulfgar spoke:

‘The lord of the Danes, Lord of the Scyldings, shall learn of your request. I shall winningly ask my honored chief, giver of rings, about your undertaking, and soon bear the answer back again the answer that lord shall think good to make.’

He rapidly strode to the seat of Hrothgar:

‘Men have come here from the country of Geatland, borne from afar over the back of the sea. These battle-companions call the man who leads them, *Beowulf*. Do not, kind Hrothgar, refuse them audience. Their **accoutrement** clearly bespeaks them of **earls**’ rank. And their leader seems to command them by right.’

The Guardian of the Scyldings gave his answer:

‘Him? I knew him when he was a child! His old father, Edgetheow and I fought together. Well, does the son now pay this call on a tested friend? The seafarers used to say, I remember, that this fighting man in his hand’s grasp had the strength of thirty other men. I believe that the Lord God has directed him here against Grendel’s oppression. Waste no time now but tell them to come in.’

Promptly Wulfgar in right of decorum turned to the doors and told his message:

‘The Master of Battles, Lord of the North Danes, bids me to announce that he knows your ancestry. I am to tell you all, determined warriors that you may go in now in your gear of battle. Set eyes on Hrothgar, helmed as you are.’

Then Beowulf arose, surrounded by his soldiers, the Geat swung in across Heorot's floor, thick thronging retinue, the warrior leading – helmeted, grave. He stepped to the hearth:

‘Health to Hrothgar! I am Hygelac’s kinsman and serve in his fellowship. Word of Grendel has been made known to me. The sailors speak of this hall standing idle and silent of voices, as soon as the evening’s light has hidden beneath the heaven’s hood. I am urged by my councilors to seek you, sovereign Hrothgar. These men knew well the weight of my hands. Have they not seen me come home from fights where I had bound five Giants, or crushed on the wave sea-serpents by night and broken the beasts? And shall I not try a single match – a trial – against this fiend, this monster Grendel? I have now, therefore, to make to you this one request; to ask one sole favor, protector of the Scyldings, not to forbid me with my loyal companions to cleanse your hall Heorot. Having come this far! As I am informed that this unlovely one is careless enough to carry no weapon, I **abjure** utterly the bearing of sword. With naked hands shall I grapple with the fiend, fight to the death here, hater and hated! He who is chosen shall give himself to God.

‘If he can contrive it, we may count upon Grendel to eat quite fearlessly the flesh of we Geats here in this war-hall. There will be no need, Sir, for you to bury my head; *he* will have it gladly. He will bear my bloody corpse away, bent on eating it, bespatter his moor-lair without another thought. But if the fight should take me, I ask that you send King Hygelac this best of battle-shirts, that my breast now wears. It is the queen of war-coats, and from the forge of Wayland. Fate. Fate will take its course!’ (Old English)

Then Hrothgar spoke, the Helmet of the Scyldings:

‘So it is to fight in our defense, friend Beowulf, and as an office of kindness that you have come to us here! It is a sorrow in spirit for me to say to any man what the hatred of Grendel has brought me to in Heorot. My hall-companions, my war-band, are dwindled – doom swept away by Grendel and horror. They often boasted, when the beer was drunk, that they would here await in this **wassailing-place**, with daunting blades before Grendel’s assault, but each time the morning brought the light of day, this mead-hall was seen all stained with blood. Blood had soaked its

shining floor; it was a house of slaughter Yet sit now to the banquet, should the mood so take you.’

A bench was then cleared for the company of Geats there in that war-hall, for the whole band together. Prompt in his office, the man who held the mead horn poured out its sweetness. The song of the poet again rang in Heorot. The heroes laughed loud – the Geats and Danes together!

Then **Unferth** spoke, one of Hroethgar’s warriors, sitting at the feet of the Father of the Scyldings, He could not allow that any other name should hold under heaven a higher title than his own:

‘Is this the Beowulf of **Breca**’s swimming-match, when for pride the pair of you tested the seas and for a trite oath entrusted your lives to the deep waters? A sorry contest! Your arms embraced the ocean’s streams. You beat the wave-way, wove your hand-movements. The sea boiled with waves of winter. You laboured seven nights: and then you lost! His might was the greater. Morning found him cast by the seas on the coast of Norway. He made his way back home. The son of Beanstan performed to the letter what he had promised to you. I see little hope then of a happier outcome – though in other conflicts elsewhere in the world you may indeed have prospered – if you intend keeping your all-night vigil in Grendel’s path.’

Then spoke Beowulf, son of Edgetheow:

‘I thank my friend Unferth, who unlocks us his tale of Breca’s bragged exploit. The beer in his gut lends eloquence to his tongue. But as for the truth: I had more sea-strength, and endured under water a worse struggle than he did. It was something the two of us said as boys – boasting how we should venture our lives on the open ocean, which in due time we accordingly did.

‘Hard in our right hands we held each a sword as we went through the seas, so to defend ourselves against whale and killer. He could not away from me; nor would I from him. Thus stroke for stroke we stitched the ocean five nights and days, when a current split us – a churning of waters in chilliest of weathers, blackness lourering, northwind bending hostile against us. The waves were rough!

‘The unfriendliness was then aroused of the fishes of the deep. Against sea-beasts my body-armor helped me then, this forge-knit battleshirt, bright with gold. Then a savage attacker dragged me to the bottom, pinned me in his grip. But I got the chance to stab the ugly creature with my weapon’s point. Then more loathsome snouts snickered by me and swarmed at my throat. But those scaly flesh-eaters sat not down to dine on Beowulf! They picnicked not on me! Daylight found them mauled by my sword up along the beaches, soundly asleep. Since then they have never troubled any travelers over that deep waterway. Day in the east grew, the billows sank. So that I then could see the headlands, the windy cliffs. I came with my life from the compass of my foes, but tired from the struggle. (Old English) Aye! Fate is often merciful to the brave man.

‘And it was my part to put to the sword seven sea monsters. A man more sorely pressed the sea has never held!

‘No whisper has yet reached me of sword-ambushes survived, nor such scathing perils in connection with *your* name! Never has Breca, nor you, Unferth, either, in open battle-play framed such a deed with *your* shining swords. I tell you, Unferth, that Grendel had never grown such a terror, this demon had never dealt your lord such havoc in Heorot, had your heart’s intention been so grim for battle as you give us to believe. He’s learnt there’s no need to fear *your* people. He spares not a single sprig of you Danes in extorting his tribute, and expects no resistance from the spear-wielding Scyldings.

‘I’ll show him Geatish strength and stubbornness shortly enough now – a lesson in war. He who wishes shall go then blithe to the banquet when the flame-mailed sun of another day shall dawn for men in the southern sky.’

Then was laughter of heroes, harp-music ran, words were warm-hearted. **Wealththeow** the queen of Hrothgar, moved forward, mindful of courtesies, glittering to welcome the Geats in the hall. Peerless lady! But to the land’s guardian she offered first the flowing cup, then to the old and the young men in each part of the hall, until the time came when the flashing-armed queen, carried to Beowulf the brimming vessel. She spoke to him kindly and gave thanks to the Lord God in words wisely chosen, her wish being granted to meet with a man who might be relied on for aid against these troubles.

Then up spoke Beowulf, son of Edgetheow:

‘This was my determination in taking to the ocean, that I should once and for all accomplish the wishes of your adopted people. I shall achieve victory or here in this mead-hall to meet my ending-day!’

This speech sounded sweet to the glittering lady.

Then was King Hroethgar minded to rest, aware of the monster brooding his attack – from the time he saw the sun’s light to the time when darkness drowns all things, and under its shadow-cover shapes do glide dark beneath the clouds.

The whole assembly rose up. Then did the King with these words leave Beowulf:

‘Never have I at any instance to any man thus handed over Heorot, as I here do to you. Take and now hold to the house of the Danes! Bend your mind and your body and wake against the foe!’

Beowulf then replied with a boasting speech:

‘I fancy my fighting-strength, my performance in combat, at least as greatly as Grendel does his; and therefore I shall not forshorten his life with a slashing sword – too simple a business. Of good arms he knows nothing of the shattering of shields. No, we’ll at night play without *any* weapons, if unweaponed he dares to face me in fight. The Father in His wisdom shall apportion the honors then – the All-holy Lord, to whichever he think fit.’

Then the hero lay down, while about him many brave sea-warriors bent to their hall-rest, not one of them thinking ever to see again their beloved country.
(Old English)

Gliding through the shadows came the walker in the night. The warriors slept – all except one. This man kept an unblinking watch. He waited, pent heart swelling with anger against his foe, from off the moorlands’ misting fells came Grendel stalking. (Old English) He moved in through the dark. He saw with perfect

clearness the gold panelled hall, the mead drinking place of men. The door gave way at a touch of his hands. Rage-inflamed, wreckage-bent, he tore the Hall's jaws. Hastening onwards, angrily advanced, from his eyes shot a light in unlovely form like that of fire. He saw in the hall the host of young warriors. In his heart exulted the horrible monster, all his hopes swelling to a gluttonous meal. He aimed to divide – monstrous in frightfulness – the life from each body that lay in the place.

As a first, step he set his hands on a sleeping soldier, savagely tore him, gnashed at his bone-joints, bolted huge gobbets, sucked at his veins, and had soon eaten all of the man, down to his fingers and feet.

Then he stepped forward, stretched to seize our warrior Beowulf; reached out for him with his spike-filled fist. But the faster man forestalling, rose upon his arm and quickly gripped that sickening hand. The upholder of evils immediately knew he had not met on Middle Earth's acres with any man of a harder hand-grasp. He strained to be off; he ailed for his darkness, the company of devils and his den beneath the meer. But Hygelac's brave kinsman recalled his evening's utterance, and tightened his hold till fingers burst!

The monster strained away. The man stepped closer. The monster's desire was for darkness between them, direction regardless, to get out and run for his **fen**-bordered lair. It was an ill journey that persecuter had of it when he made for Heorot.

It was indeed wonderful that the wine-supper-hall withstood the wrestling pair, that the world's palace fell not to the ground. But it was girt firmly, both inside and out, by iron braces of skilled manufacture. Many a figured gold-worked wine-bench, as we heard it, started from the floor at the struggles of that pair. A thing undreamed of by Scylding wisdom was that any of mankind by what method soever might undo that intricate, antlered hall, **sunder** it by strength – unless it were swallowed up in the embraces of fire.

Fear entered the Danes, as they heard through the side wall the grisly plaint of the enemy of God, the sobs of the damned one bewailing his pain. The Geats leapt up to defend their great prince. They were ignorant then that no sword on Earth, not the truest of steel, could touch their assailant, for every sword edge and weapon of victory he had blunted by wizardry. It was then that this monster

moved by spite against our race found in the end that flesh and bone were to fail him, for Hygelac's great-kinsman and stout hearted warrior had him fast by the hand. And hateful to each was the breath of the other. A rip in the giant flesh-frame showed then, shoulder-muscles sprang apart, a snapping of tendons, bone-locks burst. The arm of the demon was severed from his side, and Grendel flew death-sick to his joyless den, where he knew that the end of his life was in sight.

Beowulf had cleansed Heorot, had saved the hall from persecution. As a signal to all, the hero hung the hand, the arm and torn-off shoulder – the entire limb – Grendel's whole grip beneath the soaring roof.

Then it was, as I heard it, at hall next morning, warrior with warrior walked to this ghastly limb. The **athelings** gazed at the hand, high on the ceiling. Each nail socket seemed steel to the eye. Each spur on the hand was a pattern of fear. Of the bright building, just the roof had survived unmarred and in one piece.

Along the wide high roads the chiefs of the clans came and crossed remote **traps** to follow the foe's footprints, who with strength flagging had staggered to his fen-lair, giving up his heathen soul. There, the death daubed waters **bechromoned**, seethed. Gore-hot! And Hell engulfed his life in the deep fen pool.

Then the clan chiefs wheeled away from the mere in bold mood, joined by the young men, white mounted warriors. Of Beowulf, many said that over Earth's stretch, of all who wielded the sword, he was worthiest to rule. In saying this, they did not slight in the least the gracious Hrothgar, for he was a good king. (Old English)

Taking his stand on the steps of the hall, Hrothgar beheld the hand of Grendel and said:

‘Beowulf, I now take you to my bosom as a son. Hold yourself well in this new relation! You will lack for nothing that lies in my gift. May the Almighty Father yield you always the success that, on your own account, you have guaranteed with these deeds.’

Then Beowulf spoke, son of Edgethea:

‘I had meant to catch him, clamp him lock-hold, and I clung to him too loosely to prevent his escape. But now he lives no longer. He is forced to await till the Lord in His splendor shall pass his great decree.’

Then, as a sign of victory, Hroethgar, son of Healfdene ordered for Beowulf a sword worked in gold; and onto the floor had brought on eight war-horses with glancing bridles, one with a saddle studded with stones – battle-seat of the Danes. He bade also compensation to be made, again in gold, for the men whom Grendel had horribly murdered.

What a banquet then was! Gladness mounted, bench-mirth rang, the bearers gave out wine from wonderful vessels. (Old English) When the evening came, they cleared away the benches and covered the floor with beds and bolsters, the Geats placing by their heads their polishes shields, the **lindens** of battle. Always ready for war! What a nation they were! Then they sank into sleep.

But it was soon made clear that a survivor was still living – another foe, grieving, ailing for its loss. (Old English) In the chilling currents, dwelling in dread waters, the monstrous **ogress** – Grendel's mother.

.....

Grendel's mother now purposed, blackhearted, gluttonous, on a wrath-bearing visit of vengeance for her son. (Old English) She descended on Heorot, and fate swept on its wheel when the mother of Grendel found her way among those men. Many a hard sword from its rack among the benches was by firm hand lifted – the broad shield raised. She was all eager to be out of the place, now that she was discovered, and escape with her life. She grasped a man quickly – the king's good friend, Ashere. She clutched him to herself, and was away to the fen.

Beowulf was not there! A separate lodging was assigned out of the treasure giving to the Geat champion. Heorot was in uproar! Grendel's hand had gone with her!

Speedily, Beowulf was summoned to the chamber. The man excellent in warfare walked across the hall flanked by his escort – The floor timbers boomed – to make his address to the Danish King, and ask of him whether the night had been pleasant, after call so urgent.

'Do not ask about pleasure,' said Hroethgar. Sorrow has returned to the House of Denmark with the death of Ashere, my closest counsellor, the keeper of my thoughts, the strongest of warriors noted in battle. Men of birth and merit all should be as Ashere. A bloodthirsty monster has murdered him in Heorot, glorying in her carrion. She has taken vengeance for the previous night. Revenge is her motive. I have heard it said by those who live in the country that they have seen a pair of huge moor hauntings – otherworldly ones. They know the man of old by the name of Grendel and know of no father. But the other is in woman's shape.'

'Mysterious is their region: **wolf fells**, wind-picked moors; a torrent of water falls from a louring bluff to an underground flood. Not far from here the **mere** lies – dark, overhung with hoar-frost. A fire in the water. The **hart** that roams the heath when the hounds have pressed him may hide in the forest his antlered head, but the hart will die there – sell his life on the brink – rather than swim. Unholy that place is! And the wind stirs up wild storms there, whipping the swirling waters, which climb the clouds and make the skies weep. Our sole remedy is to turn again to you.'

Then Beowulf spoke, son of Edgetheow:

'Bear your grief, wise one! We must all expect to leave our life upon this earth. We must earn some renown, if we can, before death – as did your friend Ashere. Daring is the forever the epitaph of the fighting man. (Old English) We shall rapidly find where this Grendel's mother has gone!'

The old king leapt up and offered thanks to God, to the Lord Almighty, for what this man had spoken. Steeds with braided manes were instantly bridled. The hero and the monarch rode out shining together, and a troop of shield bearers marched by their side.

The trace of her going, the track across the plains, was clearly to be seen on the fog-bound moor – the way she had carried the lifeless body, flailing, of the man who meant the most to Hroethgar the great king.

Reconnoitering ahead, Beowulf saw where some ash-trees hung above a hoary rock, beneath which the water was **turbid** with blood, with warm upwellings. And there they found, boiling with crimson, the head of Ashhere by the edge of the cliff.

Then the war horn sang an eager battle cry! And Beowulf put on, unanxious for his life, the mail shirt, bulwark to his bone-framed chest, a silver helmet to strike down through swirl of water, and the hilted sword that Hroethgar's spokesman Unferth – Yes, that **taunter** of the swimming match – had given him in this, his hour of trial. Its name – **Hrunting**. Poisoned twig patterned, never failing the hero whose hand took it up. It would seem that Unferth forgotten his sarcasm spoken before when eloquent with wine.

Then Beowulf spoke, son of Edgetheou:

‘I am eager to begin, great son of Healfdene. Remember your promise that if I should die, you would assume the place of a father towards me, and then let Unferth take back this blade he has given to me. He is widely known, and must not lose his glory.’

He then dived into the **Mere**, not waiting for an answer, and the surging water closed over his head. He swam until noon before reaching the lake floor. The grim and greedy guardian of the flood, keeping her hungry hundred-season watch, discovered at once that one from above – a human – had sounded the home of the monsters. She felt for the man and fastened upon him her terrible hooks. But the mail-shirt so ringed him that she could not drive her fierce fingers through the mesh of that harness masking his limbs. While she bore him, **pinioned**, down to her lair, he could not draw his sword, for throngs of ripping tusks, sea-beasts, attacked him.

Suddenly there was no water; he was in a vaulting chamber. He saw a gleam and flashing – a bright fire blazing clear. He then saw the size of this sea-demon woman. He dashed out good **Hrunting** with such violence that the ring-banded sword screamed out loud on her head. But the glittering metal refused to

bite or hurt her at all. The edge had failed, though before in all conflicts it had carved through the helmet of each chosen man.

Resolute again, Beowulf flung his sword to the ground, went for Grendel's mother, seized her by the shoulder, and with mounting anger swung the desperate enemy till she fell to the floor. She promptly repaid this present of his. (Her boy was to be avenged, her only son). toppled his weariness, drew out her knife, and had not the mail-shirt overspreading his back well shielded his life, Edgeltheow's son might have ended his venture under the vastness of the Earth.

Then he saw among the armor on the wall a giant sword from former days. This wonder was so enormous that no other man would be equal to bearing it in battle-play. Why, it was a giant's **forge** that had fashioned it so well. The Geat champion, shaking now with war-rage, caught it by the rich hilt, and careless of his life, brandished it in circles and brought it down in fury to take her full and fairly, biting into her neck! The blade sheared through the backbone. She fell to the ground. The sword was gory. He was glad at the deed.

Light glowed out and illumined the chamber with a clearness such as the candle of heaven sheds in the sky. And Beowulf saw where Grendel, wasted through his wound at the battle of Heorot, his body gaping, open lay waiting for his death. The hard-swung sword struck. The settlement was made.

From above, Hroethgar's men **descried** soon enough the water stirred turbid and marbling the surface. They thought it unlikely they'd see once again the prince return triumphant to seek their famous master. Surely the she-wolf had done away with him. The night hour had come, so the keen-hearted **Scyldings** abandoned the cliff-head, homeward bound with their king.

But the Geats sat on, and stared at the pool, despairing to ever see Beowulf again. The blood it had shed now made the giant sword dwindle – melt as the ice when Spring's frost's grip unfastens. Grendel's mother's hot blood had melted it, burned it, so **venemous** the hell-fiend who died in that hall.

Then the Geat champion, taking only that hilt bristling with jewels, the sword *Hrunting*, and Grendel's vile head struck up through the water and through the rough wave-swirl came strongly to land where the watchers there waiting – huge in relief – quickly loosened his helmet and shirt of fine mail.

Then, bold as kings, carefree of heart, they carried the head, four to a spear, retracing their steps to the gold-giving hall. They presented the head, held up by its locks, manhandled in where the men were all drinking – a hideous sight for the thanes and their queen. An awesome thing! They eyed it well.

Beowulf presented himself to King Hroethgar:

‘Behold, my trophies here great son of Healfdene. Now I say that you may sleep in Heorot free from care, both young men and guard my lord of the Scyldings.’

Hroethgar gazed on the head and hilt, the hall silent:

‘Beowulf my friend, your name shall resound through the nations of earth that are furthest away. It is granted to your people that you shall live to be comfort and **bulwark** to your heroes. The noon of your strength shall last for a while now, but we know that in a little time, some flame, drowning, spear, or ugliness of age will conquer you finally, bravest of warriors. So it is with myself. But now join those here seated and rejoice in your feast, O man clad in victory!’

Next day, the sunlight shaking out above the shadows, each Geatish atheling was eager to be home And Beowulf ordered the sword *Hrunting* to be returned to Unferth, accounting it formidable in fight, finding its edges true. Ample was his spirit.

The fighting men were armed up, ready for the journey and Beowulf said:

‘We sailors come from afar, which is to say how keenly we yearn to return to our king **Healgaic**. We have been rightly, royally treated, and if ever on this earth can earn of you more of your love than I have so far done, if ever neighboring tribes intend your harm, I’ll bring you a grove of grey-tipped spears – if you are short of men. We find many friends here.’

Hroethgar thanked him, and said:

‘As I come to know your temper, friend Beowulf, the more it pleases me. You have brought it about that both sea-Geats and spear-

Danes shall share out peace. Your people, I know, are always open-hearted, are firm towards enemies and fast to their friends.’

Riding at anchor, the wave skimmer stayed at anchor for owner and lord. The coast guard saw the heroes depart, as he had seen them come, and graciously greeted them – rode down to meet them. The soaring prow, high masted, moved out to divide the deep water, and skimming, it left Denmark behind. It furled back the waves, foam throated seafarer, plaining until they sighted the headlands they knew.

The Geatish harbor-guard, ever scouring in their lookout for these men, now moored the broad-ribbed boat in the sand. No pounding breaker should drive away again those darting timbers.

The news of Beowulf’s return was brought to **King Heagalic**. The floor was cleared for his band, by order of the king. Carryng the mead cup was Hareth’s daughter, presenting the wine bowl to the hand of each Geat.

Hygelac then made courteous inquiry. Curiosity burned to know the adventures of these men:

‘I pled with you continually never to meet with that murderous creature, but to let the North Danes themselves bring an end to their Grendel-feud.’

Beowulf spoke:

‘Gracious Hygelac, It has been told aloud what battle occasion befell me and Grendel. When heaven’s jewel, day’s glory, had glided from the world, the dire dusk fiend came down to seek us out. The crimson-toothed slayer would not leave the gold hall empty handed. He groped out his greedy palm. I grasped it. And – tale too long to tell – that hand stayed behind in the hall of Heorot. After the ensuing dusk came, quick on its heels, the mother of Grendel moved to her revenge. She struck down a warrior, carried the body to the mountain-torrents depths, in hideous embrace. I found in the surges that grimmest of guardians, and after hand to hand struggle, the whirlpool boiled with the blood of the mother. I had slashed off her head in that hall underground, with a sword of huge size.

Oh, the great King Hroethgar rewarded me well with a heap of treasures – all I desired. Now, O bravest of kings, I present them to you.

And then Hygelac, responding, bid them bring in the sword **hierloom** of Geatland – elaborate in gold. He had it placed in the lap of Beowulf, son of Edgetheow. Also bestowed on him were seven thousand hides, a chief's stool, and hall. Before, Beowulf's family, the **House of the Wymendings**, only held rank of sword. They now inherited a birthright, the greatest region of all the wide kingdom.

.....

Now it fell out much later, when Hygelac died, and despite the shield shelter his son Heardred was dead, that the broad kingdom came by this turn, into Beowulf's hands. For half a century he ruled it.

But where are you now, my noblest treasure sharer? I cannot look upon these ruined walls and not cry out, "Where are they now?" The many matchless heroes? The proud horsemen and their steeds? Where are the feasting faces round this table? And where the gladness this grim hall once knew? Beneath these skies, words alone will endure. Here wealth is lent us, friends are lent us, heroes are mortal, and kinsfolk pass away. But here at last the earth's wide frame itself shall come to desolation.

But Beowulf was a good king!

Fifty winters he ruled, and drew grey and drew guardianship of the land, till one began a – hall guarding dragon – to put forth his power in the pitch-black nighttimes. He guarded a treasure in a towering stone burial mound. Men knew not his entrance, but one day a slave on the run from a flogging *felt* his way in. When he saw the dragon there, he was seized with great terror. But even so, he stole from thence a solid gold cup.

In another age, an unknown man, heavy with friend-loss, had brought in and hid here his beloved gold hoard, saying:

‘Old ground, for men could not the gold of the earls. This hardened helmet heeled with gold shall lose its shell; this **cuirass** that in the crash, took bite of iron will moulder with man; this mail shirt hung from a shoulder that shouldered warriors shall not jingle again. There’s no joy from harp play, no hawk swings through the hall now, no horse tramps the threshold; terrible slaughter has carried to darkness many kindreds of men.’

Then he left the stone **barrow**, and the smooth evil dragon, doomed from of old to seek barrow halls and guard for all time the gold that he finds, swam through the gloom enfolded in flame. And for three hundred winters, this dragon feind, this swooper, sleek-skinned by night guarded the hoard-hall until that slave woke his anger by bearing to his master the golden goblet as a peace offering.

The dragon reptile woke, sniffed along the rock, circled in flames to discover the robber. No hint of man. But this meant war, and it pleased him. He rejoiced at the thought of action through battle, and waited till evening only with difficulty. His fire he swore would requite the lost cup. Night falling, he issued out, belched glowing flakes. He burnt the bright buildings. The blazing grew skyward, and men were afraid. The flying **scourge** did not mean to leave one living thing. Before morning’s light, he flew back to his chamber. He had lapped the people of the land in fire, and trusted now to the barrow’s strength.

His faith misled him. (old English) Beowulf knew soon enough the truth of the horror, for his own hall itself had been swallowed in flame. Supposing he had angered the eternal lord, his breast was thronged with unaccustomed care-filled thoughts.

But this king of the Geats now planned a punishment, and commanded the making of a shield all in iron, well knowing that one of **linden** would fail him in fire. He disdained to attack with a troop of men, having clashed with many since his men of Heorot and did not fear death. He went with eleven men to set eyes on the dragon having by then discovered the cause of the outrage, the precious drinking cup had now passed into his hands from the hands of the finder, and that miserable slave now made the thirteenth man in the company. Cowed, he must show them the way to the place. For he alone knew the **knoll** in his earth-hole, the underground hollow heaped with intricate treasure

The war-season king sat down on the headland, spoke encouraging words to the friends of his hearth, but gloomy was his spirit – death-eager, wandering. He knew that fate waited to seek his soul’s hoard.

Beowulf spoke long, recalling past conflicts, and ended his discourse with open-heart boast:

‘Battles in pleny I ventured in youth, and, as old as I am now, I’ll again achieve glory, if this evil destroyer once dares to venture forth. I would take no sword, no weapon to the serpent if I knew another way to fight him, as with Grendel before. But, as I must expect hot war-breath and venom, I shall take the precautions of chain-mail and shield. My mood is strong. Men in armor, wait here on the barrow. It’s my faith alone to match strength with this **worm**. I’ll win the treasure by daring, or die in the fight.’

The champion stood up and bore his shield to the rocky cliff’s foot, so in the wall an archway of stone and a stream there breaking from the burial barrow. A stream of fire! A boiling watercourse of killing flames! Filled with rage, Beowulf uttered a shout from his breast. His voice re-echoed through the vault of grey stone The treasure guardian heard, and bellowed out from the rock in a hissing gust. The grey ground boomed! Beowulf swung up his shield, shook out his sharp sword. Each of the pair – intending destruction – was horror to the other. The fleetness of the serpent wound itself together, came flowing forward, flaming and coiling. Our chief raised his hand and reached down such a stroke with his ancestral sword that, meeting the bone, it turned – bit less strongly than required of it then. The bared battle-blade had failed in the fight!

After this cut, the worm grew savage-minded. It spat death-fire, war flashes blazed in the distance, far fenced in the folk-king. He felt bitter pain!

His band of battle companions did not stand about him, but fled to the forest and looked after their lives.!

All but one. His name was **Wiglaf**, son of Weoxstan, Geatish prince of Beowulf’s house of the Windings. His Leige lord he saw, tormented by heat, and remembering the favors formally giving him, conferring the land-rights his father had held, he could not hold back. He seized the yellow shield of linden, drew the

ancient sword, and his courage was firm, as the serpent soon found when they came to grips. He strode through the blood-smoke, bore his helmet to the end aid of his lord:

‘Beloved Beowulf, bear all well, you gave out in your youth you would never let your glory abate. your life now with your utmost of strength. My help shall be yours!’

Hearing these words, the Dragon came raging, attacked once again – terror fire flashing. Wiglaf’s mail did not serve, and his shield was withered back to the boss in the billow of fire. But nothing deterred, the young man dodged back, stepped smartly to take up his kinsman’s protection. And then did that king remember his worth, dealt out a sword blow of annihilating weight, striking into the head. But the hero’s sword shattered! His hand was so strong! (I have heard that any sword he bore into battle his blow would overtax – so it happened with this.)

Now a third time the fire dragon, his chance lying open, rushed in on our king, crushed all his neck between bitter fangs. Wiglaf then, disregarding the head, struck below it, aimed true, and the fire quickly slackened in consequence.

The king then recovering, reached for his stabbing knife, hewed mightily down – and hacked the dragon in half! So daring drove out life (Old English) And the king saw the last triumph of his works in the world.

His wound burned and swelled, and the bane burned in the chest – the poison within him. He walked away thinking, sat down on a ledge and surveyed the old earth -hall. Wiglaf took water and washed his good lord. He bathed away the battle-blood, loosened his helmet.

Beowulf spoke through the pain:

‘I would now wish my war gear be given to my son, if such hei, flesh of flesh, had been granted to me. I have guarded this people for full half a century, and the wasn’t a king who dared **afront** me with war. I held my own well, seldom swore wrongful oaths. In all of theses things I may still rejoice. Quickly go now, good Wiglaf, and look on the hoard. Make haste that I may gaze on that golden inheritance: the clear, skillful jewels,

so that I by that treasury may be more **assuaged**, leaving the life and the lordship that I have long held.’

Straightaway, the **son of Weoxstan** obeyed his wounded lord. He entered the barrow – and was thrilled at the sight of gold in its glitter littering the ground. He hurried back to Beowulf, eager to return, bearing some of the treasures. He came upon his king covered in blood and at his life’s end.

Beowulf said:

‘I wish to thank my God for these treasures I see, for making me able to win for my people such a trophy as this. You, Wiglaf, must attend to the people’s need henceforth. No further may I stay. Bid men to build me a tomb on the foreland by the sea that shall stand as a reminder of me to my folk, towering high above the Hronessness, so that Ocean travelers shall afterwoods name it *Beowulf’s Barrow*, bending in the distance, through the mists upon the sea.

He unclasped his golden collar, harness and arm-ring, gold plated helmet, gave to the young warrior – *Beah ond byrnan* – his crown and coat of mail, (Old English) bade him use them well:

‘You are the last of our **House** of the Waymundings. My people are gone, and I must them follow.’

These were his last words before his soul left his breast, mounting to meet with the glory of the righteous.

It was soon after this that the ten battle-shirkers – all traitors and weaklings – came out of the woods. They bore their shields ashamedly to where the old man lay, with Wiglaf trying to revive him without any success:

Wiglaf angrily declared:

‘Companions of the Guard! Your kinsmen shall become wanderers without land-rights as soon as athelings over the world shall hear how you fled. But haste is best now: we must bear our ring-bestower on his road. Let the owners of homesteads and all worthy warriors from far and wide fetch in wood for the hero’s funeral pyre.’

The Geat race then reared up a funeral pyre shining mail and shields of war and helmets hung upon it. They laid out in the middle the body of their chief, and on top they then kindled the biggest funeral fire. The roaring of flames mingled with weeping as the fire's red heart consumed the house of bone. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

This was the manner of the mourning of the Geats, sharers in the feast, at the fall of their lord. They said that he had proved of all the kings of the world the gentlest of men, the most gracious, the kindest to his people, the keenest for fame.

Cwaedon that he waere
wyruldcyinga manna mildust
ond monowaerest leodum llioost
ond loefggeornst.