

Beowulf

translated by Charles W. Kennedy

(The Danish Court and the Raids of Grendel)

Lo! we have listened to many a lay
Of the Spear-Danes' fame, their splendor of
old,

Their mighty princes, and martial deeds!
Many a mead-hall Scyld, son of Scaef,² *Danes*

5 Snatched from the forces of savage foes.
From a friendless foundling, feeble and
wretched,

He grew to a terror as time brought change.
He throve under heaven in power and pride
Till alien peoples beyond the ocean

10 Paid toll and tribute. A good king he! . . .

'Tis by earning honor a man must rise
In every state. Then his hour struck,
And Scyld passed on to the peace of God.

As their leader had bidden, whose word
was law

15 In the Scylding realm³ which he long had
ruled,

His loving comrades carried him down
To the shore of ocean; a ring-prowed ship,
Straining at anchor and sheeted with ice,
Rode in the harbor, a prince's pride.

20 Therein they laid him, their well-loved lord,
Their ring-bestower, in the ship's embrace,
The mighty prince at the foot of the mast
Amid much treasure and many a gem
From far-off lands. No lordlier ship

25 Have I ever heard of, with weapons heaped,
With battle-armor, with bills and byrnies.⁴
On the ruler's breast lay a royal treasure
As the ship put out on the unknown deep.
With no less adornment they dressed him
round

30 Or gift of treasure, than once they gave
Who launched him first on the lonely sea
While still but a child. A golden standard
They raised above him, high over head,
Let the wave take him on trackless seas.

35 Mournful their mood and heavy their hearts;
Nor wise man nor warrior knows for a truth
Unto what haven that cargo came. . . .

In the next lines, omitted here, the poet traces

the subsequent line of Danish kings, descended from Scyld: first his son Beowulf (not the hero of this poem, but a warrior of more ancient times); then his grandson Healfdene (hā'alf den ē). In time one of Healfdene's four children, Hrothgar (hrōth'gār), takes command of the kingdom. Following the young Scyld's earlier example, he begins by gathering about him a band of warriors.

To Hrothgar was granted glory in war,
Success in battle; retainers bold

40 Obeyed him gladly; his band increased
To a mighty host. Then his mind was moved
To have men fashion a high-built hall,

A mightier mead-hall than man had known,
Wherein to portion to old and young

45 All goodly treasure that God had given,
Save only the folk-land,⁵ and lives of men.
His word was published to many a people

Far and wide o'er the ways of earth
To rear a folk-stead richly adorned;

50 The task was speeded, the time soon came
That the famous mead-hall was finished and
done.

To distant nations its name was known,
The Hall of the Hart,⁶ and the king kept well
His pledge and promise to deal out gifts,
Rings at the banquet. The great hall rose
High and horn-gabled,⁷ holding its place. . . .

Then an evil spirit who dwelt in the
darkness

Endured it ill that he heard each day
The din of revelry ring through the hall,

Excerpted from *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic*, translated by Charles W. Kennedy. Copyright 1940 by Oxford University Press, Inc., renewed 1968 by Charles W. Kennedy. Reprinted by permission.

1. **Spear-Danes.** The poet supplies the Danish people with various epithets (descriptive names) in the course of the poem, partly to help his lines alliterate, and perhaps partly as an attempt at characterization. In addition to "Spear-Danes," he calls them "Ring-Danes," "Bright-Danes," as well as "South-," "East-," and "West-Danes."

2. **Scyld** (shild), **son of Scaef** (shāf), founder of the Danish line of kings, the **Scyldingas**, "descendants of Scyld." The Danish people are also referred to as "Scyldings." Scyld's name means "Shield, son of Sheaf," or perhaps "Shield with a sheaf."

3. **Scylding realm**, Denmark.

4. **bills and byrnies**, swords and shirts of chain mail.

5. **folk-land**, common land (the public land owned by the community). Germanic tribal law reserved this land for grazing.

6. **Hall of the Hart**, **Heorot** (hā'æ rot), Hrothgar's mead-hall. The hart (or stag) was a symbol of Germanic kingship. The head of the scepter found at Sutton Hoo (see pages 34-35) was a stag.

7. **horn-gabled**, perhaps with roof ornaments carved to resemble a stag's antlers, or perhaps simply "wide-gabled."

60 The sound of the harp, and the scop's sweet
 song. . . .⁸
 They called him Grendel, a demon grim
 Haunting the fen-lands, holding the moors,
 Ranging the wastes, where the wretched
 wight
 Made his lair with the monster kin;
 65 He bore the curse of the seed of Cain⁹
 Whereby God punished the grievous guilt
 Of Abel's murder. Nor ever had Cain
 Cause to boast of that deed of blood;
 God banished him far from the fields of men;
 70 Of his blood was begotten an evil brood,
 Marauding monsters and menacing trolls,
 Goblins and giants who battled with God
 A long time. Grimly He gave them reward!
 Then at the nightfall the fiend drew near
 75 Where the timbered mead-hall towered on
 high,
 To spy how the Danes fared after the feast.
 Within the wine-hall he found the warriors
 Fast in slumber, forgetting grief,
 Forgetting the woe of the world of men.
 80 Grim and greedy the gruesome monster,
 Fierce and furious, launched attack,
 Slew thirty spearmen asleep in the hall,
 Sped away gloating, gripping the spoil,
 Dragging the dead men home to his den.
 85 Then in the dawn with the coming of
 daybreak
 The war-might of Grendel was widely
 known.

Mirth was stilled by the sound of weeping;
 The wail of the mourner awoke with day.
 And the peerless hero, the honored prince,¹⁰
 90 Weighed down with woe and heavy of heart,
 Sat sorely grieving for slaughtered thanes,¹¹
 As they traced the track of the cursed
 monster.
 From that day onward the deadly feud
 Was a long-enduring and loathsome strife.
 95 Not longer was it than one night later
 The fiend returning renewed attack
 With heart firm-fixed in the hateful war,
 Feeling no rue for the grievous wrong.
 'Twas easy thereafter to mark the men
 100 Who sought their slumber elsewhere afar,
 Found beds in the bowers, since Grendel's
 hate
 Was so baldly blazoned in baleful signs.
 He held himself at a safer distance
 Who escaped the clutch of the demon's
 claw.

105 So Grendel raided and ravaged the realm,

8. **scop's sweet song.** The *scop* (skop) was the tribe's storyteller, chanting his tales to the sound of the harp.
 9. **seed of Cain.** In Genesis, Cain murders his brother Abel and is driven into the wilderness by God. According to legend his offspring included a variety of monsters. The poet mentions *eotenas*, "etans" (cannibal giants like trolls), *yffe* "elves" (beautiful but evil in Germanic legend), and *orc-nēas*, "goblins" (animated corpses like zombies). Grendel may have been a creature of this last type (see note below).
 10. **honored prince,** Hrothgar.
 11. **thanes, warriors.** A thane ranked between an earl (a nobleman) and an ordinary freeman.

Comment: The Nature of Grendel

Grendel's nature is, of course, diabolical from a Christian point of view: he is a member of the race of Cain, from whom all misshapen and unnatural beings were spawned, such as ogres and elves. He is a creature dwelling in the outer darkness, a giant, a cannibal. When he crawls off to die, he is said to join the rout of devils in Hell. However, he also appears to have roots in Scandinavian **folklore**. In Old Norse literature, monsters of his type make their appearance chiefly as *draugar*,¹ or animated corpses. They are ordinary folk who have been buried upright in cairns,² according to Norse custom, but if they harbor a grievance

after death they will refuse to stay put and will roam about at night wreaking aimless vengeance. They are articulate and usually angry, in contrast to the silent zombies of Haiti. A *draugr* is supernaturally strong and invulnerable (being already dead) and will often have a mother called a *ketta*, or "she-cat," who is even more monstrous than he. Grendel, then, appears to be a blend of the *draugr* figure and a devilish monster from the world of Christian folklore.

From *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*, translated by Howell D. Chickering, Jr. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1977

1. **draugar** (drou'gär), plural of *draugr* (drou'gør).
 2. **cairns** (kernz, karnz). A cairn is a pile of stones serving as a memorial, tomb, or landmark.

One against all, in an evil war
 Till the best of buildings was empty and still.
 'Twas a weary while! Twelve winters' time
 The lord of the Scyldings had suffered woe,
 110 Sore affliction and deep distress.
 And the malice of Grendel, in mournful lays,
 Was widely sung by the sons of men,
 The hateful feud that he fought with
 Hrothgar—
 Year after year of struggle and strife,
 115 An endless scourging, a scorning of peace
 With any man of the Danish might.
 No strength could move him to stay his
 hand,
 Or pay for his murders,¹² the wise knew well
 They could hope for no halting of savage
 assault.

120 Like a dark death-shadow the ravaging
 demon,
 Nightlong prowling the misty moors,
 Ensnared the warriors, wary or weak.
 No man can say how these shades of hell
 Come and go on their grisly rounds. . . .
 125 The son of Healfdene was heavy-hearted,
 Sorrowfully brooding in sore distress,
 Finding no help in a hopeless strife;
 Too bitter the struggle that stunned the
 people,
 The long oppression, loathsome and grim.

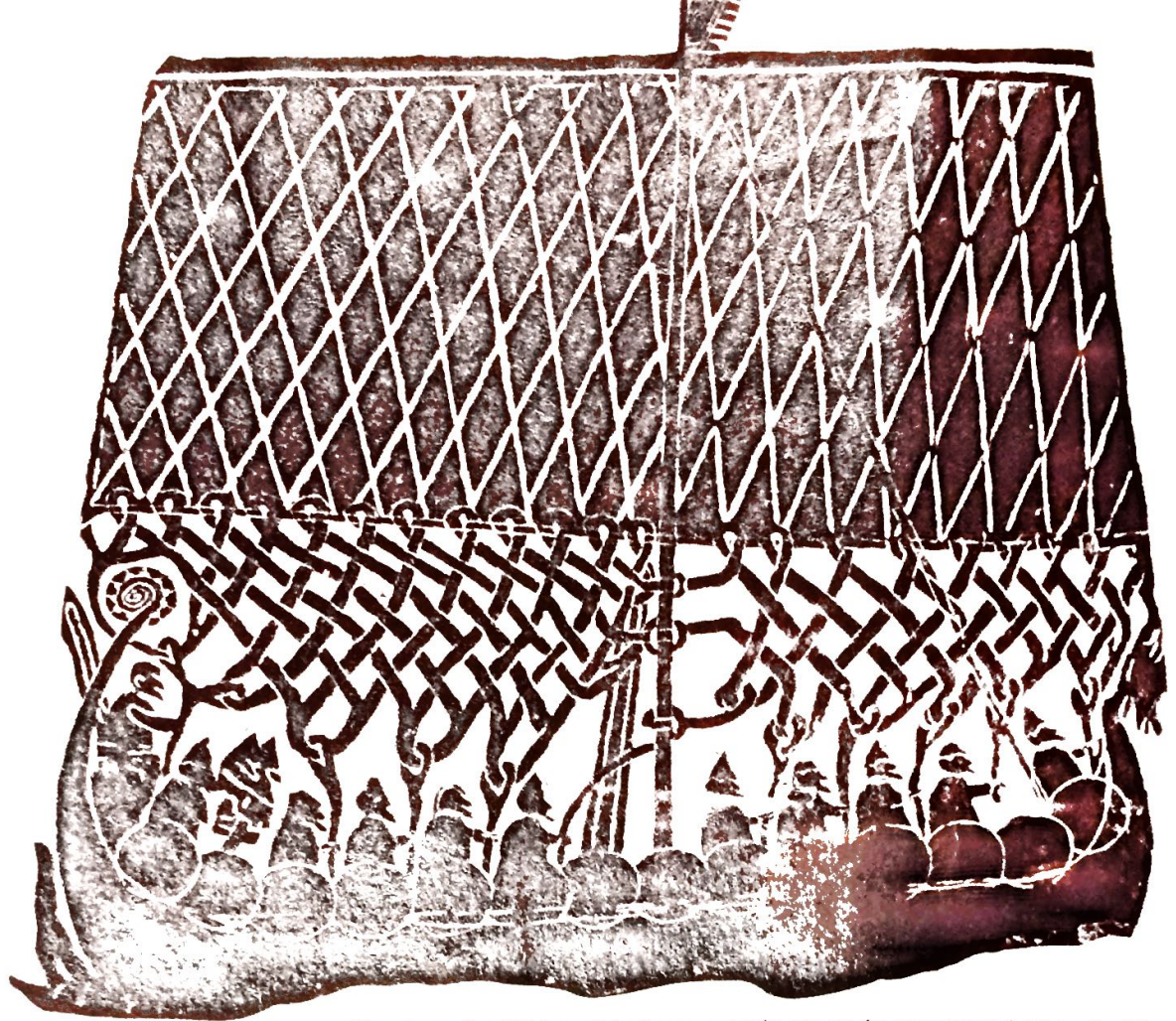
The Geats (yā'æts) lived in southwestern Sweden. Hygelac, their king as the story begins, is historical. He was famous for his unusual height. ("Even when he was twelve years old, no horse could carry him," claims an eighth-century *Book of Monsters*.) He died in battle while raiding the European mainland in 521. Beowulf, as Hygelac's thane, owes the king obedience. But hearing of Grendel's attacks on the neighboring Danes, he decides to go to their rescue, sailing from the valley of the Göta river in Sweden to the Danish island of Zealand, where Hrothgar has erected his mead-hall, Heorot (see map, page 3).

(The Coming of Beowulf)

130 Then tales of the terrible deeds of Grendel
 Reached Hygelac's thane in his home with
 the Geats;
 Of living strong men he was the strongest,

Fearless and gallant and great of heart.
 He gave command for a goodly vessel
 135 Fitted and furnished; he fain would sail
 Over the swan-road to seek the king —
 Who suffered so sorely for need of men,
 And his bold retainers found little to blame
 In his daring venture, dear though he was;
 140 They viewed the omens, and urged him on.
 Brave was the band he had gathered about
 him,
 Fourteen stalwarts seasoned and bold,
 Seeking the shore where the ship lay
 waiting,
 A sea-skilled mariner sighting the landmarks.
 145 Came the hour of boarding; the boat was
 riding
 The waves of the harbor under the hill.
 The eager mariners mounted the prow;
 Billows were breaking, sea against sand.
 In the ship's hold snugly they stowed their
 trappings,
 150 Gleaming armor and battle-gear;
 Launched the vessel, the well-braced bark,
 Seaward bound on a joyous journey.
 Over breaking billows, with bellying sail
 And foamy beak, like a flying bird
 155 The ship sped on, till the next day's sun
 Showed sea-cliffs shining, towering hills
 And stretching headlands. The sea was
 crossed,
 The voyage ended, the vessel moored.
 And the Weder people¹³ waded ashore
 160 With clatter of trappings and coats of mail;
 Gave thanks to God that His grace had
 granted
 Sea-paths safe for their ocean-journey.
 Then the Scylding coast guard watched
 from the sea-cliff
 Warriors bearing their shining shields,
 165 Their gleaming war-gear, ashore from the
 ship.
 His mind was puzzled, he wondered much

12. *murders*. The poet here ironically refers to the Danes' inability to force Grendel to pay *wergild* ("man-payment"), or compensation, to the families of the warriors he has murdered. In Anglo-Saxon and Germanic law, a fixed price in money was placed on the life of every individual in the tribe, from the churl (the lowest-ranking freeman) to the king. This money was paid by the killer's family to that of the victim to avoid blood feud.
 13. *Weder people*, *Weder-Géatas*, "Storm-Geats," an epithet for Beowulf's people.



Carving of a Viking ship from a runic stone (a monument carved with runes, the letters of an ancient Germanic alphabet used from the A.D. 200s to the 1200s) located on the island of Gotland, off Sweden.

What men they were. On his good horse
 mounted.
 Hrothgar's thane made haste to the beach,
 Boldly brandished his mighty spear
 170 With manful challenge: "What men are you,
 Carrying weapons and clad in steel,
 Who thus come driving across the deep
 On the ocean-lanes in your lofty ship?
 Long have I served as the Scylding outpost,
 175 Held watch and ward at the ocean's edge
 Lest foreign foemen with hostile fleet
 Should come to harry our Danish home,
 And never more openly sailed to these
 shores
 Men without password, or leave to land.
 180 I have never laid eyes upon earl on earth
 More stalwart and sturdy than one of your
 troop,
 A hero in armor; no hall-thane he
 Tricked out with weapons, unless looks belie
 him
 And noble bearing. But now I must know

185 Your birth and breeding, nor may you come
 In cunning stealth upon Danish soil.
 You distant-dwellers, you far seafarers,
 Hearken, and ponder words that are plain:
 'Tis best you hasten to have me know
 190 Who your kindred and whence you come."
 The lord of the seamen gave swift reply,
 The prince of the Weders unlocked his
 word-hoard:
 "We are sprung of a strain of the Geatish
 stock,
 Hygelac's comrades and hearth-companions.
 195 My father was famous in many a folk-land,
 A leader noble, Ecgtheow¹⁴ his name! . . .
 With loyal purpose we seek your lord,
 The prince of your people, great Healfdene's
 son. . . .
 You know if it's true, as we've heard it told,
 200 That among the Scyldings some secret scather.
 (*The text of Beowulf continues on page 12.*)

14. *Ecgtheow*, (edj'thā ð).

Some stealthy demon in dead of night,
With grisly horror and fiendish hate
Is spreading unheard-of havoc and death.
Mayhap I can counsel the good, old king
205 What way he can master the merciless fiend,
If his coil of evil is ever to end
And feverish care grow cooler and fade—
Or else ever after his doom shall be
Distress and sorrow while still there stands
210 This best of halls on its lofty height.”

Then from the saddle the coast guard
spoke,
The fearless sentry: “A seasoned warrior
Must know the difference between words
and deeds,
If his wits are with him. I take your word
215 That your band is loyal to the lord of the
Scyldings.
Now go your way with your weapons and
armor,
And I will guide you; I’ll give command
That my good retainers may guard your
ship, . . .”

Then the Geats marched on; behind at her
mooring,
220 Fastened at anchor, their broad-beamed boat
Safely rode on her swinging cable.
Boar-heads¹⁵ glittered on glistening helmets
Above their cheek-guards, gleaming with
gold;
Bright and fire-hardened the boar held watch
225 Over the column of marching men.
Onward they hurried in eager haste
Till their eyes caught sight of the high-built
hall,
Splendid with gold, the seat of the king,
Most stately of structures under the sun;
230 Its light shone out over many a land.
The coast guard showed them the shining
hall,
The home of heroes; made plain the path;
Turned his horse; gave tongue to words:
“It is time to leave you! The mighty Lord
235 In His mercy shield you and hold you safe
In your bold adventure. I’ll back to the sea
And hold my watch against hostile horde.”

(Beowulf's Welcome at Hrothgar's Court)

The street had paving of colored stone;
The path was plain to the marching men.

240 Bright were their byrnie, hard and
hand-linked;
In their shining armor the chain mail sang
As the troop in their war-gear tramped to the
hall.

The sea-weary sailors set down their shields,
Their wide, bright bucklers along the wall,
245 And sank to the bench. Their byrnie rang.
Their stout spears stood in a stack together
Shod with iron and shaped of ash.

’Twas a well-armed troop! Then a stately
warrior
Questioned the strangers about their kin:
250 “Whence come you bearing your burnished
shields,
Your steel-gray harness and visored helms,
Your heap of spears? I am Hrothgar’s
herald,
His servant-thane. I have never seen
strangers,
So great a number, of nobler mien.
255 Not exiles, I ween, but high-minded heroes
In greatness of heart have you sought out
Hrothgar.”

Then bold under helmet the hero made
answer,
Mighty of heart: “We are Hygelac’s men,
His board-companions; Beowulf is my name.
260 I will state my mission to Healfdene’s son,
The noble leader, your lordly prince,
If he will grant approach to his gracious
presence.”

And Wulfgar answered, the Wendel prince,¹⁶
Renowned for merit in many a land,
265 For war-might and wisdom: “I will learn the
wish
Of the Scylding leader, the lord of the
Danes,
Our honored ruler and giver of rings,
Concerning your mission, and soon report
The answer our leader thinks good to give.”
270 He swiftly strode to where Hrothgar sat
Old and gray with his earls¹⁷ about him;

15. **Boar-heads.** Germanic tribesmen regularly used the boar’s head as a magical decoration for their helmets. The boar, sacred to the Norse god Frey, is a desperate fighter when cornered.

16. **Wulfgar . . . the Wendel prince.** Hrothgar’s herald may have been one of the Vandals, a Germanic tribe living south of the Baltic between the Vistula and Oder rivers (see map, page 3).

17. **earls,** his chief men.

Crossed the floor and stood face to face
With the Danish king; he knew courtly
custom.

Wulfgar saluted his lord and friend:

275 "Men from afar have fared to our land
Over ocean's margin—men of the Geats,
Their leader called Beowulf—seeking a
boon,

The holding of parley, my prince, with thee.
O gracious Hrothgar, refuse not the favor!
280 In their splendid war-gear they merit well
The esteem of earls; he's a stalwart leader
Who led this troop to the land of the
Danes."

Hrothgar spoke, the lord of the Scyldings:
"Their leader I knew when he still was a
lad. . . .

285 Seafaring men who have voyaged to
Geatland

With gifts of treasure as token of peace,
Say that his hand-grip has thirty men's
strength.

God, in His mercy, has sent him to save
us—

So springs my hope—from Grendel's
assaults.

290 For his gallant courage I'll load him with
gifts!

Make haste now, marshal the men to the
hall,

And give them welcome to Danish ground."
Then to the door went the well-known
warrior,

Spoke from the threshold welcoming words:

295 "The Danish leader, my lord, declares
That he knows your kinship; right welcome
you come,

You stout sea-rovers, to Danish soil.

Enter now, in your shining armor
And vizored helmets, to Hrothgar's hall.

300 But leave your shields and the shafts of
slaughter

To wait the issue and weighing of words."

Then the bold one rose with his band
around him,

A splendid massing of mighty thanes;

A few stood guard as the Geat gave bidding

305 Over the weapons stacked by the wall.

They followed in haste on the heels of their
leader

Under Heorot's roof. Full ready and bold
The helmeted warrior strode to the hearth;
Beowulf spoke; his byrny glittered,

310 His war-net woven by cunning of smith:
"Hail! King Hrothgar! I am Hygelac's thane,
Hygelac's kinsman. Many a deed
Of honor and daring I've done in my youth.
This business of Grendel was brought to my
ears

315 On my native soil. The seafarers say
This best of buildings, this boasted hall,
Stands dark and deserted when sun is set,
When darkening shadows gather with dusk.
The best of my people, prudent and brave,
320 Urged me, King Hrothgar, to seek you out;
They had in remembrance my courage and
might.

Many had seen me come safe from the
conflict,

Bloody from battle; five foes I bound
Of the giant kindred, and crushed their clan.

325 Hard-driven in danger and darkness of night
I slew the nicors¹⁸ that swam the sea,
Avenged the woe they had caused the
Weders,

And ended their evil—they needed the
lesson!

And now with Grendel, the fearful fiend,

330 Single-handed I'll settle the strife!
Prince of the Danes, protector of Scyldings,
Lord of nations, and leader of men,
I beg one favor—refuse me not,
Since I come thus faring from far-off lands—

335 That I may alone with my loyal earls,
With this hardy company, cleanse Hart-Hall.
I have heard that the demon in proud disdain
Spurns all weapons; and I too scorn—
May Hygelac's heart have joy of the deed—

340 To bear my sword, or sheltering shield,
Or yellow buckler, to battle the fiend.
With hand-grip only I'll grapple with
Grendel;

Foe against foe I'll fight to the death,
And the one who is taken must trust to
God's grace! . . .

345 If death shall call me, he'll carry away
My gory flesh to his fen-retreat
To gorge at leisure and gulp me down,

18. *nicors*, water demons, animal in shape.

Soiling the marshes with stains of blood.
 There'll be little need longer to care for my
 body!

350 If the battle slays me, to Hygelac send
 This best of corselets that covers my breast,
 . . .
 Finest of byrnies. Fate goes as Fate must!"
 Hrothgar spoke, the lord of the Scyldings:
 "Deed of daring and dream of honor
 Bring you, friend Beowulf, knowing our
 need! . . .
 It is sorrow sore to recite to another
 The wrongs that Grendel has wrought in the
 hall,
 His savage hatred and sudden assaults.
 My war-troop is weakened, my hall-band is
 wasted;

360 Fate swept them away into Grendel's grip.
 But God may easily bring to an end
 The ruinous deeds of the ravaging foe.
 Full often my warriors over their ale-cups
 Boldly boasted, when drunk with beer,
 365 They would bide in the beer-hall the coming
 of battle,
 The fury of Grendel, with flashing swords.
 Then in the dawn, when the daylight
 strengthened,
 The hall stood reddened and reeking with
 gore,
 Bench-boards wet with the blood of battle;
 370 And I had the fewer of faithful fighters,
 Beloved retainers, whom Death had taken.
 Sit now at the banquet, unbend your mood,
 Speak of great deeds as your heart may spur
 you!"
 Then in the beer-hall were benches made
 ready

375 For the Geatish heroes. Noble of heart,
 Proud and stalwart, they sat them down
 And a beer-thane served them; bore in his
 hands
 The patterned ale-cup, pouring the mead,
 While the scop's sweet singing was heard in
 the hall.

380 There was joy of heroes, a host at ease,
 A welcome meeting of Weder and Dane.

(Unferth Taunts Beowulf)

Then out spoke Unferth, Ecglaf's son,¹⁹
 Who sat at the feet of the Scylding lord,

Picking a quarrel—for Beowulf's quest,
 385 His bold sea-voyaging, irked him sore;
 He bore it ill that any man other
 In all the earth should ever achieve
 More fame under heaven than he himself:
 "Are you the Beowulf that strove with
 Breca²⁰
 390 In a swimming match in the open sea,
 Both of you wantonly tempting the waves,
 Risking your lives on the lonely deep
 For a silly boast? No man could dissuade
 you,
 Nor friend nor foe, from the foolhardy
 venture
 395 Of ocean-swimming; with outstretched arms
 You clasped the sea-stream, measured her
 streets,
 With plowing shoulders parted the waves.
 The sea-flood boiled with its wintry surges,
 Seven nights you toiled in the tossing sea;
 400 His strength was the greater, his swimming
 the stronger! . . .
 Therefore, I ween, worse fate shall befall,
 Stout as you are in the struggle of war,
 In deeds of battle, if you dare to abide
 Encounter with Grendel at coming of night."
 405 Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
 "My good friend Unferth, addled with beer
 Much have you made of the deeds of Breca!
 I count it true that I had more courage,
 More strength in swimming than any other
 man.
 410 In our youth we boasted—we were both of
 us boys—
 We would risk our lives in the raging sea.
 And we made it good! We gripped in our
 hands
 Naked swords, as we swam in the waves,
 Guarding us well from the whales' assault.
 415 In the breaking seas he could not outstrip
 me,
 Nor would I leave him. For five nights long
 Side by side we strove in the waters
 Till racing combers wrenched us apart,

19. *Unferth, Ecglaf's* (edj'lafs) son. Unferth's name can be interpreted as "Peacebreaker." His role is a familiar one in heroic poetry, that of the king's rude retainer whose mockery provokes the hero to reveal himself. Something very like the Unferth episode occurs in Book VIII of the *Odyssey*.
 20. *Breca* (brek'ə).

Freezing squalls, and the falling night,
 420 And a bitter north wind's icy blast.
 Rough were the waves; the wrath of the
 sea-fish
 Was fiercely roused; but my firm-linked
 byrny, | Chain mail coat
 The gold-adorned corselet that covered my
 breast,
 Gave firm defense from the clutching foe.
 425 Down to the bottom a savage sea-beast
 Fiercely dragged me and held me fast
 In a deadly grip; none the less it was granted
 me
 To pierce the monster with point of steel.
 Death swept it away with the swing of my
 sword.
 430 The grisly sea-beasts again and again
 Beset me sore; but I served them home
 With my faithful blade as was well-befitting.
 They failed of their pleasure to feast their fill
 Crowding round my corpse on the
 ocean-bottom!
 435 Bloody with wounds, at the break of day,
 They lay on the sea-bench slain with the
 sword.
 No more would they cumber the mariner's
 course
 On the ocean deep. From the east came the
 sun,
 Bright beacon of God, and the seas
 subsided;
 440 I beheld the headlands, the windy walls.
 Fate often delivers an doomed earl
 If his spirit be gallant! And so I was granted
 To slay with the sword-edge nine of the
 nicors. | Water demons
 I have never heard tell of more terrible strife
 445 Under dome of heaven in darkness of night,
 Nor of man harder pressed on the paths of
 ocean.
 But I freed my life from the grip of the foe
 Though spent with the struggle. The billows
 bore me,
 The swirling currents and surging seas,
 450 To the land of the Finns.²¹ And little I've
 heard
 Of any such valiant adventures from you!
 Neither Breca nor you in the press of battle
 Ever showed such daring with dripping
 swords—

Though I boast not of it! But you stained
 your blade
 455 With blood of your brothers, your closest of
 kin;
 And for that you'll endure damnation in hell,
 Sharp as you are! I say for a truth,
 Son of Ecglaaf, never had Grendel
 Wrought such havoc and woe in the hall,
 460 That horrid demon so harried your king,
 If your heart were as brave as you'd have
 men think! king!
 ✦ But Grendel has found that he never need fear
 Revenge from your people, or valiant attack
 From the Victor-Scyldings; he takes his toll,
 465 Sparing none of the Danish stock.
 He slays and slaughters and works his will
 Fearing no hurt at the hands of the Danes!
 But soon will I show him the stuff of the
 Geats,
 Their courage in battle and strength in the
 strife;
 470 Then let him who may go bold to the
 mead-hall
 When the next day dawns on the dwellings
 of men,
 And the sun in splendor shines warm from
 the south."²²
 Glad of heart was the giver of treasure,²²
 Hoary-headed and hardy in war;
 475 The lordly leader had hope of help
 As he listened to Beowulf's bold resolve.
 There was revel of heroes and high
 carouse,
 Their speech was happy; and Hrothgar's
 queen,
 Of gentle manners, in jewelled splendor
 480 Gave courtly greeting to all the guests. . . .

(Beowulf Slays Grendel)

In the hall as of old were brave words
 spoken, Hrothgar
 There was noise of revel; happy the host
 Till the son of Healfdene would go to his
 rest.
 He knew that the monster would meet in the
 hall

21. *Finns*, probably the Lapps, inhabitants of Finmarken, around the North Cape in the northern extremity of Norway and considerably above the Arctic Circle.
 22. *giver of treasure*, Hrothgar.

485 Relentless struggle when light of the sun
 Was dusky with gloom of the gathering
 night,
 And shadow-shapes crept in the covering
 dark,
 Dim under heaven. The host arose.
 Hrothgar graciously greeted his guest,
 490 Gave rule of the wine-hall, and wished him
 well,
 Praised the warrior in parting words:
 "Never to any man, early or late,
 Since first I could brandish buckler and
 sword,
 Have I trusted this ale-hall save only to you!
 495 Be mindful of glory, show forth your
 strength,
 Keep watch against foe! No wish of your
 heart
 Shall go unfulfilled if you live through the
 fight."
 Then Hrothgar withdrew with his host of
 retainers, . . .
 The Geatish hero put all his hope
 500 In his fearless might and the mercy of God!
 He stripped from his shoulders the byrny of
 steel,
 Doffed helmet from head; into hand of thane
 Gave inlaid iron, the best of blades;
 Bade him keep well the weapons of war.
 505 Beowulf uttered a gallant boast,
 The stalwart Geat, ere he sought his bed:
 "I count myself nowise weaker in war
 Or grapple of battle than Grendel himself.
 Therefore I scorn to slay him with sword,
 510 Deal deadly wound, as I well might do!
 Nothing he knows of a noble fighting,
 Of thrusting and hewing and hacking of
 shield,
 Fierce as he is in the fury of war.
 In the shades of darkness we'll spurn the
 sword
 515 If he dares without weapon to do or to die.
 And God in His wisdom shall glory assign,
 The ruling Lord, as He deems it right."
 Then the bold in battle bowed down to his
 rest,
 Cheek pressed pillow; the peerless thanes
 520 Were stretched in slumber around their lord.
 Not one had hope of return to his home,

To the stronghold or land where he lived as
 a boy.
 For they knew how death had befallen the
 Danes,
 How many were slain as they slept in the
 wine-hall. . . .
 525 Then through the shades of enshrouding
 night
 The fiend came stealing; the archers slept
 Whose duty was holding the horn-decked
 hall—
 Though one was watching—full well they
 knew
 No evil demon could drag them down
 530 To shades under ground if God were not
willing.
 But the hero watched awaiting the foe,
 Abiding in anger the issue of war.
 ✦ From the stretching moors, from the misty
 hollows,
 Grendel came creeping, accursed of God,
 535 A murderous ravager minded to snare
 Spoil of heroes in high-built hall.
 Under clouded heavens he held his way
 Till there rose before him the high-roofed
 house,
 Wine-hall of warriors gleaming with gold.
 540 Nor was it the first of his fierce assaults
 On the home of Hrothgar; but never before
 Had he found worse fate or hardier
 hall-thanes!
 Storming the building he burst the portal,
 Though fastened of iron, with fiendish
 strength;
 545 Forced open the entrance in savage fury
 And rushed in rage o'er the shining floor.
 A baleful glare from his eyes was gleaming
 Most like to a flame. He found in the hall
 Many a warrior sealed in slumber,
 550 A host of kinsmen. His heart rejoiced;
 The savage monster was minded to sever
 Lives from bodies ere break of day,
 To feast his fill of the flesh of men.
 But he was not fated to glut his greed
 555 With more of mankind when the night was
 ended!
 ✦ The hardy kinsman of Hygelac waited
 To see how the monster would make his
 attack.

sons / as Mr
 w/out -
 d Grendel
 use
 them

The demon delayed not, but quickly
clutched
A sleeping thane in his swift assault,
560 Tore him in pieces, bit through the bones,
Gulped the blood, and gobbled the flesh,
Greedy gorged on the lifeless corpse,
The hands and the feet. Then the fiend
stepped nearer,
Sprang on the Sea-Geat lying outstretched,
565 Claspng him close with his monstrous claw.
But Beowulf grappled and gripped him hard,
Struggled up on his elbow; the shepherd of
sins
Soon found that never before had he felt
In any man other in all the earth
570 A mightier hand-grip; his mood was
humbled,
His courage fled; but he found no escape!
He was fain to be gone; he would flee to the
darkness,
The fellowship of devils. Far different his
fate
From that which befell him in former days!
575 The hardy hero, Hygelac's kinsman,
Remembered the boast he had made at the
banquet;
He sprang to his feet, clutched Grendel fast,
Though fingers were cracking, the fiend
pulling free.
The earl pressed after; the monster was
minded
580 To win his freedom and flee to the fens.
He knew that his fingers were fast in the
grip
Of a savage foe. Sorry the venture,
The raid that the ravager made on the hall.
There was din in Heorot. For all the
Danes,
585 The city-dwellers, the stalwart Scyldings,
That was a bitter spilling of beer!
The walls resounded, the fight was fierce,
Savage the strife as the warriors struggled.
The wonder was that the lofty wine-hall
590 Withstood the struggle, nor crashed to earth,
The house so fair; it was firmly fastened
Within and without with iron bands
Cunningly smithied; though men have said
That many a mead-bench gleaming with gold
595 Sprang from its sill as the warriors strove.
The Scylding wise men had never weened

That any ravage could wreck the building,
Firmly fashioned and finished with bone,
Or any cunning compass its fall,
600 Till the time when the swelter and surge of
fire
Should swallow it up in a swirl of flame.²³
Continuous tumult filled the hall;
A terror fell on the Danish folk
As they heard through the wall the horrible
wailing,
605 The groans of Grendel, the foe of God
Howling his hideous hymn of pain,
The hell-thane shrieking in sore defeat.
He was fast in the grip of the man who was
greatest
Of mortal men in the strength of his might,
610 Who would never rest while the wretch was
living,
Counting his life-days a menace to man.
Many an earl of Beowulf brandished
His ancient iron to guard his lord,
To shelter safely the peerless prince.
615 They had no knowledge, those daring
thanes,
When they drew their weapons to hack and
hew,
To thrust to the heart, that the sharpest
sword,
The choicest iron in all the world,
Could work no harm to the hideous foe.
620 On every sword he had laid a spell,
On every blade; but a bitter death
Was to be his fate; far was the journey
The monster made to the home of fiends.
Then he who had wrought such wrong to
men,
625 With grim delight as he warred with God,
Soon found that his strength was feeble and
failing
In the crushing hold of Hygelac's thane.
Each loathed the other while life should last!
There Grendel suffered a grievous hurt,
630 A wound in the shoulder, gaping and wide;
Sinews snapped and bone-joints broke,
And Beowulf gained the glory of battle.
Grendel, fated, fled to the fens,
To his joyless dwelling, sick unto death.

Swords/
Weapons
won't
work

23. swirl of flame. This is one of a number of allusions in the poem to the later burning of Heorot.

in Jivis

635 He knew in his heart that his hours were
 numbered,
 † His days at an end. For all the Danes
 Their wish was fulfilled in the fall of
 Grendel.
 The stranger from far, the stalwart and
 strong,
 Had purged of evil the hall of Hrothgar,
 † 640 And cleansed of crime; the heart of the hero

Joyed in the deed his daring had done.
 The lord of the Geats made good to the
 East-Danes
 The boast he had uttered; he ended their ill,
 And all the sorrow they suffered long
 † 645 And needs must suffer—a foul offense.
 The token was clear when the bold in battle
 Laid down the shoulder and dripping claw—
 Grendel's arm—in the gabled hall!

Discussion

1. In lines 38-55 the *Beowulf*-poet portrays a successful king. Through Hrothgar's achievements, the poet suggests his own system of values. What seems to matter most to people in his society?
2. What does Grendel look like? Does the poet describe him in detail or leave him to the reader's imagination? Cite some lines where a detail of Grendel's appearance is used to create horror.
3. What are Beowulf's motives in aiding

- Hrothgar? Explain how they suggest an Anglo-Saxon idea of heroism.
4. During the account of the fight between Beowulf and Grendel, the narrative **point of view** keeps shifting. Look closely at the passages which begin at lines 533, 556, 602, 624, 636, and 640, and determine whose viewpoint appears in each. Then discuss the consequences of this shifting perspective.
5. Beowulf chooses to fight Grendel alone and unarmed. What are his reasons?

(The Joy of the Danes)

When morning came, as they tell the tale,
 650 Many a warrior hastened to hall,
 Folk-leaders faring from far and near
 Over wide-running ways, to gaze at the
 wonder,
 The trail of the demon. Nor seemed his
 death
 A matter of sorrow to any man
 655 Who viewed the tracks of the vanquished
 monster
 As he slunk weary-hearted away from the
 hall,
 Doomed and defeated and marking his flight
 With bloody prints to the nicors' pool.
 The crimson currents bubbled and heaved
 660 In eddying reaches reddened with gore;
 The surges boiled with the fiery blood.
 But the monster had sunk from the sight of
 men.
 In that fenny covert the cursed fiend
 Not long thereafter laid down his life,
 665 His heathen spirit; and hell received him.
 Then all the comrades, the old and young,

The brave of heart, in a blithesome band
 Came riding their horses home from the
 mere.
 Beowulf's prowess was praised in song;
 670 And many men stated that south or north,
 Over all the world, or between the seas,
 Or under the heaven, no hero was greater.
 Then spoke Hrothgar; hasting to hall
 He stood at the steps, stared up at the roof
 675 High and gold-gleaming; saw Grendel's
 hand:
 "Thanks be to God for this glorious sight!
 I have suffered much evil, much outrage
 from Grendel,
 But the God of glory works wonder on
 wonder.
 I had no hope of a haven from sorrow
 680 While this best of houses stood badged with
 blood,
 A woe far-reaching for all the wise
 Who weened that they never could hold the
 hall
 Against the assaults of devils and demons.

But now with God's help this hero has
 compassed
 685 A deed our cunning could no way contrive.
 I will keep you, Beowulf, close to my heart
 In firm affection; as son to father
 Hold fast henceforth to this foster-kinship.
 You shall know not want of treasure or
 wealth
 690 Or goodly gift that your wish may crave,
 While I have power. For poorer deeds
 I have granted guerdon,²⁴ and graced with
 honor
 Weaker warriors, feebler in fight.
 You have done such deeds that your fame
 shall flourish
 695 Through all the ages! God grant you still
 All goodly grace as He gave before."
 Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
 "By favor of God we won the fight,
 Did the deed of valor, and boldly dared
 700 The might of the monster. I would you could
 see
 The fiend himself lying dead before you!
 I thought to grip him in stubborn grasp
 And bind him down on the bed of death,
 There to lie straining in struggle for life,
 705 While I gripped him fast lest he vanish
 away.

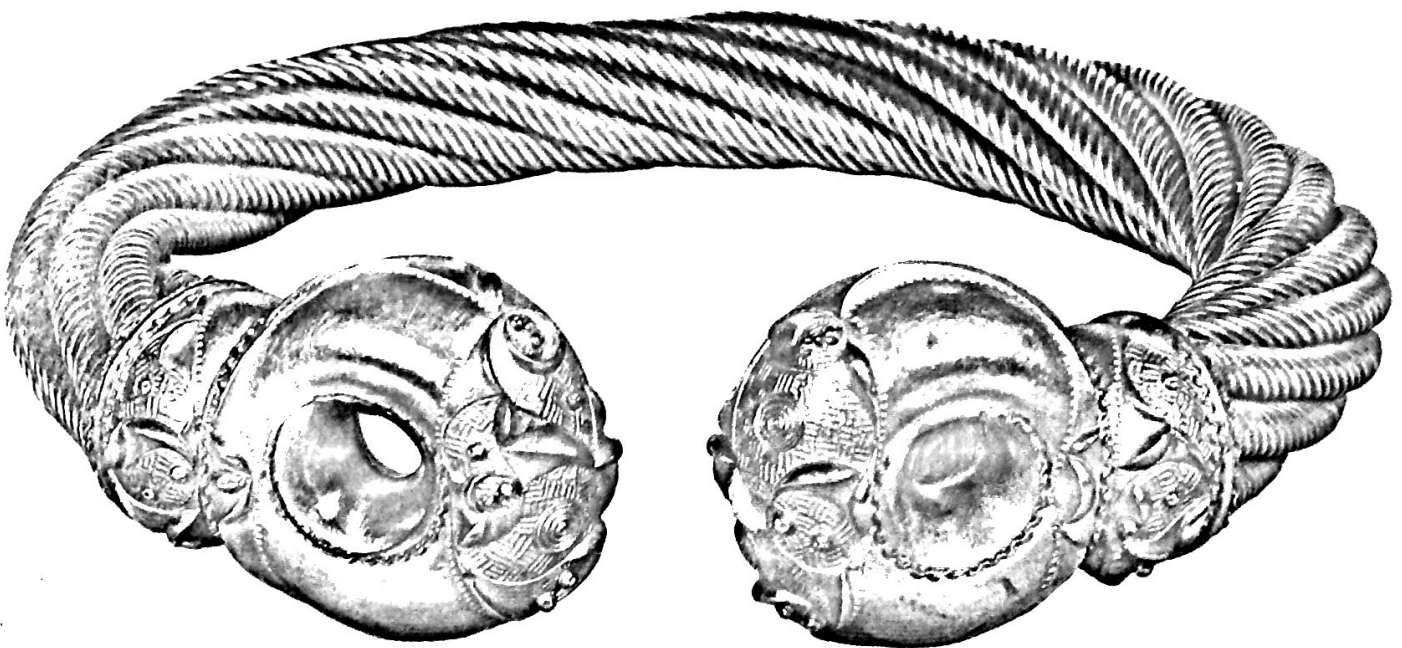
But I might not hold him or hinder his going
 For God did not grant it, my fingers failed.
 Too savage the strain of his fiendish
 strength!

To save his life he left shoulder and claw,
 710 The arm of the monster, to mark his track,
 But he bought no comfort; no whit thereby
 Shall the wretched ravager racked with sin,
 The loathsome spoiler, prolong his life.
 A deep wound holds him in deadly grip,
 715 In baleful bondage; and black with crime
 The demon shall wait for the day of doom
 When the God of glory shall give decree."

Then slower of speech was the son of
 Ecglaf,

More wary of boasting of warlike deeds,
 720 While the nobles gazed at the grisly claw,
 The fiend's hand fastened by hero's might
 On the lofty roof. Most like to steel
 Were the hardened nails, the heathen's
 hand-spurs,
 Horrible, monstrous; and many men said
 725 No tempered sword, no excellent iron,
 Could have harmed the monster or hacked
 away
 The demon's battle-claw dripping with
 blood.

24. *guerdon*, reward.



The Snettisham Torque, 1st century, B.C. A torque (or *torc*) is an ornament to be worn around the neck.

(The Feast)

In joyful haste was Heorot decked
And a willing host of women and men
730 Gaily dressed and adorned the guest-hall.
Splendid hangings with sheen of gold
Shone on the walls, a glorious sight
To eyes that delight to behold such wonders.
The shining building was wholly shattered
735 Though braced and fastened with iron bands;
Hinges were riven; the roof alone
Remained unharmed when the horrid
monster,
Foul with evil, slunk off in flight. . . .
Soon was the time when the son of
Healfdene
740 Went to the wine-hall; he fain would join
With happy heart in the joy of feasting.
I never have heard of a mightier muster
Of proud retainers around their prince. . . .
Upon Beowulf, then, as a token of triumph,
745 Hrothgar bestowed a standard of gold,
A banner embroidered, a byrny and helm.
In sight of many, a costly sword
Before the hero was borne on high; . . .
On the crest of the helmet a crowning
wreath,
750 Woven of wire-work, warded the head
Lest tempered swordblade, sharp from the
file,
Deal deadly wound when the shielded
warrior
Went forth to battle against the foe.
Eight horses also with plated headstalls
755 The lord of heroes bade lead into hall;
On one was a saddle skillfully fashioned
And set with jewels, the battle-seat
Of the king himself, when the son of
Healfdene
Would fain take part in the play of swords;
760 Never in fray had his valor failed,
His kingly courage, when corpses were
falling. . . .
Then on the ale-bench to each of the earls
Who embarked with Beowulf, sailing the
sea-paths,
The lord of princes dealt ancient heirlooms,
765 Gift of treasure, and guerdon of gold
To requite his slaughter whom Grendel slew,
As he would have slain others, but all-wise
God

And the hero's courage had conquered Fate.

Stewards poured wine from wondrous
vessels;
770 And Wealhtheow,²⁵ wearing a golden crown,
Came forth in state where the two were
sitting,
Courteous comrades, uncle and nephew,²⁶
Each true to the other in ties of peace. . . .
Wealhtheow spoke to the warrior host:
775 "Take, dear Beowulf, collar and corselet,
Wear these treasures with right good will!
Thrive and prosper and prove your might!
Befriend my boys with your kindly counsel;
I will remember and I will repay.
780 You have earned the undying honor of
heroes
In regions reaching as far and wide
As the windy walls that the sea encircles.
May Fate show favor while life shall last!
I wish you wealth to your heart's content;
785 In your days of glory be good to my sons!
Here each hero is true to other,
Gentle of spirit, loyal to lord,
Friendly thanes and a folk united,
Wine-cheered warriors who do my will."

(The Troll-Wife Avenges Grendel)

790 Then she went to her seat. At the fairest
of feasts
Men drank of the wine-cup, knowing not
Fate,
Nor the fearful doom that befell the earls
When darkness gathered, and gracious
Hrothgar
Sought his dwelling and sank to rest.
795 A host of heroes guarded the hall
As they oft had done in the days of old.
They stripped the benches and spread the
floor
With beds and bolsters. But one of the
beer-thanes
Bowed to his hall-rest doomed to death.
800 They set at their heads their shining shields,
Their battle-bucklers; and there on the bench

25. *Wealhtheow* (wā'al thā ō), Hrothgar's wife, the queen of the Danes.

26. *uncle and nephew*, Hrothgar and Hrothulf, the son of Hrothgar's younger brother Halga.

Above each hero his towering helmet,
 His spear and corselet hung close at hand.
 It was ever their wont to be ready for war
 805 At home or in field, as it ever befell
 That their lord had need. 'Twas a noble
 race!
 Then they sank to slumber. But one paid
 dear
 For his evening rest, as had often happened
 When Grendel haunted the lordly hall
 810 And wrought such ruin, till his end was
 come,
 Death for his sins; it was easily seen,
 Though the monster was slain, an avenger
 survived
 Prolonging the feud, though the fiend had
 perished.
 The mother of Grendel, a monstrous hag,
 815 Brooded over her misery, doomed to dwell
 In evil waters and icy streams. . . .
 But rabid and raging his mother resolved
 On a dreadful revenge for the death of her
 son!
 She stole to the hall where the Danes were
 sleeping,
 820 And horror fell on the host of earls
 When the dam of Grendel burst in the door.
 But the terror was less as the war-craft is
 weaker,
 A woman's strength, than the might of a
 man . . .
 As soon as discovered, the hag was in haste
 825 To fly to the open, to flee for her life.
 One of the warriors she swiftly seized,
 Clutched him fast and made off to the fens.
 He was of heroes the dearest to Hrothgar,
 The best of comrades between two seas;
 830 The warrior brave, the stouthearted
 spearman,
 She slew in his sleep. Nor was Beowulf
 there;
 But after the banquet another abode
 Had been assigned to the glorious Geat.
 There was tumult in Heorot. She tore from
 its place
 835 The bloodstained claw. Care was renewed!
 It was no good bargain when both in turn
 Must pay the price with the lives of friends!
 Then the white-haired warrior, the aged
 king,

Was numb with sorrow, knowing his thane
 840 No longer was living, his dearest man dead.
 Beowulf, the brave, was speedily
 summoned. . . .
 The hero came tramping into the hall
 With his chosen band—the boards
 resounded—
 Greeted the leader, the Ingwine²⁷ lord,
 845 And asked if the night had been peaceful and
 pleasant.
 Hrothgar spoke, the lord of the Scyldings:
 "Ask not of pleasure; pain is renewed
 For the Danish people. Æschere²⁸ is dead!
 . . .
 He was my comrade, closest of counsellors,
 850 My shoulder-companion as side by side
 We fought for our lives in the welter of war,
 In the shock of battle when boar-helms
 crashed.
 As an earl should be, a prince without peer,
 Such was Æschere, slain in the hall
 855 By the wandering demon! I know not
 whither
 She fled to shelter, proud of her spoil,
 Gorged to the full. She avenged the feud. . . .
 Oft in the hall I have heard my people,
 Comrades and counselors, telling a tale
 860 Of evil spirits their eyes have sighted,
 Two mighty marauders who haunt the
 moors.
 One shape, as clearly as men could see,
 Seemed woman's likeness, and one seemed
 man,
 An outcast wretch of another world,
 865 And huger far than a human form.
 Grendel my countrymen called him, not-
 knowing
 What monster-brood spawned him, what sire
 begot.
 Wild and lonely the land they live in,
 Windswept ridges and wolf-retreats,
 870 Dread tracts of fen where the falling torrent
 Downward dips into gloom and shadow
 Under the dusk of the darkening cliff.
 Not far in miles lies the lonely mere
 Where trees firm-rooted and hung with frost
 (*The text of Beowulf continues on page 24.*)

27. *Ingwine* (ing'wi nə), literally, "friends of Ing," an epithet for the Danes. Ing was an epithet of the Norse god Frey.

28. *Æschere* (ash'her rə).

875 Overshroud the wave with shadowing gloom.
And there a portent appears each night,
A flame in the water; no man so wise
Who knows the bound of its bottomless
depth.

The heather-stepper, the horned stag,
880 The antlered hart hard driven by hounds,
Invading that forest in flight from afar
Will turn at bay and die on the brink
Ere ever he'll plunge in that haunted pool.
'Tis an eerie spot! Its tossing spray
885 Mounts dark to heaven when high winds stir
The driving storm, and the sky is murky,
And with foul weather the heavens weep.
On your arm only rests all our hope!
Not yet have you tempted those terrible
reaches,

890 The region that shelters that sinful wight.
Go if you dare! I will give requital
With ancient treasure and twisted gold,
As I formerly gave in guerdon of battle,
If out of that combat you come alive."

895 Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"Sorrow not, brave one! Better for man
To avenge a friend than much to mourn.
All men must die; let him who may
Win glory ere death. That guerdon is best
900 For a noble man when his name survives
him.

Then let us rise up, O ward of the realm,
And haste us forth to behold the track
Of Grendel's dam.²⁹ And I give you pledge
She shall not in safety escape to cover,
905 To earthy cavern, or forest fastness,
Or gulf of ocean, go where she may.
This day with patience endure the burden
Of every woe, as I know you will."
Up sprang the ancient, gave thanks to God
910 For the heartening words the hero had
spoken.

(Beowulf Slays the Troll-Wife)

Quickly a horse was bridled for Hrothgar,
A mettlesome charger with braided mane;
In royal splendor the king rode forth
Mid the trampling tread of a troop of
shieldmen.
915 The tracks lay clear where the fiend had
fared

Over plain and bottom and woodland path,
Through murky moorland making her way
With the lifeless body, the best of thanes
Who of old with Hrothgar had guarded the
hall.

920 By a narrow path the king pressed on
Through rocky upland and rugged ravine,
A lonely journey, past looming headlands,
The lair of monster and lurking troll.
Tried retainers, a trusty few,
925 Advanced with Hrothgar to view the ground.
Sudden they came on a dismal covert
Of trees that hung over hoary stone,
Over churning water and bloodstained wave.
Then for the Danes was the woe the deeper,
930 The sorrow sharper for Scylding earls,
When they first caught sight, on the rocky
sea-cliff,

Of slaughtered Æschere's severed head.
The water boiled in a bloody swirling
With seething gore as the spearmen gazed.
935 The trumpet sounded a martial strain;
The shield-troop halted. Their eyes beheld
The swimming forms of strange sea-dragons,
Dim serpent shapes in the watery depths,
Sea-beasts sunning on headland slopes;
940 Snakelike monsters that oft at sunrise
On evil errands scour the sea.
Startled by tumult and trumpet's blare,
Enraged and savage, they swam away;
But one the lord of the Geats brought low,
945 Stripped of his sea-strength, despoiled of
life,

As the bitter bow-bolt pierced his heart.
His watery-speed grew slower, and ceased.
And he floated, caught in the clutch of
death.

Then they hauled him in with sharp-hooked
boar-spears,
950 By sheer strength grappled and dragged him
ashore,

A wondrous wave-beast; and all the array
Gathered to gaze at the grisly guest.

Beowulf donned his armor for battle,
Heeded not danger; the hand-braided byrny.
955 Broad of shoulder and richly bedecked,
Must stand the ordeal of the watery depths.
Well could that corselet defend the frame

29. *dam*, mother.

Lest hostile thrust should pierce to the
heart.
Or blows of battle beat down the life.
960 A gleaming helmet guarded his head
As he planned his plunge to the depths of
the pool
Through the heaving waters—a helm
adorned
With lavish inlay and lordly chains,
Ancient work of the weapon-smith
965 Skillfully fashioned, beset with the boar,
That no blade of battle might bite it through.
Not the least or the worst of his
war-equipment
Was the sword the herald of Hrothgar
loaned
In his hour of need—Hrunting³⁰ its name—
970 An ancient heirloom, trusty and tried;
Its blade was iron, with etched design,
Tempered in blood of many a battle.
Never in fight had it failed the hand
That drew it daring the perils of war,
975 The rush of the foe. Not the first time then
That its edge must venture on valiant deeds.

. . . .
Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
“O gracious ruler, gold-giver to men,
As I now set forth to attempt this feat,
980 Great son of Healfdene, hold well in mind
The solemn pledge we plighted of old,
That if doing your service I meet my death
You will mark my fall with a father’s love.
Protect my kinsmen, my trusty comrades,
985 If battle take me. And all the treasure
You have heaped on me bestow upon
Hygelac. . . .”

After these words the prince of the
Weders
Awaited no answer, but turned to the task,
Straightway plunged in the swirling pool.
990 Nigh unto a day he endured the depths
Ere he first had view of the vast sea-bottom.
Soon she found, who had haunted the flood,
A ravening hag, for a hundred half-years,
Greedy and grim, that a man was groping
995 In daring search through the sea-troll’s
home.
Swift she grappled and grasped the warrior
With horrid grip, but could work no harm,
No hurt to his body; the ring-locked byrny

Cloaked his life from her clutching claw;
1000 Nor could she tear through the tempered
mail
With her savage fingers. The she-wolf bore
The ring-prince down through the watery
depths
To her den at the bottom; nor could Beowulf
draw
His blade for battle, though brave his mood.
1005 Many a sea-beast, strange sea-monsters,
Tasked him hard with their menacing tusks,
Broke his byrny and smote him sore.
Then he found himself in a fearsome hall
Where water came not to work him hurt,
1010 But the flood was stayed by the sheltering
roof.
There in the glow of firelight gleaming
The hero had view of the huge sea-troll.
He swung his war-sword with all his
strength,
Withheld not the blow, and the savage blade
1015 Sang on her head its hymn of hate.
But the bold one found that the battle-flasher
Would bite no longer, nor harm her life.
The sword-edge failed at his sorest need.
Often of old with ease it had suffered
1020 The clash of battle, cleaving the helm,
The fated warrior’s woven mail.
That time was first for the treasured blade
That its glory failed in the press of the fray.
But fixed of purpose and firm of mood
1025 Hygelac’s earl was mindful of honor;
In wrath, undaunted, he dashed to earth
The jewelled sword with its scrolled design,
The blade of steel; staked all on strength,
On the might of his hand, as a man must do
1030 Who thinks to win in the welter of battle
Enduring glory; he fears not death.
The Geat-prince joyed in the straining
struggle,
Stalwart-hearted and stirred to wrath,
Gripped the shoulder of Grendel’s dam
1035 And headlong hurled the hag to the ground.
But she quickly clutched him and drew him
close,
Countered the onset with savage claw.
The warrior staggered, for all his strength,

30. *herald of Hrothgar* . . . *Hrunting* (hrún'ting). Hrothgar's herald here is Unferth, now reconciled to Beowulf. *Hrunting* may mean "Thruster."

Dismayed and shaken and borne to earth.
1040 She knelt upon him and drew her dagger,
With broad bright blade, to avenge her son,
Her only issue. But the corselet's steel
Shielded his breast and sheltered his life
Withstanding entrance of point and edge.

Swift the hero sprang to his feet;
1045 Saw mid the war-gear a stately sword,
An ancient war-brand of biting edge,
Choicest of weapons worthy and strong,
The work of giants, a warrior's joy,
1050 So heavy no hand but his own could hold it,
Bear to battle or wield in war.
Then the Scylding warrior, savage and grim,
Seized the ring-hilt and swung the sword,
Struck with fury, despairing of life,
1055 Thrust at the throat, broke through the
bone-rings;
The stout blade stabbed through her fated
flesh.
She sank in death; the sword was bloody;
The hero joyed in the work of his hand.
The gleaming radiance shimmered and shone
1060 As the candle of heaven shines clear from
the sky.
Wrathful and resolute Hygelac's thane
Surveyed the span of the spacious hall;
Grimly gripping the hilted sword
With upraised weapon he turned to the wall.

And there before him bereft of life
1065 He saw the broken body of Grendel
Stilled in battle, and stretched in death,
As the struggle in Heorot smote him down.
The corpse sprang wide as he struck the
blow,
1070 The hard sword-stroke that severed the
head.

Then the tried retainers, who there with
Hrothgar
Watched the face of the foaming pool,
Saw that the churning reaches were
reddened,
The eddying surges stained with blood.
1075 And the gray, old spearmen spoke of the
hero,
Having no hope he would ever return
Crowned with triumph and cheered with
spoil.

Many were sure that the savage sea-wolf
Had slain their leader. At last came noon.
1080 The stalwart Scyldings forsook the headland:
Their proud gold-giver departed home.
But the Geats sat grieving and sick in spirit,
Stared at the water with longing eyes,
Having no hope they would ever behold
1085 Their gracious leader and lord again.
Then the great sword, eaten with blood of
battle,
Began to soften and waste away
In iron icicles, wonder of wonders,
Melting away most like to ice
1090 When the Father looses the fetters of frost,
Slackens the bondage that binds the wave,
Strong in power of times and seasons;
He is true God! Of the goodly treasures
From the sea-cave Beowulf took but two,
1095 The monster's head and the precious hilt
Blazing with gems; but the blade had melted,
The sword dissolved, in the deadly heat,
The venomous blood of the fallen fiend. . . .

(Beowulf Returns to Heorot)

With sturdy strokes the lord of the seamen
1100 To land came swimming, rejoiced in his
spoil,
Had joy of the burden he brought from the
depths.
And his mighty thanes came forward to meet
him,
Gave thanks to God they were granted to
see
Their well-loved leader both sound and safe.
1105 From the stalwart hero ~~his helmet and byrny~~
Were quickly loosened; the lake lay still,
Its motionless reaches reddened with blood.

From the sea-cliff's brim the warriors bore
The head of Grendel, with heavy toil;
1110 Four of the stoutest, with all their strength,
Could hardly carry on swaying spear
Grendel's head to the gold-decked hall.
Swift they strode, the daring and dauntless,
Fourteen Geats, to the Hall of the Hart;
1115 And proud in the midst of his marching men
Their leader measured the path to the
mead-hall.
The hero entered, the hardy in battle.

Dismayed and shaken and borne to earth.
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Fourteen Geats, to the Hall of the Hart;
1115 And proud in the midst of his marching men
Their leader measured the path to the
mead-hall.
The hero entered, the hardy in battle,

The great in glory, to greet the king;
 And Grendel's head by the hair was carried
 1120 Across the floor where the feasters drank—
 A terrible sight for lord and for lady—
 A gruesome vision whereon men gazed!
 Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
 "O son of Healfdene, lord of the Scyldings!
 1125 This sea-spoil wondrous, whereon you stare,
 We joyously bring you in token of triumph!
 Barely with life surviving the battle,
 The war under water, I wrought the deed
 Weary and spent; and death had been swift
 1130 Had God not granted His sheltering strength.
 My strong-edged Hrunting, stoutest of
 blades,
 Availed me nothing. But God revealed—
 Often His arm has aided the friendless—
 The fairest of weapons hanging on wall,
 1135 An ancient broadsword; I seized the blade,
 Slew in the struggle, as fortune availed,
 The cavern-warders. But the war-brand old,
 The battle-blade with its scrolled design,
 Dissolved in the gush of the venomous gore;
 1140 The hilt alone I brought from the battle.
 The record of ruin, and slaughter of Danes,
 These wrongs I avenged, as was fitting and
 right.
 Now I can promise you, prince of the
 Scyldings,
 Henceforth in Heorot rest without rue
 1145 For you and your nobles; nor need you
 dread
 Slaughter of follower, stalwart or stripling,
 Or death of earl, as of old you did."
 Into the hand of the aged leader,
 The gray-haired hero, he gave the hilt,
 1150 The work of giants, the wonder of gold. . . .
 Hrothgar spoke, beholding the hilt,
 The ancient relic whereon was etched
 An olden record of struggle and strife,
 The flood³¹ that ravaged the giant race,
 1155 The rushing deluge of ruin and death.
 That evil kindred were alien to God,
 But the Ruler avenged with the wrath of the
 deep! . . .
 Then out spoke Hrothgar, Healfdene's son,
 And all the retainers were silent and still:
 1160 "Well may he say, whose judgment is just,
 Recalling to memory men of the past,
 That this earl was born of a better stock!

Your fame, friend Beowulf, is blazoned
 abroad
 Over all wide ways, and to every people.
 1165 In manful fashion have you showed your
 strength,
 Your might and wisdom. My word I will keep,
 The plighted friendship we formerly pledged.
 Long shall you stand as a stay to your
 people. . . .
 'Tis a wondrous marvel how mighty God
 1170 In gracious spirit bestows on men
 The gift of wisdom, and goodly lands,
 And princely power! He rules over all!
 He suffers a man of lordly line
 To set his heart on his own desires,
 1175 Awards him fullness of worldly joy,
 A fair homeland, and the sway of cities,
 The wide dominion of many a realm,
 An ample kingdom, till, cursed with folly,
 The thoughts of his heart take no heed of his
 end.
 1180 He lives in luxury, knowing not want,
 Knowing no shadow of sickness or age;
 No haunting sorrow darkens his spirit,
 No hatred or discord deepens to war;
 The world is sweet, to his every desire,
 1185 And evil assails not—until in his heart
 Pride overpowering gathers and grows!
 The warder slumbers, the guard of his spirit;
 Too sound is that sleep, too sluggish the
 weight
 Of worldly affairs, too pressing the Foe,
 1190 The Archer who looses the arrows of sin.
 Then is his heart pierced, under his helm,
 His soul in his bosom, with bitter dart.
 He has no defense for the fierce assaults
 Of the loathsome Fiend. What he long has
 cherished
 1195 Seems all too little! In anger and greed
 He gives no guerdon of plated rings.
 Since God has granted him glory and wealth
 He forgets the future, unmindful of Fate.
 But it comes to pass in the day appointed
 1200 His feeble body withers and fails;
 Death descends, and another seizes
 His hoarded riches and rashly spends
 The princely treasure, imprudent of heart.

31. *flood*, Noah's flood, which also destroyed the giant race mentioned in Genesis 6:4.

Beloved Beowulf, best of warriors,
 1205 Avoid such evil and seek the good,
 The heavenly wisdom. Beware of pride!
 Now for a time you shall feel the fullness
 And know the glory of strength, but soon
 Sickness or sword shall strip you of might,
 1210 Or clutch of fire, or clasp of flood,
 Or flight of arrow, or bite of blade,
 Or relentless age; or the light of the eye
 Shall darken and dim, and death on a
 sudden,
 O lordly ruler, shall lay you low.
 1215 A hundred half-years I've been head of
 the Ring-Danes,
 Defending the folk against many a tribe
 With spear-point and sword in the surges of
 battle
 Till not one was hostile 'neath heaven's
 expanse.
 But a loathsome change swept over the land,
 1220 Grief after gladness, when Grendel came,
 That evil invader, that ancient foe!
 Great sorrow of soul from his malice I
 suffered;
 But thanks be to God who has spared me to
 see
 His bloody head at the battle's end!
 1225 Join now in the banquet; have joy of the
 feast,
 O mighty in battle! And the morrow shall
 bring
 Exchange of treasure in ample store."
 Happy of heart the Geat leader hastened,
 Took seat at the board as the good king
 bade.
 1230 Once more, as of old, brave heroes made
 merry
 And tumult of revelry rose in the hall.
 Then dark over men the night shadows
 deepened;
 The host all arose, for Hrothgar was minded,
 The gray, old Scylding, to go to his rest.
 1235 On Beowulf too, after labor of battle,
 Came limitless longing and craving for sleep.
 A hall-thane graciously guided the hero,
 Weary and worn, to the place prepared,
 Serving his wishes and every want
 1240 As befitted a mariner come from afar.
 The stout-hearted warrior sank to his rest;
 The lofty building, splendid and spacious,

Towered above him. His sleep was sound
 Till the black-coated raven, blithesome of
 spirit,
 1245 Hailed the coming of Heaven's bliss.

(The Parting of Beowulf and Hrothgar)

Then over the shadows uprose the sun.
 The Geats were in haste, and eager of heart
 To depart to their people. Beowulf longed
 To embark in his boat, to set sail for his
 home.
 1250 The hero tendered the good sword Hrunting
 To the son of Ecglaf, bidding him bear
 The lovely blade; gave thanks for the loan,
 Called it a faithful friend in the fray,
 Bitter in battle. The greathearted hero
 1255 Spoke no word in blame of the blade!
 Arrayed in war-gear, and ready for sea,
 The warriors bestirred them; and, dear to
 the Danes,
 Beowulf sought the high seat of the king.
 The gallant in war gave greeting to Hrothgar;
 1260 Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
 "It is time at last to tell of our longing!
 Our homes are far, and our hearts are fain
 To seek again Hygelac over the sea.
 You have welcomed us royally, harbored us
 well
 1265 As a man could wish; if I ever can win
 Your affection more fully, O leader of
 heroes,
 Swift shall you find me to serve you again!"
 Hrothgar addressed him, uttered his
 answer:
 "Truly, these words has the Lord of wisdom
 1270 Set in your heart, for I never have
 hearkened
 To speech so sage from a man so young.
 You have strength, and prudence, and
 wisdom of word! . . .
 The Sea-Geats could have no happier choice
 If you would be willing to rule the realm,
 1275 As king to hold guard o'er the hoard and the
 heroes.
 The longer I know you, the better I like you,
 Beloved Beowulf! You have brought it to
 pass
 That between our peoples a lasting peace
 Shall bind the Geats to the Danish-born;
 1280 And strife shall vanish, and war shall cease.

And former feuds, while I rule this realm.”

Then the son of Healfdene, shelter of
earls,

Bestowed twelve gifts on the hero in hall,
Bade him in safety with bounty of treasure

1285 Seek his dear people, and soon return.

The peerless leader, the Scylding lord,
Kissed the good thane and clasped to his
bosom

While tears welled fast from the old man’s
eyes.

Both chances he weighed in his wise, old
heart,

1290 But greatly doubted if ever again

They should meet at council or drinking of
mead.

Nor could Hrothgar master—so dear was
the man—

His swelling sorrow; a yearning love
For the dauntless hero, deep in his heart,

1295 Burned through his blood. Beowulf, the
brave,

Prizing his treasure and proud of the gold,
Turned away, treading the grassy plain.

The ring-stemmed sea-goer, riding at anchor,
Awaited her lord. There was loud acclaim

1300 Of Hrothgar’s gifts, as they went their way.

He was a king without failing or fault,
Till old age, master of all mankind,

Stripped him of power and pride of strength.

Discussion

1. Why does the poet go into such a detailed description of the rewards Hrothgar gives to Beowulf?

2. In the accounts of Beowulf’s victories over both Grendel and his mother, another man dies before Beowulf is victorious (see lines 558 ff. and 826 ff.). This puzzles some readers who think Beowulf should have prevented these deaths. What do you think?

3. Now that you have read about Beowulf’s successful battle with Grendel’s mother, reconsider his earlier account of the five-day swimming race with Breca (lines 410–450). Why did the poet insert that account early in the poem?

4. The poem has an unusually long description of Grendel’s lair (lines 868–887). What purposes does this passage serve? Turn to

“Translating *Beowulf*” on pages 22–23. Compare and contrast the different translations of this scene. Which most stresses action? Which emphasizes traditional poetic language? Which most successfully evokes dread?

5. In the fight with Grendel’s mother the poet stresses Beowulf’s need for a sword: lines 967 ff. describe the sword Hrunting he takes with him; while lines 1046 ff. describe his lucky discovery of a second weapon. Since she is weaker than her son (see lines 822–823), why does Beowulf need this weapon to kill Grendel’s mother?

6. What are the essential themes in Hrothgar’s famous speech to Beowulf (lines 1160–1227)? In what ways is this speech appropriate for this moment in the story?

(Beowulf Returns to Geatland)

Then down to the sea came the band of
the brave,

1305 The host of young heroes in harness of war,
In their woven mail; and the coast-warden
viewed

The heroes’ return, as he heeded their
coming!

No uncivil greeting he gave from the sea-cliff
As they strode to ship in their glistening
steel;

1310 But rode toward them and called their return
A welcome sight for their Weder kin.

There on the sand the ring-stemmed ship,
The broad-bosomed bark, was loaded with
war-gear,

With horses and treasure; the mast towered
high

1315 Over the riches of Hrothgar’s hoard.
A battle-sword Beowulf gave to the
boat-warden

Hilted with gold; and thereafter in hall
 He had the more honor because of the
 heirloom,
 The shining treasure. The ship was
 launched.
 1320 Cleaving the combers of open sea
 They dropped the shoreline of Denmark
 astern.
 A stretching sea-cloth, a bellying sail,
 Was bent on the mast; there was groaning of
 timbers;
 A gale was blowing; the boat drove on.
 1325 The foamy-necked plunger plowed through
 the billows,
 The ring-stemmed ship through the breaking
 seas,
 Till at last they sighted the sea-cliffs of
 Geatland,
 The well-known headlands; and, whipped by
 the wind,
 The boat drove shoreward and beached on
 the sand. . . .
 1330 Then the hero strode with his stalwart
 band
 Across the stretches of sandy beach,
 The wide sea-shingle. The world-candle
 shone,
 The hot sun hasting on high from the south.
 Marching together they made their way
 1335 To where in his stronghold the stout young
 king, . . .
 Dispensed his treasure. Soon Hygelac heard
 Of the landing of Beowulf, bulwark of men,
 That his shoulder-companion had come to
 his court
 Sound and safe from the strife of battle.
 1340 The hall was prepared, as the prince gave
 bidding,
 Places made ready for much travelled men.
 And he who came safe from the surges of
 battle
 Sat by the side of the king himself, . . .
 In friendly fashion in high-built hall
 1345 Hygelac questioned his comrade and thane;
 For an eager longing burned in his breast
 To hear from the Sea-Geats the tale of their
 travels. . . .

Beowulf now tells the king of his battles with
 Grendel and Grendel's mother, and of the re-
 wards his victory has won. He concludes:

“These riches I bring you, ruler of heroes,
 And warmly tender with right good will.
 1350 Save for you, king Hygelac, few are my
 kinsmen,
 Few are the favors but come from you.”
 Then he bade men bring the boar-crested
 headpiece,
 The towering helmet, and steel-gray sark,³²
 The splendid war-sword, and spoke this
 word:
 1355 “The good king Hrothgar gave me this gift,
 This battle-armor, and first to you
 Bade tell the tale of his friendly favor. . . .
 Well may you wear it! Have joy of it all.”

. . .
 Then the battle-bold king, the bulwark of
 heroes,
 1360 Bade bring a battle-sword banded with gold,
 The heirloom of Hrethel;³³ no sharper steel,
 No lovelier treasure, belonged to the Geats.
 He laid the war-blade on Beowulf's lap,
 Gave him a hall and a stately seat
 1365 And hides³⁴ seven thousand. Inherited lands
 Both held by birth-fee, home and estate.
 But one held rule o'er the spacious realm,
 And higher therein his order and rank.

(The Fire-Dragon and the Treasure)

It later befell in the years that followed
 1370 After Hygelac sank in the surges of war, . . .
 That the kingdom came into Beowulf's hand.
 For fifty winters he governed it well,
 Aged and wise with the wisdom of years,
 Till a fire-drake³⁵ flying in darkness of night
 1375 Began to ravage and work his will.
 On the upland heath he guarded a hoard,
 A stone barrow lofty. Under it lay
 A path concealed from the sight of men.
 There a thief broke in on the heathen
 treasure,

32. *sark*, shirt (here, of mail).

33. *Hrethel* (hreth'el), king of the Geats, father of Hygelac,
 grandfather of Beowulf.

34. *hides*. The *hide* (roughly, as much land as could be worked
 by one plow in a single year) varied from 40 to 120 acres. Seven
 thousand hides is a huge piece of land.

35. *fire-drake*, a fire-breathing dragon.

Comment: Heroic Morality

In his *Germania*, the Roman historian Tacitus (A.D. 55?–120?) gave a detailed and generally reliable account of the customs of the Germanic tribes from among whom came the Anglo-Saxon peoples that would later populate England:

"On the field of battle it is a disgrace to a chief to be surpassed in courage by his followers, and to the followers not to equal the courage of their chief. And to leave a battle alive after their chief has fallen means lifelong infamy and shame. To defend and protect him, and to let him get the credit for their own acts of heroism, are the most solemn obligations of their allegiance. The chiefs fight for victory, the followers for their chief. Many noble youths, if the land of their birth is stagnating in a long period of peace and inactivity, deliberately seek out other tribes which have some war in hand.

For the Germans have no taste for peace; renown is more easily won among perils, and a large body of retainers cannot be kept together except by means of violence and war. They are always making demands on the generosity of their chief, asking for a coveted war horse or a spear stained with the blood of a defeated enemy. Their meals, for which plentiful if homely fare is provided, count in lieu of pay. The wherewithal for this openhandedness comes from war and plunder. A German is not so easily prevailed upon to plough the land and wait patiently for harvest as to challenge a foe and earn wounds for his reward. He thinks it tame and spiritless to accumulate slowly by the sweat of his brow what can be got quickly by the loss of a little blood."

From *The Agricola and The Germania* of Tacitus, translated by H. Mattingly, revised by S. A. Handford. New York: Penguin Books, 1948, 1970.

1380 Laid hand on a flagon all fretted with gold,
As the dragon discovered, though cozened in
sleep
By the pilferer's cunning. The people soon
found
That the mood of the dragon was roused to
wrath! . . .
For three hundred winters this waster of
peoples
1385 Held the huge treasure-hall under the earth
Till the robber aroused him to anger and
rage,
Stole the rich beaker and bore to his master,
Imploring his lord for a compact of peace.
So the hoard was robbed and its riches
plundered;
1390 To the wretch was granted the boon that he
begged;
And his liege-lord first had view of the
treasure,
The ancient work of the men of old.
Then the worm awakened and war was
kindled,
The rush of the monster along the rock,
1395 When the fierce one found the tracks of the
foe; . . .

Swiftly the fire-drake sought through the
plain
The man who wrought him this wrong in his
sleep.
Inflamed and savage he circled the mound,
But the waste was deserted—no man was in
sight.
1400 The worm's mood was kindled to battle and
war;
Time and again he returned to the barrow
Seeking the treasure-cup. Soon he was sure
That a man had plundered the precious gold.
Enraged and restless the hoard-warden
waited
1405 The gloom of evening. The guard of the
mound
Was swollen with anger; the fierce one
resolved
To requite with fire the theft of the cup.
Then the day was sped as the worm desired:
Lurking no longer within his wall
1410 He sallied forth surrounded with fire,
Encircled with flame. For the folk of the
land
The beginning was dread as the ending was
grievous

That came so quickly upon their lord.
 Then the baleful stranger belched fire and
 flame,
 1415 Burned the bright dwellings—the glow of the
 blaze
 Filled hearts with horror. The hostile
 flier
 Was minded to leave there nothing alive.
 From near and from far the war of the
 dragon,
 The might of the monster, was widely
 revealed
 1420 So that all could see how the ravaging
 scather
 Hated and humbled the Geatish folk.
 Then he hastened back ere the break of
 dawn
 To his secret den and the spoil of gold.
 He had compassed the land with a flame of
 fire,
 1425 A blaze of burning; he trusted the wall,
 The sheltering mound, and the strength of
 his might—
 But his trust betrayed him! The terrible news
 Was brought to Beowulf, told for a truth,
 That his home was consumed in the surges
 of fire. . . .
 1430 Dark thoughts stirred in his surging bosom,
 Welled in his breast, as was not his wont.
 The flame of the dragon had levelled the
 fortress,
 The people's stronghold washed by the
 wave.
 But the king of warriors, prince of the
 Weders,
 1435 Exacted an ample revenge for it all.
 The lord of warriors and leader of earls
 Bade work him of iron a wondrous shield,
 Knowing full well that wood could not serve
 him
 Nor linden³⁶ defend him against the flame.
 1440 The stalwart hero was doomed to suffer
 The destined end of his days on earth;
 Likewise the worm, though for many a
 winter
 He had held his watch o'er the wealth of the
 hoard.
 The ring-prince scorned to assault the
 dragon
 1445 With a mighty army, or host of men.

He feared not the combat, nor counted of
 worth
 The might of the worm, his courage and
 craft,
 Since often aforetime, beset in the fray,
 He had safely issued from many an onset,
 1450 Many a combat and, crowned with success,
 Purged of evil the hall of Hrothgar
 And crushed out Grendel's loathsome kin.
 . . .
 With eleven comrades, kindled to rage
 The Geat lord went to gaze on the dragon.
 1455 Full well he knew how the feud arose,
 The fearful affliction; for into his hold
 From hand of finder the flagon had come.
 The thirteenth man in the hurrying throng
 Was the sorrowful captive who caused the
 feud.
 1460 With woeful spirit and all unwilling
 Needs must he guide them, for he only knew
 Where the earth-hall stood near the breaking
 billows
 Filled with jewels and beaten gold.
 The monstrous warden, waiting for battle,
 1465 Watched and guarded the hoarded wealth.
 No easy bargain for any of men
 To seize that treasure! The stalwart king,
 Gold-friend of Geats, took seat on the
 headland,
 Hailed his comrades and wished them well.
 1470 Sad was his spirit, restless and ready,
 And the march of Fate immeasurably near;
 Fate that would strike, seek his soul's
 treasure,
 And deal asunder the spirit and flesh.
 Not long was his life encased in the body!
 1475 Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
 "Many an ordeal I endured in youth,
 And many a battle. I remember it all. . . .
 For all the rich gifts that Hygelac gave me
 I repaid him in battle with shining sword,
 1480 As chance was given. He granted me land,
 A gracious dwelling and goodly estate. . . .
 I was always before him alone in the van.
 So shall I bear me while life-days last,
 While the sword holds out that has served
 me well, . . .

36. *linden*, a shield of linden wood.

1485 With hand and hard blade, I must fight for
the treasure." . . .

(*Beowulf and Wiglaf Slay the Dragon*)

The king for the last time greeted his
comrades,
Bold helmet-bearers and faithful friends:
"I would bear no sword nor weapon to
battle
With the evil worm, if I knew how else
1490 I could close with the fiend, as I grappled
with Grendel.
From the worm I look for a welling of fire,
A belching of venom, and therefore I bear
Shield and byrny. Not one foot's space
Will I flee from the monster, the ward of the
mound.
1495 It shall fare with us both in the fight at the
wall
As Fate shall allot, the lord of mankind.
Though bold in spirit, I make no boast
As I go to fight with the flying serpent.
Clad in your corselets and trappings of war,
1500 By the side of the barrow abide you to see
Which of us twain may best after battle
Survive his wounds. Not yours the
adventure,
Nor the mission of any, save mine alone,
To measure his strength with the monstrous
dragon
1505 And play the part of a valiant earl.
By deeds of daring I'll gain the gold
Or death in battle shall break your lord."
Then the stalwart rose with his shield
upon him,
Bold under helmet, bearing his sark
1510 Under the stone-cliff; he trusted the strength
Of his single might. Not so does a coward!
He who survived through many a struggle,
Many a combat and crashing of troops,
Saw where a stone-arch stood by the wall
1515 And a gushing stream broke out from the
barrow.
Hot with fire was the flow of its surge,
Nor could any abide near the hoard
unburned,
Nor endure its depths, for the flame of the
dragon.
Then the lord of the Geats in the grip of his
fury

1520 Gave shout of defiance; the strong-heart
stormed.
His voice rang out with the rage of battle,
Resounding under the hoary stone.
Hate was aroused; the hoard-warden knew
'Twas the voice of a man. No more was
there time
1525 To sue for peace; the breath of the serpent,
A blast of venom, burst from the rock.
The ground resounded; the lord of the Geats
Under the barrow swung up his shield
To face the dragon; the coiling foe
1530 Was gathered to strike in the deadly strife.
The stalwart hero had drawn his sword,
His ancient heirloom of tempered edge;
In the heart of each was fear of the other!
The shelter of kinsmen stood stout of heart
1535 Under towering shield as the great worm
coiled;
Clad in his war-gear he waited the rush.
In twisting folds the flame-breathing dragon
Sped to its fate. The shield of the prince
For a lesser while guarded his life and his
body
1540 Than heart had hoped. For the first time
then
It was not his portion to prosper in war;
Fate did not grant him glory in battle!
Then lifted his arm the lord of the Geats
And smote the worm with his ancient sword
1545 But the brown edge failed as it fell on bone,
And cut less deep than the king had need
In his sore distress. Savage in mood
The ward of the barrow countered the blow
With a blast of fire; wide sprang the flame.
. . .
1550 Not long was the lull. Swiftly the battlers
Renewed their grapple. The guard of the
hoard
Grew fiercer in fury. His venomous breath
Beat in his breast. Enveloped in flame
The folk-leader suffered a sore distress.
1555 No succoring band of shoulder-companions,
No sons of warriors aided him then
By valor in battle. They fled to the forest
To save their lives; but a sorrowful spirit
Welled in the breast of one of the band.
1560 The call of kinship can never be stilled
In the heart of a man who is trusty and true.
(*The text of Beowulf continues on page 36.*)

His name was Wiglaf, Weohstan's son,
 A prince of the Scylfings, a peerless thane,
 Ælfhere's kinsman;³⁷ he saw his king
 1565 Under his helmet smitten with heat.
 He thought of the gifts which his lord had
 given,
 The wealth and the land of the Wægmunding
 line
 And all the folk-rights his father had owned;
 Nor could he hold back, but snatched up his
 buckler,
 1570 His linden shield and his ancient sword. . . .
 Wiglaf spoke in sorrow of soul,
 With bitter reproach rebuking his comrades:
 "I remember the time, as we drank in the
 mead-hall,
 When we swore to our lord who bestowed
 these rings
 1575 That we would repay for the war-gear and
 armor,
 The hard swords and helmets, if need like
 this
 Should ever befall him. He chose us out
 From all the host for this high adventure.
 . . .
 Now is the day that our lord has need
 1580 Of the strength and courage of stalwart men.
 Let us haste to succor his sore distress
 In the horrible heat and the merciless flame.
 God knows I had rather the fire should
 enfold
 My body and limbs with my gold-friend and
 lord. . . .
 1585 One helmet and sword, one byrny and
 shield,
 Shall serve for us both in the storm of
 strife."
 Then Wiglaf dashed through the deadly reek
 In his battle-helmet to help his lord.
 Brief were his words: "Beloved Beowulf,
 1590 Summon your strength, remember the vow
 You made of old in the years of youth
 Not to allow your glory to lessen
 As long as you lived. With resolute heart,
 And dauntless daring, defend your life
 1595 With all your force. I fight at your side!"
 Once again the worm, when the words
 were spoken,
 The hideous foe in a horror of flame,
 Rushed in rage at the hated men.

Wiglaf's buckler was burned to the boss
 1600 In the billows of fire; his byrny of mail
 Gave the young hero no help or defense.
 But he stoutly pressed on under shield of his
 kinsman
 When his own was consumed in the
 scorching flame.
 Then the king once more was mindful of
 glory,
 1605 Swung his great sword-blade with all his
 might
 And drove it home on the dragon's head.
 But Nægling³⁸ broke, it failed in the battle,
 The blade of Beowulf, ancient and gray. . . .
 A third time then the terrible scather,
 1610 The monstrous dragon inflamed with the
 feud,
 Rushed on the king when the opening
 offered,
 Fierce and flaming; fastened its fangs
 In Beowulf's throat; he was bloodied with
 gore;
 His lifeblood streamed from the welling
 wound.
 1615 As they tell the tale, in the king's sore
 need
 His shoulder-companion showed forth his
 valor,
 His craft and courage, and native strength.
 To the head of the dragon he paid no heed.
 Though his hand was burned as he helped
 his king.
 1620 A little lower the stalwart struck
 At the evil beast, and his blade drove home
 Plated and gleaming. The fire began
 To lessen and wane. The king of the Weders
 Summoned his wits; he drew the dagger
 1625 He wore on his corselet, cutting and keen,
 And slit asunder the worm with the blow.
 So they felled the foe and wrought their
 revenge;
 The kinsmen together had killed the dragon.

37. *Wiglaf . . . kinsman*. Wiglaf's father Weohstan (wā'ō stan) was apparently both a prince of the Scylfings (shilf'ings), the ruling family among the Swedes, and a member of the Wægmunding (wag'mūn ding) family (see lines 1567–1568), the Geatish clan to which Beowulf belonged. It has been conjectured that Weohstan was a Swedish exile in Geatland (as the result of a blood feud) who had settled on Wægmunding lands. Ælfhere (alf'her rə) is not otherwise known.
 38. *Nægling* (nag'ling). The name of Beowulf's sword is related to *nægl*, "nail."

So a man should be when the need is bitter!
 1630 That was the last fight Beowulf fought;
 That was the end of his work in the world.

(Beowulf's Death)

The wound which the dragon had dealt
 him began
 To swell and burn; and soon he could feel
 The baneful venom inflaming his breast.
 1635 The wise, old warrior sank down by the wall
 And stared at the work of the giants of old,
 The arches of stone and the standing
 columns
 Upholding the ancient earth-hall within.
 His loyal thane, the kindest of comrades,
 1640 Saw Beowulf bloody and broken in war;
 In his hands bore water and bathed his
 leader,
 And loosened the helm from his dear lord's
 head.
 Beowulf spoke, though his hurt was sore,
 The wounds of battle grievous and grim.
 1645 Full well he weened that his life was ended,
 And all the joy of his years on earth;
 That his days were done, and Death most
 near:
 "My armor and sword I would leave to my
 son
 Had Fate but granted, born of my body,
 1650 An heir to follow me after I'm gone.
 For fifty winters I've ruled this realm,
 And never a lord of a neighboring land
 Dared strike with terror or seek with sword.
 In my life I abode by the lot assigned,
 1655 Kept well what was mine, courted no
 quarrels,
 Swore no false oaths. And now for all this
 Though my hurt is grievous, my heart is
 glad.
 When life leaves body, the Lord of mankind
 Cannot lay to my charge the killing of
 kinsmen!
 1660 Go quickly, dear Wiglaf, to gaze on the gold
 Beneath the hoar stone. The dragon lies still
 In the slumber of death, despoiled of his
 hoard.
 Make haste that my eyes may behold the
 treasure,
 The gleaming jewels, the goodly store,

1665 And, glad of the gold, more peacefully leave
 The life and the realm I have ruled so long."

Then Weohstan's son, as they tell the tale,
 Clad in his corselet and trappings of war,
 Harkened at once to his wounded lord.
 1670 Under roof of the barrow he broke his way.
 Proud in triumph he stood by the seat,
 Saw glittering jewels and gold on the ground,
 The den of the dragon, the old dawn-flier,
 And all the wonders along the walls.
 1675 Great bowls and flagons of bygone men
 Lay all unburnished and barren of gems,
 Many a helmet ancient and rusted,
 Many an arm-ring cunningly wrought.
 Treasure and gold, though hid in the ground,
 1680 Override man's wishes, hide them who will!
 High o'er the hoard he beheld a banner,
 Greatest of wonders, woven with skill,
 All wrought of gold; its radiance lighted
 The vasty ground and the glittering gems.

. . .
 1685 As I've heard the tale, the hero unaided
 Rifled those riches of giants of old,
 The hoard in the barrow, and heaped in his
 arms
 Beakers and platters, picked what he would
 And took the banner, the brightest of signs.

. . .
 1690 In haste returning enriched with spoil.
 He feared, and wondered if still he would
 find
 The lord of the Weders alive on the plain,
 Broken and weary and smitten with wounds.
 With his freight of treasure he found the
 prince,
 1695 His dear lord, bloody and nigh unto death.
 With water he bathed him till words broke
 forth
 From the hoard of his heart and, aged and
 sad,
 Beowulf spoke, as he gazed on the gold:
 "For this goodly treasure whereon I gaze
 1700 I give my thanks to the Lord of all,
 To the Prince of glory, Eternal God,
 Who granted me grace to gain for my people
 Such dower of riches before my death.
 I gave my life for this golden hoard.
 1705 Heed well the wants, the need of my people;
 My hour is come, and my end is near.
 Bid warriors build, when they burn my
 body,