BEOWULF

The long heroic poem known as *Beowulf* stands at the beginning of many historical surveys of English literature, and with good reason. *Beowulf* is the most famous poem surviving in Old English (the earliest recorded period of the English language, spanning the centuries from around 400 C.E. until around 1100). The native speakers of Old English, the Anglo-Saxons, were originally western Germanic tribes who began migrating to the main island of Britain in the fifth century C.E. The story of how the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain is well known: prior to their arrival, the indigenous Celtic peoples of the island had, under centuries of Roman rule, built a vibrant, cosmopolitan civilization. But when Goths sacked Italy itself in 410, the Romans began to withdraw from the outermost reaches of their empire, leaving frontier provinces such as Britain vulnerable to invaders. Among those invaders were the Germanic peoples now collectively known as the Anglo-Saxons, who arrived in force, subjugated the Romanized Celts, and established their own settlements in Britain. In a remarkably short time, these "barbarian" Anglo-Saxons would be able boast achievements in art and learning to rival any in Europe.

Eventually united into a single "kingdom of the English," the Anglo-Saxon state endured in various guises for over six-hundred years until its military overthrow by Duke William of Normandy in 1066. Although the culture of the French-speaking Normans would be dominant thereafter, important features of ordinary life—especially in aspects of the English language and in English legal and political institutions—continued to reflect their origins in Anglo-Saxon times. *Beowulf* belongs to the history of English literature, then, not only as an engaging tale of heroes and monsters, but as a window on the social, political, and religious preoccupations of a culture that contributed much to the shaping of later English society.

I. How *Beowulf* has come down to us:

Given the place of *Beowulf* in literature courses today, it is surprising to learn that the monumental standing of the work is relatively recent. The text of *Beowulf* comes down to us in a single, unimpressive manuscript that was badly damaged by fire in 1731. On the basis of its linguistic forms and the style of its handwriting, this unique surviving copy of the poem appears to have been made somewhere in southern Britain around the year 1000. This is *not* to say that the poem *Beowulf* was composed then; in fact, many scholars have concluded from a wide range of linguistic and other evidence that *Beowulf* may have been created and first written down in some form as early as the eighth century, hence long before our one surviving manuscript of it was produced. But if many additional copies ever existed, it seems they all have perished.

The one copy of the work we do have, moreover, offers few clues to what the scribes themselves knew or thought about the text: they included no title for the poem and made no mention anywhere of its author. We are therefore ignorant not only of such basic facts as who wrote *Beowulf*, and where, and when; we cannot even say for certain whether the poem was widely known or admired among Anglo-Saxon audiences. It is certainly striking that, while numerous characters mentioned in *Beowulf* have roles to play in other early Germanic literature (the Danish Scylding dynasty, for example, figures prominently in Old Norse legend), the central figure of Beowulf himself appears only here, in this one Old English poem. The *Beowulf*-poet occasionally hints at the existence of a large body of additional legends circulating about the hero (see, for example, lines 414-423, 497ff., or 2173-2185), but no independent record of such tales survives. Likewise, after the Old English period, the figure of Beowulf the hero disappears utterly from literature and legend; he is mentioned by no later medieval or early modern author until the rediscovery of the sole copy of the poem in the Renaissance. Even then, *Beowulf* (as the poem soon came to be known) was not printed in its entirety until 1815, and no complete, reliable Modern English translation of it was available until 1837. Compared to such major figures as Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton, the *Beowulf*-poet is, therefore, a relative latecomer to England's literary hall of fame.

II. The plot of the poem:

The world described in *Beowulf* has features in common with that depicted in many medieval heroic legends. It is a society made up of chiefs and their war-bands: the retainer (or "thane") offers loyal fighting service and the spoils of battle to his lord, who in turn repays that loyalty with favor, treasures, and protection (hence a chief or king is often

called by such poetic names as "ring-giver" and "dispenser of treasure"). Nations, as we think of them, do not exist; the essential unit of social organization is the *theod* or "people" associated with a territory and referred to in the poem by a variety of epithets. The Danes, for examples, are also called "Bright-Danes," "Ring-Danes," "Spear-Danes," or the "Ingwine"; Beowulf's people, the Geats, are variously "Storm-Geats," "Battle-Geats," "Sea-Geats," or "Weders." Because of the social importance of the tribe, for a warrior to be exiled or to outlive his lord in battle is considered the greatest misfortune. The war-band also provides a certain, if bloody, guarantee of justice through the constant threat of vengeance. Reprisals for the killing of one's lord or kinsman typically result in protracted blood-feuds. Aristocratic women, who enjoy privileges as advisors to their husbands and as performers of important social rituals, are routinely married off with the aim of ending feuds, but such "peace-weaver" unions usually portend disaster in early Germanic legend. The same body of legend insists, finally, that threats to human society may also just as easily come from outside the natural world. Boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds are shadowy at best in this literature, which depicts monsters, demons, and spirits encroaching on human affairs as a matter of course.

Against this general background, the particular story recounted in *Beowulf* is simple in its outlines. After several generations of glorious rule by the Scylding dynasty (lines 1-85), during the reign of King Hrothgar the realm of Denmark begins to suffer attacks from a man-eating monster called Grendel, who nightly breaks into the Danes' hall of Heorot and devours Hrothgar's thanes (lines 86-193). Hearing of the Danes' troubles, the hero Beowulf journeys from his home in Geatland (probably in the south of present-day Sweden) to offer his services to Hrothgar, and the king warmly receives him (lines 194-496). One of Hrothgar's retainers, Unferth, aggressively questions Beowulf's reputation, prompting the hero to set the record straight by recounting some of his past exploits, including a swimming contest and battles with sea-monsters (lines 497-603). Later that night, after a banquet and the ritual passing of the mead-cup by Hrothgar's queen, Wealhtheow, Beowulf and his men lie down in the hall to await Grendel's attack (lines 604-99a). The scene then shifts, and, in the poem's most cinematic moment, we cut back and forth between Grendel's ominous approach to Heorot and Beowulf as he lies alert and ready for battle inside the hall (lines 699b-733a). Grendel bursts in and, because the monster is magically protected against weapons, Beowulf must defeat him bare-handed. In a violent wrestling-match, Beowulf rips off Grendel's arm. The monster, mortally wounded, escapes back to his dwelling beneath a dismal lake, or "mere" (lines 734b-833). Celebration among the Danes follows, entailing feasts, lavish gift-giving, and the recitation of heroic stories by Hrothgar's court poet (lines 834-1247).

When all retire to bed, however, a cruel surprise is in store: Grendel's mother unexpectedly arrives to seek vengeance for her son's death. She attacks the Danes, killing Hrothgar's beloved advisor, Æschere, before fleeing back to her mere (lines 1248-1306). Hrothgar breaks the terrible news to Beowulf the next day, and the hero vows to rid the Danes of this new scourge as well. The Geats and Danes travel to Grendel's mere, described by Hrothgar in chilling detail, and Beowulf prepares for the fight of his life (lines 1307-1488). He dives to the bottom of the mere where he discovers the monsters' magically enclosed lair; there he battles Grendel's mother and, though nearly beaten once, defeats her. Finding Grendel's now-lifeless body, he takes a giant sword and cuts off the head; though the sword-blade melts from Grendel's blood, Beowulf carries the remaining hilt together with Grendel's head back to the surface (lines 1489-1647). Hrothgar, amazed by the head and the remains of the giant sword, delivers a long "sermon" to Beowulf on the proper virtues of a hero and on the dangers of arrogance (lines 1648-1781). The next day, after more gift-exchanges and formal speeches, Beowulf departs for his home in Geatland (lines 1782-1920). Arriving safely, he is greeted by his uncle, King Hygelac, and the queen, Hygd; he offers them gifts and recounts his adventures in Denmark (lines 1921-2195).

For the final episode of the poem, the action leaps abruptly forward in time more than fifty years (lines 2196-2206a): Hygelac has been killed and, though Beowulf has succeeded to the throne, the Geats have become embroiled in bloody, feud-driven conflicts with their neighbors to the north (the Swedes) and to the south (the Frisians and various tribes of the Franks). Beowulf nevertheless rules into old age, keeping his people safe until a desperate man, unnamed in the story, steals a cup from the hoard of a dragon nearby (lines 2206b-2226a). The poet explains how the treasure had been placed in the barrow by the last survivor of a conquered people, and how the dragon found and claimed the hoard (lines 2226b-2272). The dragon, enraged by the theft of his cup, begins to lay waste the country of the Geats, destroying even Beowulf's own hall (lines 2273-2339). The king prepares for what the narrator clearly states will be his final battle; as he prepares to fight, Beowulf reminisces about various episodes both from his youth and from more recent periods of conflict between the Geats and their neighbors (lines 2340-2392 and 2412-2532). Twelve men accompany Beowulf to the dragon's lair (lines 2396-2411), but the king has resolved to fight alone. Almost at once, the battle goes badly for him: his sword breaks, his armor fails against the dragon's fiery breath, and all but one of his retainers flee in terror (lines 2533-2596). The one loyal thane, Wiglaf, rebukes the cowards and encourages his king; together the two manage to defeat the dragon, but poison from the monster's wound overcomes Beowulf (lines 2597-2719). Succumbing, he asks to gaze upon the hoard, which he intends to leave as a legacy to his people. He instructs Wiglaf that a massive burial

mound be raised over his body, and, as his dying gesture, bestows his own helmet and mail-shirt on the younger man (lines 2720-2816). The deserters return to the scene, and Wiglaf again upbraids them for their disloyalty. He sends messengers to announce news of Beowulf's death to the Geats and, along with those tidings, predictions of violence and of the Geats' enslavement at the hands of their many hostile neighbors, now that Beowulf, their protector, lies dead (lines 2817-3104). The Geats cremate Beowulf's body; they bury it in a great mound, as the hero requested, and they rebury the dragon's hoard with him. The poem ends with a moving description of the Geats' final rituals of mourning for their hero and king (lines 3105-3178).

III. The nature of the poem:

As summarized above, the story told in *Beowulf* seems straightforward, as does its structure in three parts corresponding to the three monster-fights, or two parts balancing the youthful triumphs of Beowulf against his old age and defeat. We cannot get far reading the poet's actual words, however, without realizing that he has chosen to tell the story in a way starkly different than any modern author would do. Some of the qualities that make *Beowulf* so challenging to read now—its dense allusions, its seeming repetitions and digressions, and its ceremonious pace—are features common to much Old English poetry. A basic familiarity with some formal conventions of Old English poems generally can help modern audiences understand why reading *Beowulf* feels at times like traveling through a foreign country.

III.1. Old English verse and the problems of translation:

At the most basic level, a challenge lies in the poem's very language. Unlike the writings of Shakespeare or even the late-medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer, whose works can still be read and understood in their original language, Old English is so old as to be, in effect, a foreign language. For that reason, most readers today only approach *Beowulf* indirectly, through a Modern English translation. Here are the first eleven lines of the poem as rendered by Howell D. Chickering, Jr.:

> Listen! We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes
> in the old days, the kings of tribes—
> how noble princes showed great courage!
> Often Scyld Scefing seized mead-benches
> from enemy troops, from many a clan;
> he terrified warriors, even though first he was found
> a waif, helpless. For that came a remedy,
> he grew under heaven, prospered in honors,
> until every last one of the bordering nations
> beyond the whale-road had to heed him,
> pay him tribute. He was a good king!

Here are the same lines as they appear in the original Old English:

> Hwæt! We Gar-Dena in gear-dagum,
> þeod-cyninga þrym gefrunon,
> hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon!
> Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum
> monegum mægþum meodo-setla ofteah;
> egsode eorlas syððan ærest wearð
> feasceaft funden; he þæs frofre gebad,
> weox under wolcnum, weorð-myndum þah,
> oð þæt him æghwylc þara ymb-sittendra
> ofer hron-rade hyran scolde,
> gomban gyldan. Þæt wæs god cyning!

Old English is not impossibly difficult to learn (it resembles modern Dutch or German in many ways); the final half-line above, for example— *Þæt wæs god cyning!*—looks and sounds close enough to Modern English "That was (a) good king!" And many other individual words in the above passage are perhaps recognizable: *hu* 'how' (line 3); *oft* 'often' (line 4);

moneg 'many' (line 5); *eorlas* 'earls, noblemen' (line 6); *funden* 'found' and *he* 'he' (line 7); *hyran* 'hear, obey' (line 10); *gyldan* 'yield, pay' (line 11). But picking our way through the whole poem in this manner would be impossibly time-consuming.

An accurate translation, such as that by Howell Chickering which is included in this anthology, can do a good job of conveying *what* happens in *Beowulf*. But every translation, no matter how good, will fall short of communicating *how* a poem achieves its effects in the original language. In the case of Anglo-Saxon verse, the limitations of translating have important consequences, because Old English poetry was typically composed to show off the "how" of a poet's technique as much as the "what" of the plot. The essential formal principle for composing poetry in Old English was *alliteration* (the repetition of word-initial sounds), not end rhyme. Every line of Old English poetry consists of two shorter half-lines linked together by alliteration (modern editions of Old English poems print these two half-lines with a gap of several spaces in between). In Old English verse, every consonant alliterates with only itself, but every vowel alliterates with any other vowel. Thus in the Old English passage quoted above, the primary alliterating sound is /g/ in line 1, /th/ (represented by the runic character <þ>) in line 2, but the vowels /æ/ and /e/ in line 3, and so on. There may be two or three alliterative syllables in the whole line, and the alliteration should fall on important, stressed words. A skilled poet would use patterns of alliteration to relate important themes to one another throughout a work. In Modern English, unfortunately, too much alliteration is often considered annoying or gimmicky—tolerable on bumperstickers and advertisements, perhaps, but not for a lengthy, serious poem. Howell Chickering's translation does not attempt to imitate the alliterative quality of *Beowulf* in the original.

Other formal conventions of Old English poetry do survive in translation, but these too can, unfortunately, have an effect today far different than the poet may have intended. The most noticeable of these techniques is called poetic *variation*—that is, the near-repetition of a single idea in multiple forms. A simple example would be the naming and renaming of the Danes in the opening of the poem (quoted above): the poet speaks of the "glory of the Spear-Danes [*Gar-Dena*]," then a few words later returns to the idea, though the heroic subjects are now referred to as "the kings of tribes." Unfortunately, in translation this "variational" technique can end up sounding like empty repetition, as if the poor poet couldn't quite make up his mind what to call the Danes. But in Old English, variation and related techniques of circling back to re-describe a person or action already introduced allow a poet to color the narrative in interesting ways. One of the most common effects of the technique is an implicit irony, especially when variation underscores a difference between the author's (or audience's) point of view and that of the characters in the poem. Consider another passage from *Beowulf* in Old English: here the poet describes the reaction a desperate King Hrothgar to Beowulf's arrival and offer of help:

> Þa wæs on salum sinces brytta,
> gamol-feax ond guð-rof; geoce gelyfde
> brego Beorht-Dena, gehyrde on Beowulfe
> folces hyrde fæst-rædne geþoht. (lines 607-610)

Chickering translates:

> Then the treasure-giver was greatly pleased,
> gray-bearded, battle-famed, chief of the Bright-Danes;
> the nation's shepherd counted on Beowulf,
> on the warrior's help, when he heard such resolve. (lines 604-607)

Not all the renaming here is "variation" in the strict sense, but the effect tends in the same direction. In a few words, the poet captures the awkwardness and poignancy of Hrothgar's dilemma—that of a still-proud but aging king, dignified but desperate for aid to restore his people to safety and honor. The "battle-famed" monarch and "nation's shepherd" must look to an outsider for "help" without losing face before his own subjects. The listener or reader who knows the entire story of the poem may also appreciate the irony that an aged King Beowulf, in his hour of need, will receive no such rescue. Variation, at its best, encourages this sort of back-and-forth reflection, and it remains the one feature that gives Old English poetry, even in translation, its distinctly indirect, imagistic qualities.

III.2. The nuance of narrative viewpoint in *Beowulf*

Effects of poetic variation in *Beowulf* can include, as we have seen, small-scale splits of perspective between the poet's or narrator's privileged point of view, on one hand, and the more limited viewpoint of characters in the poem, on the other.

At times a similar division appears to inform *Beowulf* on a larger scale as well, raising important questions about the poet's attitude towards his subject matter. Today these questions remain at the center of scholarly debates over the poet's intentions in writing the work.

Readers encountering *Beowulf* at the beginning of a survey course on the history of English literature are often struck by the irony that, so far as its plot goes, the poem has nothing to do with England. The geographic orientation of the work is, from the perspective of the British Isles, entirely to the north and east, towards southern Scandinavia and western Germanic Europe—that is, towards realms overseas that the *Beowulf*-poet and his Anglo-Saxon audience probably regarded as their ancestral homelands. While the matter of *Beowulf* required the poet to cast his imaginative gaze across wide geographic distances, far greater challenges were the chronological and cultural divides separating the poet's society from the one described in the poem. It is this temporal distance that the poet (through the narrator of the work) routinely calls attention to; for example: "Listen! We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes / *in the old days*" (lines 1-2); "[Beowulf] was the strongest of all living men / *at that time* in this world" (lines 196-197; cf. 786-787); or "[Beowulf enjoyed] such comforts as battle voyagers / used to have *in those days*" (lines 1794-1795). There are many such distancing remarks throughout the poem.

Exactly how far before his own day did the poet imagine the events of *Beowulf* taking place? Most scholars have given up hope of pinning down any real historical setting, but at least one character in the poem, Beowulf's uncle, Hygelac, killed on a raid to Frisia (see lines 1202b-1211a and 2910-2917), has been identified with a "Danish" chief "Chlochilaicus," whose death in similar circumstances is placed around the year 521 by one early medieval chronicle. As already noted (section I, above), opinions vary as to when the *Beowulf*-poet himself wrote, but a commonly favored view, supported by a wide range of evidence, places him in central or northern England in the eighth century. According to this hypothesis, then, at least three centuries separated the Anglo-Saxon poet of *Beowulf* from the Scandinavian world depicted in his poem. At the time the poet wrote, that world was already ancient and different from his own in crucial ways. His ambivalent attitude towards such differences is felt especially in another distinctive feature of *Beowulf,* namely the mood of fatalism that permeates the poem.

At no place is the poet's sense of distance from his subject more evident than in the way he chooses to treat the narrator's and characters' frequent references to religion. When they arrived in Britain, the Anglo-Saxons probably still worshiped the Old Germanic gods—Odin, Frigg, Thor, and others better known to us today from medieval Norse mythology. About a century after settling in Britain, however, the Anglo-Saxons began a long, fitful conversion to Christianity. Irish missionaries preached the new religion from the west and north, while from the south, in 597, the reigning pope, Gregory the Great, sent emissaries from Rome to convert the English. The arrival of Christianity was important for its impact on the Anglo-Saxons' worldview, but also because Irish and Roman missionaries introduced their converts to Latin learning and the tools of literacy: reading, writing, and book-production. The very act of writing down a text such as *Beowulf* required access to technologies that, for most of the Anglo-Saxon period, remained chiefly in the hands of Christian clergy and monks.

Whenever the *Beowulf* poet lived, therefore, the historical probability is high that he and his audience were at least nominally Christian. At the same time, the poet betrays a remarkable sensitivity to the fact that Hrothgar, Beowulf, and others in the poem could not have been. (Much of Scandinavia remained pagan until the tenth century.) Characters in the world of the poem speak often of "God" as the ordainer of "fate" or bestower of natural gifts, but the poet carefully avoids placing in his characters' mouths any anachronistic references to Christ, the Trinity, the Bible, or any specific doctrine of Christianity that pagan Scandinavians could not have known. On the other hand, the "paganism" of Beowulf's world is for the most part depicted in benign, noble terms, more or less as a kind of intuited or "natural" religion. The Old English words for "God" used by characters in the poem—that is, the word "God" itself but also many Christian-sounding epithets such as "Father of Glory," "Lord of Life," "Creator" and others—appear to have been carefully chosen by the poet for their ability to refer to both pre-Christian and Christian conceptions of the deity. Likewise, when Hrothgar's court poet sings about the creation of the cosmos (lines 90-98), the lines sound unmistakably like a paraphrase of the opening chapter of the biblical account of creation in Genesis. In these and other ways, the poet's intention seems to have been to draw the pagan heroic world in terms as sympathetic as possible for an Anglo-Saxon Christian audience.

Whereas the characters in Beowulf's world speak of "God" always within these limits, the voice of the poem's narrator freely comments on their "heathenism," at one point harshly criticizing the Danes for sacrificing to devilish idols (lines 175-188). But the severity of that passage is atypical of the poem as a whole. Indeed, the narrator more often seems determined to describe the workings of a Judeo-Christian God, or such concepts as providence or sin, in a language that

characters from the world of the poem would find equally understandable. The narrator does invoke the Bible twice to explain the origins of Grendel as a descendent of Cain (lines 102-114) and the destruction of a race of giants in the Great Flood (a scene depicted on the sword-hilt that Beowulf retrieves from Grendel's hall, at lines 1684-1690). Even these instances of overtly Christian allusion are carefully controlled by the poet; the narrator and audience may have recourse to the Bible for such backgrounds, but the characters within the poem do not. The fact that all such allusions used by the poet come from scriptures that Christians call the "Old Testament" (i.e., writings about God's acts prior to the coming of Christ as described in the "New Testament") has suggested to some readers that the poet regarded his noble pagan heroes as equivalent to Old Testament figures such as Noah and Abraham, godly and virtuous men whose only "fault" (from a medieval Christian perspective) was that they lacked the fullness of knowledge about God that would be revealed through Christ.

The biblical allusions in the poem are only the most conspicuous moments of potentially ironic difference between the perspective of the poet and of his characters. Like its paganism, other values from world of the poem—such as bravery, generosity, loyalty, and integrity—are perhaps being held up as simultaneously praiseworthy *and yet* insufficient, in so far as they could not, according to the mainstream of medieval theology, lead to salvation after death. Earthly goals such as glory, wealth, and power that seem to constitute absolute goods within the world of the poem might likewise represent, to a medieval Christian, at best secondary or qualified goods, at worst the damning snares of the world or the Devil. Much disagreement persists among scholars today over whether the poet finally regards Beowulf as a "virtuous heathen" deserving of salvation, or as a case-study in the ultimate futility of the heroic code, whatever its incidental virtues. The ambiguity is neatly encapsulated in the very last words of the poem, where the Geats remember their chief as a man "most eager for fame" (line 3178). From the perspective of Beowulf's mourners, being "most eager for fame" is presumably desirable in a leader. In late Old English Christian sermons, however, the very same word used here of Beowulf (*lofgeornost* 'most eager for fame / praise') is explicitly associated with the "capital sin" of pride. Once again, the meaning of the moment differs greatly, depending on whether we regard it from the perspective of the characters in the poem, or that of a presumably Christian Anglo-Saxon poet and his audience, or that of some cultural compromise between those two alternatives.

III.3. Questions of purpose and genre: what is *Beowulf*?

With its balancing of nostalgia and critique, the poet's seeming ambivalence towards his subject makes *Beowulf* not quite like any other medieval retelling of early Germanic legend. The singularity of the poem in that regard has prompted many to wonder why the poet chose this material, or what sort of poem he understood *Beowulf* to be. Modern scholars have repeatedly tried to explain *Beowulf*'s mix of elements as a response to the political or religious climate in which it might have been composed. Many have interpreted the work in the context of the Anglo-Saxons' fairly recent conversion to Christianity, when sympathetic portrayals of a pagan Germanic past might have been wise to placate aristocratic converts who, perhaps, could not quite bring themselves to believe their non-Christian ancestors damned. Other hypotheses set the poet's intentions against the background of the Anglo-Saxons' energetic efforts, during the late seventh and eighth centuries, to evangelize the as-yet unconverted Germanic peoples of continental Europe: on this view, portraying heroes like Beowulf as *almost* Christian might have helped missionaries as they promoted their religion in places such as Frisia, Saxony, and Scandinavia—some of the very regions that figure prominently in the story of *Beowulf*. On the other hand, those who argue for a later date of composition for the work point out that its negotiation of Christian and "heathen" aristocratic values would have been equally serviceable in ninth-century circumstances, when Viking invaders overran the northeastern half of England, reintroducing paganism to the island; or, again, in the early tenth century, when Anglo-Saxon kings were taking a greater interest in rehabilitating, for current political motives, their long-claimed descent from pre-Christian Germanic heroes.

In the absence of historical facts about when *Beowulf* was first composed, however, all such theories remain largely speculative. For this reason, other attempts to contextualize the poem have relied more on comparisons with other kinds of early literature that may have provided the poet with models. The model of the Bible, as a history of God's workings in past ages, has already been mentioned. But a more immediate background for *Beowulf* was almost certainly other heroic poetry, both from the Classical Latin and native Germanic traditions. From the Latin tradition, many early-medieval authors would have had some familiarity with classical epic, especially the *Aeneid*, written in the first century B.C.E. by the Roman poet Vergil. Modern readers have often referred to *Beowulf* as an "epic," and it is true that the poem shares some characteristics with classical models of epic poetry: it relates the adventures of a single noble hero, who undertakes an important journey and fights dangerous enemies both human and supernatural. It could be further argued that, like Vergil's *Aeneid*, which tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas's founding of a new kingdom that will

ultimately become Rome, the "epic" *Beowulf* reflects a desire by some Anglo-Saxons to ground their present political identity in the stuff of ancestral legend. But, in many other points of style and substance, *Beowulf* remains markedly different from works like the *Aeneid*, and so the label "epic" does not entirely fit.

When compared to examples of Germanic heroic literature from the Continent, *Beowulf* assumes yet another shape. In the largely pre-literate societies of the early Germanic world, stories of heroic adventure were probably created out of the individual poet's stock of memorized traditional formulas and passed down orally. Since they were not written, most of these legends have not survived, and we can only speculate about their form or content. Even so, many modern scholars believe that such backgrounds of formulaic composition and oral transmission may help explain certain features of the earliest *written* poetry from the Germanic world, including *Beowulf*. The formulaic character of the work at the level of the line or half-line is evident in many places, even in translation: the plainest examples may be seen in the poet's typical way of introducing formal speeches by his characters. The half-line "So-and-so spoke / answered" is immediately followed or preceded by some phrase elaborating the speaker's appearance or characteristic virtue (see, for instance, lines 258-259, 286-287, 340-342a, 371, 404-405, 455, etc.).

Oral backgrounds to the poem have also been perceived in larger features of its structure. The genre most associated with heroic legend in pre-literate Germanic society is the "lay," that is, a short to medium-length poem centered on one particular episode from the career of a hero. Far briefer and less complicated than the classical epic, such "lays" could be more easily memorized and recited, either individually or in combination with other lays to create longer narratives. Not surprisingly, some critics have wondered whether the episodic character of *Beowulf*—with its clear division into three different monster-fights—might owe something to having originated as a series of once distinct lays covering different parts of the hero's life. Oral tradition has also been invoked to account for the densely allusive and digressive qualities of the poem: the narrator and characters routinely refer to other stories, other events outside the action at hand. In some cases, these digressions have the appearance of virtually free-standing lays embedded in the poem (the most conspicuous would be the account of the "Fight at Finnsburh," recited by Hrothgar's court poet at lines 1061-1156).

Whatever *Beowulf* may ultimately owe to pre-existing native traditions, whether in the form of lays or some other compositions, the consensus today is that the poem, in the form it survives, represents the work of a single authorial intelligence. Even if, as seems likely, the poet adapted earlier traditions to produce the work as it now stands, he did not merely "cut and paste" such materials but rather reworked them to create the coherent strategies of narrative discussed above (section III.2). Like the variational style itself, digressions may have encouraged a splitting of perspectives: their contents could signify one thing to characters within the poem but something quite different to the poet and his audience, for whom the digressive matter could serve as a kind of commentary on the characters' present or future situation. Thus after Beowulf's victory over Grendel, the court poet at Heorot sings a lay about the hero Sigemund, famous for his courage in slaying a dragon (lines 872-894). To a poet and audience already aware of how Beowulf's life will end, the allusion injects a note of foreboding into what the characters within the poem perceive as a moment of pure triumph. Likewise the already mentioned "Fight at Finnsburh" (lines 1061-1156) overshadows the Danes' joy with a reminder of the horror and futility of the blood-feud, and of the almost inevitable failure of "peace-weaver" marriages (such as we later learn Hrothgar is planning for his own daughter; see lines 2016-2065). The deliberateness in the poet's handling of digressions—which, seen from this viewpoint, are really not "digressive" at all but integral parts of the poem—is perhaps clearest when the narrator refers to events and their repercussions that still lie in the future, relative to the action of the poem. When the Danes, at the height of their glory, have just finished building their great hall, Heorot, the narrator gloomily interjects a reference to its eventual destruction by Hrothgar's own future son-in-law (lines 81-85). Likewise at other key points the narrator alludes obliquely to a tradition that Hrothgar will be betrayed by his own nephew, Hrothulf (lines 1010-1015; see also 1158-1161). The many fragmentary allusions to feuds between the Geats and their neighbors in the final third of the poem sound a comparable note of doom ahead for Beowulf's own people. In the case of neither the Danes nor the Geats does the poet directly narrate these fatal outcomes; rather he seems to have trusted his audience to be able to fill in the necessary details. The cumulative weight of references to future betrayals and destruction creates an atmosphere of gloom so effectively that it seems unlikely to be the result of any mere patchwork of pre-existing lays.

While we may therefore never discover for certain who the *Beowulf*-poet was, when he lived, or how and to what immediate purposes he composed what has become the most famous work of early-medieval English literature, the poem will continue to stand on its own for qualities that can be appreciated despite all that we do not know about it. It is, first and foremost, a well-told story of a hero nobly facing monstrous forces that threaten his society from the outside as well as treacheries that undermine it from within. It is a story of universal contrasts between community and alienation, humanity and savagery, youth and old age, prosperity and misfortune, bravery and weakness, temporal

security and everlasting fame. For those inclined to speculate about what, beyond these general sources of appeal, *Beowulf* may have meant to its original audiences, the poem opens a fascinating window on the intellectual and moral preoccupations of Anglo-Saxon society, with its often uneasy compromises between ideals of secular heroism and a more recently adopted Christian morality. Above all, *Beowulf* reveals a sophisticated engagement by some Anglo-Saxons with the complexities of their own history as a distinct people. Their past, as imagined in *Beowulf*, is at once a glorious, refined heroic age and a terrifying world of violence and uncertainty that no degree of earthly heroism seems adequate to set right.

IV. Suggestions for further reading:

As the preceding paragraphs have suggested, the volume of published scholarly discussion of *Beowulf* has become almost overwhelming. I note here only a few gateway-type works helpful for students.

> *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*. Translated with an introduction and commentary by Howell D. Chickering, Jr. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1977. Revised edition 2006. [The original 1977 edition is the source of the translation adopted for this anthology. In addition to his translation, Chickering provides in-depth notes and commentary, plus the original Old English text on facing pages next to his Modern English version. For students who wish to explore Beowulf in greater depth, this all-in-one edition is still one of the best places to begin.]

Other student-friendly translations, also including notes, commentary, and a selection of critical essays or surveys of criticism, are:

> *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Translated by R. M. Liuzza. Broadview Press: Peterborough, Ontario, 2000.
>
> *Beowulf: A Prose Translation*. 2nd edition. Translated by E. Talbot Donaldson; edited by Nicholas Howe. Norton Critical Editions. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.
>
> *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*. Translated by Seamus Heaney; edited by Daniel Donoghue. Norton Critical Editions. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002.

A handy collection that gathers and translates from other medieval literary works some of the stories alluded to in *Beowulf* (such as the legends of the Scylding dynasty or of the Germanic hero Siegmund) is:

> *Beowulf and its Analogues*. Edited and translated by G. N. Garmonsway, Jacqueline Simpson, and Hilda Ellis Davidson. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971.

Scholarly interpretations of *Beowulf* are numerous, to say the least. A very convenient survey of professional studies on all aspects of the poem (down to 1994) is:

> *A Beowulf Handbook*. Edited by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles. Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. [This book is less for beginners than for those pursuing intermediate or advanced research on some specific aspect of the poem, but it is still an excellent resource.]

Because my discussion of the poem's narrative point of view, above (section III.2), is heavily indebted to it, I single out for mention one particularly eloquent and influential study of the poem as a whole:

> Robinson, Fred C. *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*. Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1985.

As approaches to the large body of specialized scholarly publications around the poem, students may find helpful the following anthologies of *Beowulf*-criticism:

> *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*. Edited by R. D. Fulk. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991. [Includes many now classic essays on the poem, including the famous paper by J. R. R. Tolkein, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," originally published in 1936.]

Beowulf: Basic Readings. Edited by Peter S. Baker. Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England 1. New York: Garland, 1995. Revised and reprinted as *The Beowulf Reader: Basic Readings*. New York: Garland, 2000.

Also useful as a recent orientation to debates is:

Orchard, Andy. *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003.

Beowulf

Listen! We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes
in the old days, the kings of tribes—
how noble princes showed great courage!
Often Scyld Scefing[1] seized mead-benches
from enemy troops, from many a clan;
he terrified warriors, even though first he was found
a waif, helpless. For that came a remedy,
he grew under heaven, prospered in honors
until every last one of the bordering nations
beyond the whale-road[2] had to heed him,
pay him tribute. He was a good king!
A son was born him, a glorious heir,
young in the courtyards, whom God[3] had sent
to comfort the people —well had He seen
the sinful distress they suffered earlier,
leaderless for long. Therefore the Life-lord,
the Ruler of glory, granted earthly honor:
[Beow][4] was famed —his name spread far—
"Scyld's son," through all the Northern lands.
So ought a [young] man, in his father's household,
treasure up the future by his goods and goodness,
by splendid bestowals, so that later in life
his chosen men stand by him in turn,
his retainers serve him when war comes.
By such generosity any man prospers.
Scyld then departed at the appointed time,
still very strong, into the keeping of the Lord.
His own dear comrades carried his body
to the sea's current, as he himself had ordered,
great Scylding lord, when he still gave commands;
the nation's dear leader had ruled a long time.
There at the harbor stood the ring-carved prow,
the noble's vessel, icy, sea-ready.
They laid down the king they had dearly loved,
their tall ring-giver, in the center of the ship,
the mighty by the mast.[5] Great treasure was there,

[1] The legendary king of the Danes who gave the "Scylding" dynasty its name, Scyld Scefing appears in various guises in a number of Anglo-Saxon and medieval Scandinavian texts. His originally mythological stature is suggested both by the associations of his name with crop fertility and by his mysterious arrival as an infant among the Danes (lines 6b-7a and 43-46).

[2] "whale-road," i.e. the sea. Riddling compound-words of this sort, known as "kennings," are a common stylistic feature of Old English and Old Norse poetry.

[3] "God": the first of many references to a deity in the poem; likewise in the following lines "Life-lord" (16) and "Ruler of glory" (17). All these terms may sound unambiguously Christian to a modern reader, especially when capitalized as in our translation (this capitalization has been inserted by the modern editor/translator; Anglo-Saxon scribes did *not* use capitalization to distinguish "God" (the Judeo-Christian God) from "a god." Before the Anglo-Saxons accepted Christianity, "god," Life-lord" and the rest could just as easily have been used of Odin or other figures in the Germanic pantheon. See further discussion of this point in the introduction (section III.2).

[4] "[Beow]": in the original Old English, the copyist of the manuscript here wrote "Beowulf," but most scholars today regard that as a mistake. In other sources, Scyld's descendant is named "Beow"; whatever his name, this character is not to be confused with the main hero of the present poem, Beowulf the Geat, who will not be introduced until line 194.

bright gold and silver, gems from far lands.
I have not heard of a ship so decked
with better war-dress, weapons of battle,
swords and mail-shirts; on his breast there lay
heaps of jewels that were to drift away,
brilliant, with him, far on the power of the flood.
No lesser gifts did they provide him
—the wealth of a nation— than those at his start
who set him adrift when only a child,
friendless and cold, alone on the waves.
High over his head his men also set
his standard, gold-flagged, then let the waves lap,
gave him to the sea with grieving hearts,
mourned deep in mind. Men cannot say,
wise men in hall nor warriors in the field,
not truly, who received that cargo.
I[6] Then in the strongholds [Beow] the Scylding
was king of all Denmark, beloved by his people,
famous a long time —his noble father
having passed away— had a son in his turn,
Healfdene the great, who, while he lived,
aged, war-fierce, ruled lordly Scyldings.
From Healfdene are numbered four children in all;
from the leader of armies they woke to the world,
Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga the good;
it is told that [Yrse was Onela's][7] queen,
bed-companion of the Battle-Scylfing.
Then Hrothgar was given victory in battle,
such honor in war that the men of his house
eagerly served him, while younger kinsmen
grew into strength. It came to his mind
that he would command a royal building,
a gabled mead-hall fashioned by craftsmen,
which the sons of men should hear of forever,
and there within he would share out
among young and old all God had given him,
except common land and the lives of men.[8]
Then, I have heard, the work was announced
to many peoples throughout middle-earth,
that they should adorn this nation's hall.
In due time, yet quickly it came to be finished,
greatest of hall-buildings. He, whose word
had power everywhere, said its name, "Heorot"[9]—
he broke no promises, but dealt out rings,
treasures at his table. The hall towered high,

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[5] The funeral of Scyld: The placing of Scyld's body in a ship heaped with treasures bears some resemblance to actual early-medieval "ship-burials" discovered by archeologists in most regions of the early Germanic world. The (usually cremated) remains of a chief were laid among his treasures and other possessions in ship, and the ship was buried beneath an earthen mound. The funeral of Scyld is therefore distinct, in that his body is not cremated and his ship is set adrift. These departures from actual Germanic burial custom add to the mythological aura about Scyld: his mysterious arrival by sea as an infant is matched by an equally mysterious departure at death.

[6] These Roman numerals I through XLIII (accidentally omitting number XXX) appear in the original manuscript, marking the poem into divisions known as "fitts." It is not known whether they were part of the original poet's composition or were added later by someone else.

[7] The name "Yrse" and first two letters of "Onela" are not legible in the manuscript, due to damage. Editors and translators supply them conjecturally on the basis of parallels in later Scandinavian sources. Here and elsewhere throughout the text, square brackets [ ] are usually an indication that the editor / translator has supplemented or altered something apparently defective in the original manuscript.

[8] I.e., Hrothgar, though a powerful king, respects the laws of his people: he cannot give away land that belongs to the whole community, nor can he arbitrarily "give the life of" (i.e. kill or enslave) any of his subjects.

[9] The Old English name of the hall, *Heorot*, means 'hart, male deer,' an animal associated with kingship.

cliff-like, horn-gabled, awaited the war-flames,
malicious burning; it was still not the time
for the sharp-edged hate of his sworn son-in-law
to rise against Hrothgar in murderous rage.[10]
Then the great monster in the outer darkness
suffered fierce pain, for each new day
he heard happy laughter loud in the hall,
the thrum of the harp, melodious chant,
clear song of the scop.[11] He spoke, who could tell
the beginning of men, knew our ancient origins,
told how the Almighty had made the earth,
this bright shining plain which the waters surround:
He, victory-creative, set out the brightness
of sun and moon as lamps for earth-dwellers,
adorned the green fields, the earth, with branches,
shoots, and green leaves; and life He created,
in each of the species which live and move.[12]
Thus the brave warriors lived in hall-joys,
blissfully prospering, until a certain one
began to do evil, an enemy from Hell.[13]
That murderous spirit was named Grendel,
huge moor-stalker who held the wasteland,
fens, and marshes; unblessed, unhappy,
he dwelt for a time in the lair of the monsters
after the Creator had outlawed, condemned them
as kinsmen of Cain —for that murder God
the Eternal took vengeance, when Cain killed Abel.
No joy that kin-slaughter: the Lord drove him out,
far from mankind, for that unclean killing.
From him sprang every misbegotten thing,
monsters and elves and the walking dead,
and also those giants who fought against God
time and again; He paid them back in full.[14]
II When night came on, Grendel came too,
to look round the hall and see how the Ring-Danes,
after their beer-feast, had ranged themselves there.
Inside he found the company of nobles
asleep after banquet— they knew no sorrow,
man's sad lot. The unholy spirit,
fierce and ravenous, soon found his war-fury,
savage and reckless, and snatched up thirty
of the sleeping thanes. From there he returned

[10] The first of the narrator's prophetic references to the ruin of the Danes. Here the threat is predicted as coming from Hrothgar's future son-in-law, Ingeld of the Heathobards. The planned marriage of Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, to Ingeld is alluded much later in the poem, when Beowulf himself forecasts that the union will end in bloodshed (lines 2020 ff.).

[11] "Scop" is the most common Old English word for 'poet'; the scop who entertains Hrothgar at Heorot will introduce important digressions later, at lines 872-894 (on Sigemund) and 1061-1156 (on "The Fight at Finnsburh").

[12] The creation story recited by the *scop* bears a much stronger resemblance to that in the biblical book of Genesis (1:1-19) than to pagan Nordic creation stories, such as those collected in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*.

[13] The name "hell" already existed in the Old Germanic languages as a designation for the Underworld or for the goddess Hel who reigned there. Thus this term, like the names for "God" used in the poem (see note to line 13, above), could simultaneously represent Christian and pre-Christian religious concepts.

[14] Grendel springs from the cursed, monstrous race fathered by the biblical fratricide, Cain (see Genesis 4:1-16). Cain's curse and exile are mentioned in the Bible, but the legend of his monstrous progeny is a later accretion to the biblical story; the "giants" mentioned in lines 113-114 are a reference to the "Nephilim" mentioned at Genesis 6:4, a race destroyed by the Great Flood. Note that all these explanations for the evil of Grendel are being offered by the *narrator* of the poem; neither Hrothgar nor any character within the action of the poem seems to be aware of the biblical accounts (see above, introduction, section III.2). The narrator will mention Grendel's descent from Cain again later, at lines 1258b-1265b.

to his home in the darkness, exulting in plunder,
took his slaughtered feast of men to his lair.
It was in the darkness, the cold before dawn,
that Grendel's war-strength was made plain to men.
Then a deep wail rose up after feasting,
a great cry at dawn. The famous leader,
so long their good king, sat silent in grief,
the strong man suffered his loss of thanes,
when they found the tracks of the monstrous enemy,
the devilish spirit. Too great was that outrage,
too hateful, long-lasting. And it was no longer
than the following night he returned to the hall,
slaughtered even more, and he grieved not at all
for his wicked deeds— was too deep in sin.
Then it was easy to find a few men
who [sought] rest elsewhere, at some slight distance,
slept in the outbuildings, once the full hate
of the mighty hall-server was truly told,
made clear as a beacon by signs too plain.
Whoever escaped kept farther away.
So Grendel held sway, strove against right,
one against many, till that greatest hall
stood useless, deserted. The time was long,
the space of twelve winters, that the Scylding king
endured in torment all possible cares,
the fullest agony. And so it was told
afar [to men,] and the sons of men,
through mournful lays, that Grendel had fought
long against Hrothgar, driven by hate,
had committed crimes for many seasons,
a relentless feud. He wanted no peace
with any of the men in the Danish host,
to put off his killing, settle it by payment;
none of the counselors had any great need
to look for bright gifts from his reddened hands.[15]
[Instead] the monster was lying in wait,
a dark death-shadow, ambushed and devoured
both young men and veterans; in perpetual night
held the misty moors; men cannot know
where whispering demons, such warlocks glide.
Many awful sins against mankind,
the solitary fiend often committed,
a fearsome shaming; made his lair in Heorot,
the jewel-decorated, in the black nights;
he could not come near the gift-throne, the treasure,
because of God— he knew not His love.
It was great torture for the lord of the Scyldings,
a breaking of spirit. The wise men would sit,
high-ranking, in council, considered all plans,
what might be done by the bravest men
against the onslaught. Little it helped them.
At times they prepared sacrifice in temples,

[15] Just as Grendel's miserable status as an "exile" or "dweller on the marches" (border-lands) reflects early Germanic ideals of communal life shared in a great hall, his hostility towards the Danes is represented here in terms of another Germanic institution, the blood-feud. Whereas ordinary feuds could be settled by monetary compensation (as an alternative to continued violence), however, Grendel, as a monster, cannot or will not make peace by such means.

war-idol offerings, said old words aloud,
that the great soul-slayer might bring some comfort
in their country's disaster. Such was their custom,
the hope of the heathen; they remembered Hell
in their deepest thoughts. They knew not the Lord,
the Judge of our deeds, were ignorant of God,
knew not how to worship our Protector above,
the King of Glory. Woe unto him
who in violent affliction has to thrust his soul
in the fire's embrace, expects no help,
no change in his fate! Well is it with him
who after his death-day is allowed to seek
the Father's welcome, ask His protection![16]

III So Healfdene's son brooded continually
over his sorrows; the wise man could not
ward off the trouble. The strife was too great,
hateful, long-lasting, that had come to the nation,
cruel spirit's envy, gigantic night-evil.
Far off in his homeland Hygelac's thane,[17]
good man of the Geats, heard about Grendel;
he was the strongest of all living men
at that time in this world,
noble and huge. He ordered made ready
a good wave-rider, announced he would seek
the warrior-king, famous ruler,
across the swan's riding, since he needed men.
Against that journey all sensible men
said not a word, though he was dear to them,
but encouraged such heart, observed the omens.
The mighty man had carefully chosen
from tribes of the Geats champions, battlers,
the best he could find, the acknowledged brave.
A group of fifteen he led to his ship;
the sea-skilled man marched down to the shore.
Time passed quickly. They made all secure.
Then the ship was floating beneath the cliffs.
Armored warriors climbed the prow;
the sea-currents eddied; they carried up weapons,
stored them amidships, all the bright ornaments,
stately battle-dress. Then the men shoved off,
on a willing journey in their well-braced ship.
Across open seas, blown by the wind,
the foamy-necked ship went like a bird,
till in good time, the second day out,
the curved prow-carving had gone so far
that the seafaring men sighted land,
silvery sea-cliffs, high rocky shores,
broad headlands. The deep sea was crossed,
their journey at an end. The troop of Storm-Geats
went over the side, climbed ashore,

[16] These lines (175-188) are the only passage in the poem where the narrator specifically condemns the paganism of the Danes as "sacrifice" in heathen "temples," as they seek aid from "the great soul-slayer" (by which the poet seems to mean the Christian figure of Satan or the devil). What is not clear, however, is whether these sacrifices are typical of the Danes' pre-Christian religion, or whether they are a desperate measure to which Grendel's attacks have driven them. So unusual is the overt harshness of the narrator's tone at this point that some scholars used to regard this passage as a later interpolation in the poem, though this extreme view is no longer popular today.

[17] I.e. Beowulf, though his actual name is not revealed until line 343.

made their ship fast. Their chain-mail clanked,
their bright battle-shirts. They gave thanks to God
the wave-road was smooth, had been easily crossed.
From high on a wall the Scylding watchman
whose duty it was to guard the sea-cliffs
saw glinting shield-bosses passed hand to hand
down the gangplank, an army's war-gear.
His mind was afire to know who they were.
He rode his horse straight down to the shore,
retainer of Hrothgar, brandished his spear,
shook the strong wood, mighty in his hand,
spoke out stiffly: "Who are you armored men,
protected by mail, who thus come sailing
your high ship on the sliding wave-roads,
overseas to this shore? [Long have I] held
the sea-watch in season, as the king's coast-guard,
that none of our enemies might come into Denmark,
do us harm with an army, their fleet of ships.
Never more openly have warriors landed
when carrying shields, and you have no leave
from our men of battle, agreement with kinsmen.
Never have I seen a mightier noble,
a larger man, than that one among you,
a warrior in armor. That's no mere retainer
so honored in weapons— may that noble bearing
never belie him! I must know your lineage,
now, right away, before you go further,
spies scouting out the land of the Danes.
Now, you far strangers from across the sea,
ocean-travelers, hear my simple thought:
haste is needed, and the sooner the better,
it is best to be quick and say whence you come."
IIII That noblest man then gave him an answer,
the leader of the band unlocked his word-hoard:
"We are of the race of the Geatish nation,
sworn hearth-companions of Hygelac their king.
My own father was well known abroad,
a noble battle-leader, Ecgtheow by name.
He saw many winters before he passed on,
old, from our courtyards; every wise counselor
throughout the world remembers him well.
We come with good heart to the land of the Danes,
to seek out your lord, the son of Healfdene,
shield of the people: be good in your words.
We have a great mission to the famous king,
leader of the Danes, and I too agree
nothing should be secret. You are aware
—if it is indeed as we have heard told—
that among the Scyldings some sort of enemy,
mysterious ravager, in pitch-black night,
brings terrible malice, an unknown hatred,
shame and great slaughter. From a generous mind
I can offer Hrothgar good plan and counsel,
how, old and good, he may conquer his enemy,
if reversal of fortune is ever to come to him,
any exchange for baleful affliction,
cooling of care-surges hot in his heart;

or else ever afterwards through years of grief
he must endure terrible suffering,
so long as that hall rises high in its place."
The coast-guard spoke, sitting on his horse,
fearless official: "A keen-witted shield-bearer
who thinks things out carefully must know the distinction
between words and deeds, keep the difference clear.
I hear you say that this is a troop
loyal to the Scylding. Now then, go forth,
take your armor and weapons. I shall be leading you.
I also shall order my young comrades
to guard your ship, new-tarred on our sand,
against any enemies, to hold it in honor
till once again, over sliding seas,
the coil-necked wood bears friendly men
to the Geatish shores— all of the valiant,
good men of the Weders, to whom it is given
to survive, unharmed, that rush of battle."
And so they set off. Their ship swung calmly,
rode on its ropes, the wide-beamed ship
fast at anchor. Boar-figures[18] gleamed
over plated cheek-guards, inlaid with gold;
shining, fire-hardened, fierce war-masks
guarded their lives. The warriors hastened,
marched in formation, until they could see
the gold-laced hall, the high timbers,
most splendid building among earth-dwellers
under the heavens —the king lived there—
its gold-hammered roofs shone over the land.
The battle-worthy guide showed them the glittering,
brilliant hall of spirited men,
that they might go straight, then wheeled his horse
back through the troop, spoke out a word:
"It is time I returned; the Father all-powerful
in His mercy keep you safe
through all your ventures. I am off to the sea
to keep the watch for enemy marauders."
V The road was stone-paved, a straight path guided
the men in their ranks. Bright their war-mail,
hardened, hand-linked; glistening iron rings
sang in their battle-shirts as they came marching
straight to that hall, fearful in war-gear.
The sea-weary men set their broad shields,
spell-hardened rims, against the high wall,
eased down on benches, their chain-mail clinking,
fit dress for warriors. Their spears were stacked,
the seafarers' weapons, bristling upright,
straight ash, gray points. That iron-fast troop
was honored in weapons. Then a haughty noble
asked the picked men about their descent:
"From where have you carried those gold-trimmed shields,
iron-gray corselets, and grim mask-helmets,
this host of battle-shafts? I am Hrothgar's
herald and chamberlain, but never have I seen

[18] The image of the boar, a totemic animal in many early cultures, adorns some surviving helmets from the Anglo-Saxon period.

so many foreigners bolder in spirit.
I expect in pride —scarcely in exile!—
out of high courage you have come to Hrothgar."
Then he was answered by the valiant warrior;
the Geatish leader spoke in his turn,
strong in his helmet: "We are Hygelac's
companions in hall. Beowulf is my name.
I wish to make known my business here
to the son of Healfdene, famous king,
lord of your lives, if it please him to grant
that we may approach his generous self."
Wulfgar made answer —a prince of the Vendels—
the truth of his character was known to many,
his courage and wisdom: "I shall ask the friend
of all tribes of Danes, lord of the Scyldings,
great ring-giver, most noble ruler,
about your arrival, as you have requested,
and soon will announce, will return you the answer
our king sees fit to give unto me."
Then he walked quickly to where Hrothgar sat,
old, gray-bearded, surrounded by nobles;
strode up the hall till he stood face to face
with the Danish king; he knew the noble custom.
Wulfgar addressed his friend and lord:
"A troop of Geats has arrived here,
traveling far across the broad sea.
Battle-veterans, these soldiers call
their leader Beowulf. They make the request,
my Scylding lord, that they might exchange
their words with yours. Choose among answers
but give no refusal, Hrothgar my friend:
in battle-dress, weapons, they appear worthy
of nobles' esteem, and tall, truly strong,
the chief who has led such soldiers here."
VI Then Hrothgar spoke, protector of Scyldings:
"Why, I knew him when he was only a boy;
his father, now dead, was named Ecgtheow:
Hrethel of the Geats gave him a wife,
his only daughter.[19] And so his brave son
has now come here, seeks a loyal friend!
In fact, the merchants who used to carry
gifts of coins, our thanks to the Geats,
said he had war-fame, the strength of thirty
in his mighty hand-grip. Holy God
in the fullness of mercy has sent him to us,
to the Danish people, if I'm not mistaken,
against Grendel's terror. I must offer this man
excellent treasures for his daring courage.
Now be in haste, call these men in,
let them meet our nobles, gathered kinsmen;
say to them also they are more than welcome
to the Danish nation." [Then Wulfgar went

[19] The first mention of Beowulf's family background: we will eventually be told (lines 456-471) that Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, was forced into exile as a young man, and that Hrothgar took him in and paid off Ecgtheow's enemies in the feud. Beowulf's mother was a daughter of the Geatish king, Hrethel. In the present time of the poem's action, Hrethel's son Hygelac, Beowulf's maternal uncle, has become king of the Geats.

to the door of the hall,] spoke from the doorway:
"I am ordered to tell you our glorious ruler,
king of the East-Danes, knows your lineage,
and that you good men, strong battle-hearts
from beyond the sea, are welcome to him.
Now you may enter, in your battle-armor,
wearing war-masks, to see Hrothgar;
let shields stay here, tightened war-wood,
your battle-shafts wait the result of words."
The noble one rose, and his men with him,
a powerful band; some of them stayed
to guard the weapons, as their leader ordered.
As a troop they marched under Heorot's roof,
their chief at the front. Brave in his helmet,
[he advanced] till he stood before the king.
Then Beowulf spoke, in his gleaming mail,
the ring-net sewn by a master smith:
"Hall, Hrothgar, health ever keep you!
I am Hygelac's thane and kinsman;
mighty the deeds I have done in my youth.
News of Grendel reached me in Geatland;
travelers say that this great building,
brightest hall, stands empty, useless
to all the warriors when evening light
fades from the sky, brightness of heaven.
My people advised me, wise men among us,
our best counselors, that I should seek you,
chieftain Hrothgar, king of the Danes,
since they had known my tested strength;
they saw themselves how I came from combat
bloodied by enemies where I crushed down five,
killed a tribe of giants, and on the waves at night
slew water-beasts; no easy task,
but I drove out trouble from Geatland—
they asked for it, the enemies I killed.
Now, against Grendel, alone, I shall settle
this matter, pay back this giant demon.
I ask you now, protector of Scyldings,
king of the Bright-Danes, a single favor—
that you not refuse me, having come this far,
guardian of warriors, friend of the nations,
that I be allowed to cleanse great Heorot,
alone, with my men, my noble warriors.
I have heard it said this evil monster
in his wild recklessness scorns all weapons.
I therefore decline, that Hygelac my lord
may be pleased to the heart, to take any sword
or broad-braced shield, yellow war-wood,
into this combat, but with my own hand-grip
I will meet this enemy and fight for life,
foe against foe. Whoever death takes
will have to trust in the judgment of God.
I expect he will wish, if he gains control,
to feed unafraid on Geatish men too,
to eat in the war-hall, as he often has done,
the might of the Hreth-men. No need then
to cover my face; he, with his mouth,

will cover enough, if death takes me;
will carry my body to a bloody feast,
hardly in mourning, will dine alone,
splash his lair red; no need for you
to worry any longer about my burial!
But send back to Hygelac, if battle takes me,
this excellent war-shirt shielding my breast,
my finest cloak; it is Hrethel's heirloom,
Weland made it. Fate will go as it must."[20]
VII Then Hrothgar replied, the Scyldings' protector:
"For [our past deeds,] and out of kindness,
you have now sought us, Beowulf my friend.
Your father struck up a mighty feud,
slayer of Heatholaf among the Wylfings,
by his own hand. Then the treaty-folk
could not harbor him for fear of war,
and so he traveled to the land of South-Danes,
over rolling waves to Honor-Scyldings.
That was when first I ruled the Danes
and held, in youth, a gem-rich kingdom,
bright fort of heroes. Heorogar had died,
the son of Healfdene, my older brother
no longer alive; he was better than I!
Later I settled the feud by payment;
I sent to those Wylfings, over the water's ridge,
fine old treasures; your father swore me oaths.
It gives me great pain to have to reveal
to any man what fearful attacks,
shame, and disaster Grendel has brought me
in his persecution. The ranks in my hall,
my men, are less; fate swept them off
in Grendel's terror. Yet God may easily
stop the mad deeds of the foolhardy ravager!
Often indeed my warrior thanes
boasted over ale-horns, bold in their mead,
that they would meet Grendel's attack
in the banquet hall with a rush of swords.
But at dawn this mead-hall was bright in blood,
all the bench-planks a running slick,
the ball red with gore. I had fewer men,
loyal comrades, after such deaths.
Now sit at the feast, unbind your thoughts
to men, great warrior, as your heart desires."
Then a bench was cleared, room made in the hall
for the gathered Weders standing in a troop;
the courageous men took their seats,
proud in their strength; a thane did his office,
carried in his hands the gold ale-flagons,
poured bright mead. At times the scop sang,
bright-voiced in Heorot; there was joy of warriors,
no small gathering of Geats and Danes.

[20] The preceding lines (433-454) demonstrate the stereotypical hero's *boast* before battle: by publicly pledging to carry out a certain task, the hero cannot turn back without utterly losing face; see also lines 633 ff., 676 ff., and frequently throughout the poem.

"Weland" in line 454 is Weland the Smith (German *Wieland*, Old Norse *Völundr*), a popular figure in Germanic legends, most famous for his ability to forge the very best weapons.

VIII Unferth,[21] Ecglaf's son, rose up to speak,
who sat at the feet of the lord of the Scyldings;
he unbound a battle-rune— the journey of Beowulf,
the brave seafarer, caused him chagrin,
for he would not grant that any other man
under the heavens might ever care more
for famous deeds than he himself:
"Are you the same Beowulf who challenged Breca
to a swimming match on the open sea?
There out of pride you both tested sea-ways,
through foolish boasting risked lives on the deep.
None could dissuade you, friend nor foe,
keep either of you from that hapless trip,
when you two went swimming out of the bay,
your arms embracing the crests, sea-currents,
flung out your hands to measure the sea-roads,
the ocean of wind. The steep seas boiled
in winter's pourings. You both toiled seven nights,
driven by the waves, and in that swimming
he overcame you, had greater strength.
The sea cast him up on the Heatho-Ræms' shore;
from there at daybreak he sought his homeland,
beloved by his people, came back to the Brondings,
fair peace-fort where he had subjects,
stronghold, and treasures. The good son of Beanstan
had truly fulfilled his whole boast against you.
And so at your hand I expect worse results,
although you have been always successful
in fierce battle-rushes, if you really dare
wait here for Grendel the whole night long."
Beowulf replied, the son of Ecgtheow:
"What a great deal, Unferth my friend,
full of beer, you have said about Breca,
told of his deeds. But to tell the true story,
I had more sea-strength, power in swimming,
and also more hardship, than any other man.
To each other we said, as boys will boast,
—we both were still young— that we two alone
would swim out to sea, to the open ocean,
dare risk our lives, and we did as we said.
We held naked swords hard in our hands
as we swam on the sea; thought to protect us
from whales' tusks. He could not glide,
swim farther from me, away on the surge,
the heaving waves, no swifter in water,
nor would I leave him. Five nights we swam,
together on the ocean, till it drove us apart
in its churning, sliding; that coldest weather
turned against us, dark night and water,
the north wind war-sharp. Rough were the waves,
and angry sea-beasts had been stirred up.
Then my body-armor, hard-linked, hand-joined,

[21] The Unferth episode: Given the extravagant courtesies surrounding Beowulf's reception at Heorot, here the challenge by Unferth (lines 504-526) seems to many readers unsettlingly abrupt. The episode nevertheless allows Beowulf publicly to vindicate his own reputation and to show up Unferth as a coward with a shameful past (see lines 581-591). Later in the poem, the two will be reconciled (lines 1452-1465), though Unferth still comes off as the lesser warrior. Recent scholarship has further attempted to explain the abruptness of Unferth's challenge to Beowulf in terms of another stock convention of early heroic poetry, namely the formal exchange of insults known as a *flyting*.

did me some service against their attack;
my chain-metal war-shirt, worked with gold,
covered my chest. A fierce sea-monster
dragged me down deep, held me on the bottom
in his cruel grip. However, it was granted
that my point reached him; I stabbed as I could
with my sharp sword, with battle-thrust killed
the huge sea-beast by my own hand.
VIIII "Again and again the angry monsters
made fierce attacks. I served them well
with my noble blade, as was only fitting.
Small pleasure they had in such a sword-feast,
dark things in the sea that meant to eat me,
sit round their banquet on the deep sea-floor.
Instead, in the morning, they lay on the beach,
asleep from my sword, the tide-marks bloodied
from their deep gashes, and never again
did they trouble the passage of seafaring men
across the ocean. Light came from the east,
God's bright beacon, and the seas calmed,
till I saw at last the sea-cliffs, headlands,
the windy shore. So fate often saves
an undoomed man when his courage holds.
However it was, I had chanced to kill
some nine sea-beasts. I never have heard
of a harder night-fight under heaven's vault,
or a man more oppressed on the ocean streams.
Yet I survived those clutches and lived,
weary in my venture. The sea bore me,
ocean's current, lifting walls of water,
to the land of the Lapps. I never have heard
such struggle, sword-terror, told about you.
Never in the din and play of battle
did Breca or you show such courage
with shining blades —not to boast about it—
though you were a man-slayer, killed your brothers,
closest kinsmen, for which you must suffer
damnation in hell, clever though you are.
I'll tell you a truth, son of Ecglaf:
never would Grendel have done so much harm,
the awesome monster, against your own leader,
shameful in Heorot, if heart and intention,
your great battle-spirit, were sharp as your words.
But he has discovered he need not dread
too great a feud, fierce rush of swords,
not from your people, the 'Victory-Scyldings.'
He exacts his tribute, has mercy for none
of the Danes he finds, but hugs his feast-joys,
kills and devours, expects no attack
from any Spear-Danes. But I will soon show him,
this very night, the courage and strength
of the Geats in combat. Whoever pleases
may walk brave to mead once a new day,
tomorrow's dawn, the sun clothed in light
shines from the south on the sons of men."
Then the treasure-giver was greatly pleased,
gray-bearded, battle-famed, chief of the Bright-Danes;

the nation's shepherd counted on Beowulf,
on the warrior's help, when he heard such resolve.
There was laughter and noise, a pleasing din,
the glad words of men. Wealhtheow came forward,
Hrothgar's queen, mindful of courtesies;
attired in her gold, she welcomed the men.
The noble lady gave the first cup,
filled to the brim, to the king of the Danes,
bade him rejoice in this mead-serving,
beloved by his people; he took it happily,
victory-famed king, the hall-cup and feast.
The lady of the Helmings[22] walked through the hall,
offered the jeweled cup to veterans and youths,
until the time came that the courteous queen,
splendid in rings, excellent in virtues,
came to Beowulf, brought him the mead.
She greeted him well, gave thanks to God,
wise in her words, that her wish came to pass,
that she might expect help against crimes
from any man. He accepted the cup,
battle-fierce warrior, from Wealhtheow's hand,
then made a speech, eager for combat—
Beowulf spoke, Ecgtheow's son:
"I made up my mind, when I set out to sea,
boarded our ship with my band of men,
that I would entirely fulfill the desire
of the Danish nation or else fall slaughtered,
in the grip of the foe. Tonight I will do
a heroic deed or else I will serve
my last day of life here in this mead-hall."
These words well pleased the royal lady,
the boast of the Geat. The gracious queen,
her cloak gold-laden, then sat by her lord.
Again as before many words were spoken,
great noise in the hall, the company rejoicing,
a victorious folk, until, before long,
the son of Healfdene wished to retire,
take his night's rest. He knew an attack
upon his high hall had been planned by the monster
ever since dawn, when first light was seen,
until darkening night should cover them all
and dark shapes of shadow come gliding out,
black under clouds. The troop all arose.
Then the old king addressed the young warrior,
Hrothgar to Beowulf, wished him good luck,
control of the wine-hall, and spoke these words:
"Never before, since I could lift shield-arm,
have I entrusted the hall of the Danes
to any other man, except to you now.
Now hold and guard this royal house,
remember fame and show brave strength,
watch for your foe! A work of such courage
will have full reward if you come through alive."
X Then Hrothgar went with his band of men,

[22] I.e. Queen Wealhtheow, whose offering of mead to Beowulf and his men reflects her importance to Hrothgar's court and its formal rituals.

the Scylding king, out from the hall;
the great man wanted to find Wealhtheow,
his bed-companion. The King of Glory
had now set a hall-guard brave against Grendel,
so men had learned; he did special service
for the lord of the Danes, kept giant-watch.
And the Geatish man trusted completely
in his proud strength and the favor of God.
He unlaced his chain-shirt, iron body-warden,
undid his helmet, gave his gold-wrapped sword,
finest iron, his gear to a steward,
bade him look well to that equipment.
Then the good warrior, Beowulf the Geat,
made his boast known before he lay down:
"No poorer I hold my strength in a fight,
my work in battle, than Grendel does his;
and so I will not kill him by sword,
shear off his life, though I easily might.
He does not know the warrior's arts,
how to parry and hew, cut down a shield,
strong though he be in his hateful work;
so swords are laid by if he dare seek battle,
tonight no weapons, and then mighty God,
the Lord wise and holy, will give war-glory
to whichever side He thinks the right."
Then he lay down, the pillow took the cheek
of the battle-brave noble, and round him many
valiant sea-fighters sank to hall-rest.
None of them thought he would ever return
from that long hall-floor to his native land,
the people and home-fort where he'd been raised,
for each one knew dark murder had taken
too many men of the Danes already,
killed in the wine-hall. But the Lord had granted
the men of the Weders comfort and help,
a weaving of war-luck, that they overcame
their enemy entirely, by one man's strength,
by his own powers. It is a known truth
that mighty God has ruled mankind
throughout far time. Now in the night
the dark walker came gliding in shadow;
the bowmen slept who were to hold
the gabled hall —all but one.
It was known to men that the demon could not
drag them into shadows when God did not wish it.
And Beowulf, wakeful, on watch for the foe,
angrily awaited the outcome of battle.

XI Then up from the marsh, under misty cliffs,
Grendel came walking; he bore God's wrath.
The evil thief planned to trap some human,
one of man's kind, in the towering hall.
Under dark skies he came till he saw
the shining wine-hall, house of gold-giving,
a joy to men, plated high with gold.
It was not the first time he had visited Hrothgar;
never in his life, before or after,
did he find harder luck or retainers in hall.

The evil warrior, deprived of joys,
came up to the building; the door burst open,
though bound with iron, as soon as he touched it,
huge in his blood-lust; enraged, he ripped open
the mouth of the hall; quickly rushed in—
the monster stepped on the bright-paved floor,
crazed with evil anger; from his strange eyes
an ugly light shone out like fire.
There in the hall he saw many men—
the band of kinsmen all sleeping together,
a troop of young warriors. Then his heart laughed;
evil monster, he thought he would take
the life from each body, eat them all
before day came; the gluttonous thought
of a full-bellied feast was hot upon him.
No longer his fate to feed on mankind,
after that night. The mighty man,
kinsman of Hygelac, watched how the killer
would want to move in sudden attack.
Nor did the monster think long to delay:
he lunged the next moment, seized a warrior,
gutted him sleeping —ripped him apart—
bit into muscles, swilled blood from veins,
tore off gobbets, in hardly a moment
had eaten him up, all of the dead man,
even hands and feet. He stepped further in,[23]
and caught in his claws the strong-minded man
where he lay on his bed— the evil assailant
snatched at him, clutching; hand met claw,
he sat straight at once, thrust the arm back.
The shepherd of sins then instantly knew
he had never encountered, in any region
of this middle-earth, in any other man,
a stronger hand-grip; at heart he feared
for his wretched life, but he could not move.
He wanted escape, to flee to the fen,
join the devils' rout. Such greeting in hall
he had never met before in his life.
Then the brave man remembered, kinsman of Hygelac,
his speeches that evening, rose to his feet
and held him close; fingers snapped;
the giant pulled away, the noble moved with him.
The ill-famed creature thought to go elsewhere,
anywhere possible, away from the hall,
into deep marshes, felt his fingers
in a terrible grip. An unhappy journey
the evil harmer had made to Heorot.
The king's hall thundered: to all the Danes,
the city's inhabitants, to every brave listener
it was a wild mead-sharing. The grapplers were furious—
angry hall-guards. The building clattered;
it was a great wonder the mead-hall withstood
those two battle-ragers, did not crash to earth,

[23] The choreography of the ensuing fight between Beowulf and Grendel has been much analyzed, but the scene remains hard to picture—almost impressionistic—as the poet describes it. The main idea seems to be that Beowulf, with his bare hands, seizes and twists Grendel's arm in a kind of wrestler's hold.

tall-standing house. But inside and out
good smiths had turned strong iron bands,
made the walls fast. Many mead-benches
inlaid with gold, came up from the floor,
so I have heard, where the fighters crashed.
Before this the wise men, Scylding counselors,
had not expected that any warrior
could ever destroy it, splendid, horn-bright,
by ordinary means, pull it down by craft,
unless licking fire should swallow it in flames.
A sound went out, loud and high,
raised horrible fear in Danish hearts,
in each of the men on the palisade wall
who heard the cry— God's enemy
screaming his hate-song, a victory-less tune,
the hellish captive moaning his pain.
He held him tight, the strongest man
who ever lived in the days of this life.
XII The protector of nobles had no desire
to let the killer-guest walk away free,
nor thought his life could do the least service
to any nation. Beowulf's warriors
all drew their swords, time-tested heirlooms,
wanted to defend the life of their comrade,
their famous chief, however they could.
But they did not know, as they entered the fight,
hard-minded men, battle-warriors,
meaning to swing from every side,
to cut out his soul, that keen battle-edges,
best iron in the world, sharpest blade,
could not harm him, the evil demon,
not touch him at all— he had bespelled
all weapons of battle. His leave-taking,
his life's parting from the days of this world
was to be painful; the alien spirit
was to journey far in the power of fiends.
Then he discovered, who earlier brought
trouble of heart to the race of men
by his many crimes —at feud with God—
that his body-casing would not keep life:
that Hygelac's kinsman, the bold-hearted man,
had him in hand. It was hateful to each
that the other lived. The terrible creature
took a body wound there; a gaping tear
opened in his shoulder; tendons popped,
muscle slipped the bone. Glory in battle
was given to Beowulf; Grendel fled,
wounded, death-sick, under marshy hills
to his joyless den; with that huge wound
he knew for certain his life had ended,
the sum of his days. The desire of all Danes
had come to pass in that deadly fight.
Thus he had cleansed, who came from afar,
wise, great-hearted, Hrothgar's hall,
defended it well. He rejoiced in his courage,
in his great night-work. The Geatish man
had kept his boast to the men of the East-Danes,

also had bettered every distress,
the evil sorrow they long had suffered
in hardest need —had had to endure
no small grief. It was a clear sign
once the brave man fastened the arm,
from hand to shoulder —there all together
was Grendel's claw— under the high roof.
XIII Then, so I've heard, there were many warriors
round the gift-hall that fine morning;
chieftains came from near and far,
long distances, to look at the marvel,
the monster's tracks. His parting from life
was no cause for grief to any of the men
who examined the trail of the conquered one,
saw how, despairing, he had rushed away,
ruined in the fight, to the lake of monsters,
fleeing, doomed, in bloody footprints.
There the lake water boiled with blood,
terrible surgings, a murky swirl
of hot dark ooze, deep sword-blood;
death-fated, he hid joyless in the fen,
his dark stronghold, till he gave up life,
his heathen soul; there Hell received him.
Then home again the tried retainers,
the young men too, gay as a hunt,
came from the mere, joyful on horseback,
well-mounted warriors. Beowulf's deed
was praised aloud; many kept saying
that north or south, between the two seas,
across the whole earth, no other man
under heaven's vault, of all shield-holders,
could ever be better, more worthy of kingdoms.
Nor did they find fault with their lord and friend,
gracious Hrothgar, that excellent king.
At times the warriors made their horses rear,
let fine dark steeds go racing in contest
wherever the footing was straight and firm,
the paths well known. At times the scop,
a thane of the king, glorying in words,
the great old stories, who remembered them all,
one after another, song upon song,
found new words, bound them up truly,
began to recite Beowulf's praise,
a well-made lay of his glorious deed,
skillfully varied his matter and style.
He sang all he knew of famous Sigemund,[24]

[24] The scop's performances in Heorot involve two of the most notable digressions in the earlier section of the poem (whether or not they are truly "digressions" is a matter of debate; see the introduction, section III.3). The first digression, beginning here (lines 872 to 894), deals with the career of Sigemund, a hero known from continental Germanic legends as Siegmund (in German) or Sigmundr (in Old Norse). His family, called the *Wælsings* in Old English (line 874), is better-known today by its Scandinavian-derived name, the *Volsungs*. Most details about Sigemund's career alluded to here can be fleshed out from the fuller narrative in the thirteenth-century Old Norse *Saga of the Volsungs*: there, Sigmundr's sister Signy is married off to a chieftan, Siggeirr. Siggeirr invites all his Volsung in-laws to a banquet but then treacherously imprisons Sigmundr and his brothers. The brothers are killed one by one until only Sigmundr is left. With his sister's help, he escapes, and together they plot revenge against her husband. Signy uses a spell to seduce her brother Sigmundr so as to become pregnant with a child to help him carry out revenge. The pure-blooded Volsung born of this incestuous union is the "Fitela" mentioned by the *Beowulf*-poet at lines 876 and 886 and called Sigemund's nephew at line 878 (the poet does not explicitly refer to Fitela's also being Sigemund's son). Sigmundr and his growing nephew/son (called *Sinfjötli* in Old Norse sources) live as outlaws, endowed for a time with the ability to shape-shift into wolves. They finally complete their vengeance against Siggeirr and his children by Signy. Signy herself,

his feats of courage, many strange things,
the Wælsing's strife, far-off journeys,
feuds and crimes unknown to men,
except to Fitela, always beside him
when he wished to talk, to speak of such things,
uncle to nephew; they had always been
battle-companions in all their hardships;
together they killed a whole tribe of giants
with their two swords. No small glory
shone for Sigemumd after his death-day:
hardened by wars, he killed a dragon,
treasure's keeper. Beneath gray stones
that prince's son dared go alone,
reckless in courage, nor was Fitela there;
still it was granted that the sword drove through
the slithering beast shining in scales,
stood fixed in the wall; the dragon died
in that terrible thrust. The fearsome warrior
had bravely gone in to gain the ring-hoard,
take gold at will. The son of Wels
loaded his boat, carried bright treasures,
piled them amidships. The dragon melted in its heat.
He was the most famous hero-adventurer,
a battle-leader known to all nations
for deeds of bravery —gained much by courage—
after the warfare of Heremod[25] had ended,
his strength and valor; among the giants
he was well betrayed into enemy hands,
met a quick end. His black moods
had lasted too long; he brought to his people
a lifetime's sorrow, and death to his nobles.
In earlier times many wise men
had often mourned over the fortunes
of that strong-willed man; had counted on him
for relief from afflictions, trusting the son
of the king would prosper, take his father's title,
protect the nation, treasure and stronghold,
kingdom of heroes, the homeland of Scyldings.
The dearer by far was Beowulf now,
a friend to all. Heremod sank in sin.
Now and then racing, they paced their horses
on the sandy road. By then it was morning,
long after daybreak. Many retainers,
stout-hearted, walked to the lord's high hall
to see the strange marvel. The king himself

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having engineered the deaths of her husband and children by him, kills herself by walking back into Siggeirr's hall, which Sigmundr has set on fire. In the Scandinavian source-materials, it is not Sigmundr but rather his son, the even more famous hero Sigurd, who later kills a dragon and claims the famour "Nibelung" hoard. Lines 882-94, however, indicate that the *Beowulf*-poet seems to have known a version of the Volsung-legends in which Sigemund, not his son, was the dragon-slayer.

If it is not merely a digression, the story of Sigemund may have been inserted by the *Beowulf*-poet as a foreshadowing of the hero's final combat against the dragaon—a fight that will have a far different outcome than Sigemund's. This theory presupposes, of course, that the poet's audience would have been already familiar with the circumstances of Beowulf's death, an assumption that cannot be proven. A further relevance of the Sigemund episode would perhaps be to sound a more general note of gloom amidst the Danes' celebrations: the story of Signy is just one more reminder of the dangers of "peace-weaver" marriages and of the high costs of vengeance as a code of honor.

[25] Here the poet introduces a second legendary figure for contrast with Beowulf. The figure of Heremod, however, is more obscure than Sigemund, so scholars have had to resort to more guesswork here. The basic facts, gleaned from the present lines and a later, more detailed allusion by Hrothgar (lines 1706-1719) seem to be that Heremod began his career as a strong, virtuous hero, but later, as a ruler of the Danes (in a dynasty prior to the Scyldings'), he turned stingy and capricious.

came stately and gracious from the queen's chambers,
guard of the ring-treasure famed in nobility,
with his troop of earls, his queen beside him
in company of women, the mead-path procession.
XIIII Hrothgar spoke, went up to the hall
to stand on the porch, gazed at the roof,
steep plated gold, and Grendel's hand:
"For this fine sight, swift thanks to God!
Many rough visits, terrible attacks,
I suffered from Grendel, but God can always
do wonder on wonder, eternal in power.
It was not long ago that I did not hope
to see any change in all my afflictions
for the rest of my life, when shiny with blood
this best of houses stood deep in gore,
a grief reaching far into all our hearts,
for none of my men saw how to keep
this work of nations from monstrous terrors,
phantom devils. But now a retainer
has brought about through the might of the Lord
what we never could, for all our plans.
Who bore such a son into man's world,
that woman can say, if living still,
that Eternal God was gracious to her
at her birth-giving. Now, my Beowulf,
best of men, I will love you like a son,
cherish you for life. Keep this new kinship
deep in your heart. Nothing I own,
of my worldly goods, would I keep from you.
Often for less I have given treasures,
honorable gifts to lesser warriors,
poorer at battle. But now, by yourself,
you have done such a deed that your [fame] is assured,
will live forever. May Almighty God
reward you with good, as he has today!"
Then Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"With willing hearts we have achieved
this work of courage, risked all against
that unknown strength. Yet I wished the more
that you might have seen the enemy himself,
in his scaly harness, dead in the feast-hall.
I planned to bind him in hard clinches,
tie him on his death-bed as soon as we met,
that life might be difficult once he lay
fast in my hand-grip, unless he could vanish.
I could not keep him —God did not will it—
from an early departure; not firmly enough
did I welcome my enemy. Too overpowering
was his rude going. However, he left us
a visitor's token, a hand, life-protector,
the whole arm and shoulder. The miserable creature
got little comfort from that dear gift,
will live no longer, ferocious spoiler,
loathsome in crimes; but gaping pain,
a torturing wound-grip, has strapped him tight,
death's open harness, and dead, he must wait,

dripping with guilt, the last great days,
however bright God will choose to judge him."
Unferth, Ecglaf's son, was then more silent,
had no more taunts about valor in combat
once all the nobles had looked at that hand,
the gigantic fingers, high on the roof
through the young earl's strength. Each socketed nail
stood out from the front, glistened like steel,
a terrible hand-spike, heathen's armament,
a giant war-claw. All men agreed
that no hard iron, though forged as of old,
could have cut into, weakened the monster's
great battle-talon, now bloodily severed.
XV Then the order was given to furnish again
the inside of Heorot; each hand was willing,
men and women adorning the guest-house,
that great wine-hall. Tapestries gleamed,
gold weavings on walls, marvelous pictures
shifting in lights to each who looked at them.
That shining building had been badly damaged
despite iron strapping inside and out,
its hinges sprung open; the bright roof alone
came through unharmed when the fiendish outlaw,
red-stained in crimes, turned back in flight,
despairing of life. No man escapes
easily from death —let him try who will—
but all soul-bearers walking the earth,
each son of man, driven by need,
must enter his place made ready from birth,
where the body-covering deep in its earth-bed
sleeps after feast. Then came the feast-time
when the son of Healfdene went to his hall;
the king himself would share the great meal.
I never have heard of a greater gathering
who bore themselves better, grouped round their gold-lord.
Men known for courage sat down in hall,
rejoiced in the feast-meal; their famous kinsmen
in courtesy shared many flagons of mead
under that roof, the mighty-minded ones,
Hrothgar and Hrothulf. The inside of Heorot
was filled with good friends; at that time none
of the princely Scyldings betrayed each other.[26]
Then Healfdene's sword-son gave to Beowulf
a golden war-standard, ensign of victory
with plated ornament, helmet and mail-shirt,
a jewel-crusted long-sword, and many saw these
laid before the man. Beowulf drank
the mead of that hall; there was no shame
in those sumptuous gifts before the assembly.
I have not heard of many great men
who gave to another, in more open friendship
upon the mead-bench, four such treasures,
each worked with gold. The helmet's comb
was an iron tube, wound with silver wires,

[26] As earlier (lines 81-85), the narrator dampens the mood of celebration and harmony in Heorot by referring to future strife—this time between Hrothgar and his nephew, Hrothulf. See also below, lines 1158b-1161a.

that kept firm head-guard, so that file-sharp swords,
battle-hardened, might not harm him
when carrying shield against the foe.
The protector of warriors then bade his men
lead in eight horses with gold-plated trappings
to the floor of the hall; the first had a saddle
cunningly wrought, studded with gems.
It had been Hrothgar's, the king's war-seat,
when Healfdene's son joined in the sword-play;
valiant at the front, his warfare was never
less than famous when the dead were falling.
Entirely to Beowulf the lord of the Ingwines
gave the ownership of horses and weapons,
bade use them well. Manfully, generously,
that famous king, hoard-guard of heroes,
repaid the battle-rush with those fine gifts,
such horse and treasure that no man will fault them
who has the least care to tell the truth.
XVI Then, still more, to those on the mead-bench
who made the sea-journey, Beowulf's followers,
the lord of warriors gave each a treasure,
true old heirlooms, and ordered that gold
be paid for the man that Grendel killed
before in his sin —he would have killed more
had not wise God and Beowulf's courage
changed that fate. The Lord then ruled
all the race of men, as He still does now.
Therefore understanding is always best,
the spirit's forethought. Much love, much hate
must he endure who thinks to live long
here in this world, in our days of strife.
There was tumult and song, melodious noise,
in front of Healfdene's battle-commander;
the harp was plucked, good verses chanted
when Hrothgar's scop in his place on the mead-bench
came to tell over the famous hall-sport
[about] Finn's sons[27] when the attack came on them:
Hnæf of the Scyldings, hero of the Half-Danes,

[27] "Finn's sons" etc.: The *scop*'s second poem-within-the-poem, the long episode that follows here (lines 1061-1156) is known as "The Fight at Finnsburh" or "The Finnsburh Episode." The wider circulation of this story in Anglo-Saxon England is confirmed by the survival of an independent, now-fragmentary, Old English poem on the same topic. From that telling and this highly allusive one in *Beowulf*, the outlines of the complicated plot can be recovered: a Scylding prince, Hnæf, son of Hoc, leads a company of Half-Danes (a tribal offshoot of the Danes) to visit King Finn of Frisia (the Frisians are referred to as "giants" at lines 1068 and 1084). Finn has married Hnæf's sister, Hildeburh, perhaps as part of a feud settlement. The Half-Danes arrive at Finn's fortress (*burh* in Old English, hence the name *Finnsburh* in the title of the episode), but, for reasons the poet does not explain, Hnæf and his men are attacked that night by their host's men. In the fighting that ensues, Hnæf is killed (we infer) and another man, Hengest, steps up as leader of the Danes. They succeed in killing so many of the Frisians that neither side can hope for final victory. Therefore Finn (= "Folcwalda's son," line 1085) strikes a truce: he will take Hengest and the remaining Danes into his retinue, guaranteeing their protection and offering gifts in exchange for loyalty (lines 1081b-1102). As winter has set in and the Danes have no hope of sailing home on the frozen seas (lines 1123b-1130), Hengest accepts these shameful terms. The bodies of the dead, including Hnæf and his nephew, an unnuamed son of Hildeburh and Finn, are cremated (lines 1104b-1120a). With the return of spring, Hengest is able to sail back to Denmark at last; despite having sworn loyalty to Finn under the terms of truce, he still broods on his obligation to exact vengeance ("the world-wide custom" mentioned at line 1138) for his fallen lord, Hnæf. Events that follow in the story become sketchy at this point: the son of Hunlaf (presumably a Half-Dane who fell at Finnsburh) goads Hengest to vengeance by placing the sword in his lap (lines 1138-1140). We know from a different source that he other heroes mentioned in this section, Guthlaf and Oslaf (line 1144), stood with Hengest in repelling the Frisians during the earlier assault, but it is not clear what the poet is referring to when he says they "spoke of their grief / after the sea journey" etc. (lines 1144b-1145a). In any event, Hengest and the Half-Danes return to Frisia and kill Finn—formerly their temporary lord—and carry the doubly-bereft Hildeburh back to Denmark (1147b-1154a).

The relevance of this episode to events in *Beowulf* has been much debated. Obviously the story concerns vengeance and blood-feuds as well as the conflict of loyalties that these create in the character of Hengest (is he a hero or a traitor?) and, especially, in the tragic figure of

had had to fall in Frisian slaughter.
No need at all that Hildeburh praise
the faith of the "giants"; guiltless herself,
she lost her loved ones in that clash of shields,
her son and brother —they were born to fall,
slain by spear-thrusts. She knew deep grief.
Not without cause did Hoc's daughter mourn
the web's short measure that fated morning
when she saw their bodies, her murdered kinsmen,
under the skies where she had known
her greatest joy. The battle destroyed
all of Finn's thanes, except a small remnant,
so he could not press the fight with Hengest
to any end in that meeting-place,
dislodge by force the battle's survivors,
the prince's thane. So they offered terms:
they would give them space on a fresh bench-floor,
a hall with high throne of which they should have
half the control with the sons of giants,
and Folcwalda's son should honor the Danes
on every day ring-giving occurred,
should deal out his gifts to Hengest's men
exactly as often, as free with his gold,
rich plated treasure, as when he encouraged
the men of the Frisians in his drinking-hall.
Then, on both sides, they made their pledge
to this binding truce. Earnestly Finn
took oath before Hengest to hold in such honor,
by his counselors' judgment, those sad survivors
that no man should ever, by word or deed,
break off the truce, nor plotting in malice
give them any affront, though now they followed
the lord who had killed their own ring-giver—
without a leader, out of necessity;
that if any Frisian, in provocation,
should call to mind the murderous feud,
the edge of the sword should settle it for good.
The oath was performed, old native gold
piled from Finn's hoard. The chief of the War-Scyldings,
best of warriors, was laid on the pyre.
It was easy to see the blood-crusted chain-shirts,
gilded boar-helmets, the sheen of gold
and gore all mingled, great nobles dead
in their fated wounds. No few had fallen.
Then Hildeburh ordered her own dead son
placed on the pyre beside his uncle Hnæf,
their bone-cases burned, given full fire-burial.
Beside them both the noblewoman wept,
mourned with songs. The warrior rose up;
the mighty death-fire spiraled to heaven,
thundered before the mound. Their heads melted,
their gashes spread open, the blood shot out
of the body's feud-bites. Fire swallowed up,

Hildeburh, who loses brother, husband, and son all to the code of vengeance. As with Signy, the legendary sister / wife of Sigemund (see note to line 872, above), Hildeburh's situation may underscore the impossibly conflicting demands typically born by women in "peace-weaver" marriages such as Hrothgar plans for his daughter. Or the poet may also intend this episode of vengeance deferred to foreshadow the coming reprisal of Grendel's mother against the unsuspecting Danes in Heorot.

greediest spirit, ate all of both tribes
whom war had taken. Their glory was gone.
XVII Then Finn's warriors, without those comrades,
"took themselves home, back into Frisia,
sought their high fort. But Hengest remained
through the death-stained winter, living with Finn,
stayed without choice; he thought of his homeland
but he could not steer his ring-prowed ship
on the cold sea; the deep heaved in storms,
dark under wind; the waves froze
in chains of shore-ice till the next year came,
green to the towns, as it still does today;
glory-bright weathers keeping their season,
forever in order. Winter was gone,
the lush fields fair. The exile departed,
the guest, from the court; he thought more of vengeance,
total and utter, than departure by sea,
how to drive the matter to a full grief-meeting,
that the Frisians be deeply remembered by sword.
So he did not disdain the world-wide custom
when Hunlaf's son laid the sword in his lap,
good battle-flame, finest of blades;
its cutting edges were well known to the Frisians.
And thus in his turn to war-minded Finn
came fierce sword-evil, in his own home,
once Guthlaf and Oslaf spoke of their grief
after the sea-journey, the fierce attack
and their sorry stay. The restless spirit
would not stay in the breast. The hall was decorated
with the lives of the foe, a tapestry of blood,
Finn slain too, the king with his troop,
and the queen taken. The Scylding warriors
bore to their ship every good heirloom
they found in the house of the great king Finn,
gold seals, gem-brooches. Over the sea
they carried the queen back to the Danes,
brought her to her people. This lay was sung through,
the story of the scop. The glad noise resumed,
bright-clanking bench-music; wine-bearers poured
from fluted silver. Wealhtheow came forth,
glistening in gold, to greet the good pair,
uncle and nephew; their peace was still firm,
each true to the other. Likewise Unferth,
spokesman at court, sat at Hrothgar's feet;
all knew his courage, that he had great spirit,
though he kept his kinsmen in nothing like honor
when edges met. Then Weaththeow spoke:[28]
"Accept this cup, my noble lord,
gold-giving king; be filled in your joys,

[28] Wealhtheow's following speech (1166a-1184b) adds much to our earlier glimpse of her (see note to line 617, above). Here she shows herself to be more than a performer of courtly rituals; rather, she is politically astute. First (at lines 1172-1177a) she tactfully encourages the king to qualify his enthusiastic earlier promise to treat Beowulf like a son (compare lines 942b)—a promise that has perhaps made Wealhtheow anxious to reassert her own underaged sons' right to inherit the throne. She then refers to the presence of Hrothgar's nephew, Hrothulf, who, in the event of Hrothgar's death, ought to protect them until the young princes Hrethric and Hrothmund are old enough to succeed their father (lines 1177b-1184). Wealhtheow's words here may be another case of the poet's dramatic irony, given the future treachery predicted of Hrothulf (see note to line 1015, above). But in a speech that will soon follow (below, lines 1212-1228), Wealhtheow commends her sons' safety to Beowulf as well (and he takes the request seriously; see later, lines 1833-1836). It is possible, then, to read in her careful speech an awareness of the threat posed by Hrothulf; if so, she is more politically astute than Hrothgar himself.

treasure-friend to all, and give to the Geats
your kind words, as is proper for men;
in your generous mind, be gracious to the Weders,
remembering the gifts you have from all tribes.
I have been told you would have this warrior
for your son. Heorot is cleansed,
bright hall of rings; use while you may
your gifts from so many, and leave to your kinsmen
the nation and folk when you must go forth
to await your judgment. Full well I know
of my gracious Hrothulf that he would rule
the young men in honor, would keep all well,
if you should give up this world before him.
I expect he will want to repay our sons
only with good once he recalls
all we have done when he was younger
to honor his desires and his name in the world."
She turned to the bench where her sons were sitting,
Hrethric, Hrothmund, and all the young men,
the sons of nobles. There sat Beowulf,
the Geatish hero, between the two brothers.
XVIII A flagon was brought him, and friendship passed
aloud in words, and wire-wrought gold
given with a will: two rich arm-bands,
a mail-shirt, and rings, and the largest gold collar
ever heard of on earth, so it is told.
No better treasures, gold gifts to heroes,
were known under heaven since Hama bore off
to the shining city the Brosings' necklace,
gem-figured filigree. He gained the hatred
of Eormanric the Goth; chose eternal reward.[29]
This collar-ring traveled on Hygelac's breast
on his final voyage, nephew of Swerting,
when under the standard he defended his treasure,
spoils of the kill; fate took him off[30]
that time he sought trouble, stirred up a feud,
a fight with the Frisians, in his pride and daring.
He wore those gold wires, rarest gem-stones,
across the cup of waves, a mighty prince.
He fell beneath his shield. Into Frankish hands
came his life, body-gold, and the great ringed collar;
lesser warriors rifled the corpses
after the battle-harvest. Dead Geats
filled the field. Now cheers for Beowulf rose.
Then Wealhtheow spoke before all the company:
"Enjoy this neck-ring, the treasure of a people,
my dear young Beowulf, and have good luck
in the use of these war-shirts— have all success.
Make known your strength, yet be to these boys
gentle in counsel. I will not forget you for that.
You have brought it about that far and near
none but admire you, and always will,

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[29] Hama and the fourth-century Ostrogothic king, Eormanric, are known to us from other sources, but none of these tell of the famous necklace being alluded to here. A different Scandinavian story involves a "necklace of the Brísings," a mythical treasure fashioned by dwarves for the goddess Freyja but stolen by the god of mischief, Loki. The necklace will be mentioned again at lines 2168-2172.

[30] "fate took him off" etc.: The poet looks ahead to the final third of the poem, when the death of Beowulf's uncle, Hygelac, will be recounted in fuller detail (see lines 2910-2917).

a sea-broad fame, walled only by wind.
While you may live, be happy, O prince!
It is right that I grant you these jeweled treasures.
Be to my sons gracious in deeds,
winner of hall-joys, in your great strength.
Each noble here is true to the other,
every kind heart death-loyal to lord.
The thanes are united, a nation prepared;
our men, having drunk, will do as I ask."
Then she went to her seat. It was a great feast,
they drank rare wine. Little they knew
of their long-prepared fate, as it came again fiercely
to many a noble, once evening had come
and mighty Hrothgar retired to his chambers,
the king to his rest. A great many men
occupied the hall, as often before,
cleared away bench-planks, laid out their bedding.
One of those beer-drinkers, who was soon to die,
lay down to hall-rest ripe in his fate.
At their heads were placed their round battle-shields,
bright linden-wood. Above each noble
you could see his war-helmet gleaming on the bench,
its high crown, and his iron ring-coat,
strong-thrusting shaft. This was their custom,
to be ready for battle at any time,
at home or out harrying, whichever occasion
might turn to a time when their sworn lord
had need of their strength. They were a good troop.
XVIIII Then they sank into sleep. One paid sorely
for that night's rest, as happened so often
when Grendel had held the great golden hall,
did sickening crimes, till the end came
and he died for his sins. Men came to know
—it was soon plain enough— his avenger still lived
after that battle, for a long time,
in hate, war-sorrow. Grendel's mother,
a monster woman, kept war-grief
deep in her mind, dwelt in terrible waters,
icy cold streams, since Cain raised the sword
against closest kinsman, put blade to his brother;
dripping with that fate, bright-stained outlawry,
gore-marked by murder, he fled man's joys,
lived in wastelands. Out of that deep
and abysm of time came monsters, spirits.
Grendel was one, angry battle-demon,
who found at Heorot a wakeful watchman.[31]
The monster had seized him there in his hall-bed,
but there he remembered his greatness of strength,
jewel of a gift that God had given him,
trusted in the mercy of the Lord all-powerful,
his comfort and aid; by these he vanquished
his enemy hall-guest, shamed the hell-spirit.
Wretched, he fled, joyless to death-bed,
the foe of mankind. And now his mother,

[31] On Grendel's descent from Cain, see note to line 114, above.

still greedy for slaughter, wanted to visit,
make a grievous journey, avenge her son's death.[32]
She came then to Heorot where Ring-Danes slept
throughout the hall. And then to the nobles
came reversal of fortune, once Grendel's mother
reached into the hall. Terror was the less
by just so much as the strength of women,
attack of battle-wives, compared to armed men,
when wrought sword, forged under hammer,
the iridescent blade, blood-wet, cuts
through enemy's boar-guard, an edge ever firm.
Then in the great hall hard blades were drawn,
swords above benches, many broad shields
raised high in hand; none thought of helmet,
of iron garments, when the fierce attack came.
In a rush she came in, and left quite as soon,
to save her life, once they discovered her.
But that one noble she quickly snatched up,
tight in her clutches, as she left for the fen.
To Hrothgar that man was the dearest warrior
he had among liege-men between the two seas,
a mighty shield-fighter whom she tore from his bed,
a man rich in fame. Beowulf was not there—
the honored Geat was earlier assigned
another building after the gold-giving.
Shouts came from Heorot; she had seized in its gore
the famous claw-arm; then grief was renewed,
came again to that building. No good exchange,
that those on both sides had to pay with the lives
of kinsmen and friends. The gray-bearded king,
once a great warrior, was darkened in mind
when he learned of the death— his chief thane,
his nearest man, no longer alive.
Quickly Beowulf, victory-blessed man,
was called to the building. In the dark before dawn
the noble champion came with his men,
renowned among heroes, to where the old king
sat wondering if ever the Almighty would grant him
a change in fortune after this news.
The tall battle-hero marched through the hall
with his hand-picked troop —the floorboards thundered—
till he stood by the king, spoke face to face
to the lord of the Ingwines, asked if he'd passed
an agreeable night as he had intended.
XX Hrothgar made answer, the Scyldings' protector:
"Ask not of joy: sorrow has returned
to the Danish people. Æschere is dead,
the elder brother of Yrmenlaf,
my chief adviser, my rune-counselor—
he stood by my shoulder at shield-wall, the forefront,
when we guarded our heads as the armies clashed,
boar struck boar. So a man should be,
good from the start, as Æschere was.
Here within Heorot a restless corpse-spirit

[32] Repeatedly the attack of Grendel's mother is described as if following human conventions of blood-vengeance and feud for the sake of personal justice; see also lines 1301b-1303a and 1330b-1340a, and 2113b-2118a, below.

became his killer. I do not know
where she went with his body, flesh-proud, terrible,
infamous in slaughter. She avenged that feud
in which, last night, you killed Grendel
with fierce grips, in your violent strength,
because too long he had destroyed
my Danish people. In battle he fell,
life-forfeit in guilt; now another has come,
mighty in her evil, would avenge her son,
and too long a way has she pushed her revenge,
as it may seem to many of these thanes
who grieve, mind-deep, for their treasure-giver,
a cruel heart-killing. Now the hand is vanished
that served your joys in all right ways.
"I have heard land-holders among my people,
counselors in hall, speak of it thus:
they sometimes have seen two such things,
huge, vague borderers, walking the moors,
spirits from elsewhere; so far as any man
might clearly see, one of them walked
in the likeness of a woman; the other, misshapen,
stalked marshy wastes in the tracks of an exile,
except that he was larger than any other man.
In earlier days the people of the region
named him Grendel. They know of no father
from the old time, before them, among dark spirits.
A secret land they guard, high wolf-country,
windy cliffs, a dangerous way
twisting through fens, where a mountain torrent
plunges down crags under darkness of hills,
the flood under the earth. Not far from here,
measured in miles, lies that fearful lake
overhung with roots that sag and clutch,
frost-bound trees at the water's edge.
Each night there is seen a baleful wonder,
strange water-fires. No man alive,
though old and wise, knows that mere-bottom.
The strong heath-runner, chased far by hounds,
the full-horned stag, may seek a safe cover,
pursued to despair— still he will sooner
die on the bank than save his head
and plunge in the mere. Not a pleasant place!
Tearing waves start up from that spot,
black against the sky, while the gloomy wind
stirs awful storms till the air turns choking,
the heavens weep.[33] Now again, you alone
are our only help. You still do not know

[33] Scholars have long realized that the long description (lines 1354-1373a) of the lake or "mere" beneath which Grendel and his mother have their magic dwelling shares many details with one famous medieval description of the mouth of hell. Here is the description as incorporated into a tenth-century Old English sermon known today as "Blickling homily XVI," based in turn on a popular medieval Latin text known as the *Vision of St. Paul*: "In this way, Saint Paul was gazing upon the northern region of the world, at the spot where all waters plunge down. There above the water he saw a kind of grey stone. North of that stone, frost-covered groves of trees had sprouted up, and there was pitch-darkness. Beneath that stone was the habitation of sea-monsters and criminals. And Paul saw hanging from iron trees atop that cliff many black souls, bound by their hands. And their adversaries, in the form of sea-monsters, were snapping at them just as a hungry wolf does. And down below the cliff the water was black, and between the top of the stone and the water's surface was a distance of about twelve miles. And when the branches on those trees snapped, the souls who were hanging there would plummet down and the sea-monsters would seize them" [translation by C.A.J.].

the awful place where you might find
the sin-filled creature; seek it if you dare!
I will reward your feud with payments,
most valued treasures, as I did before,
old twisted gold, if you live to return."
XXI Then Beowulf answered, the son of Ecgtheow:
"Grieve not, wise king! Better it is
for every man to avenge his friend
than mourn overmuch. Each of us must come
to the end of his life: let him who may
win fame before death. That is the best
memorial for a man after he is gone.
Arise, guard of kingdoms, let us go quickly,
and track down the path of Grendel's kinsman!
I promise you this: he will find no escape
in the depths of the earth, nor the wooded mountain,
nor the bottom of the sea, let him go where he will.
Be patient this day amid all your woes,
as I have good cause to expect you to be."
The old king leaped up, gave thanks to God,
to the mighty Lord, for Beowulf's words.
Then Hrothgar's horse with braided mane
was bridled and saddled; the wise prince rode
in state, magnificent; his troop went on foot,
shields at the ready. The creature's tracks
were plainly visible through the wood-paths,
her trail on the ground; she had gone straight
toward the dark lands with the corpse of the best
thane and kinsman, now unsouled,
of all those who held the nation with Hrothgar.
Then the troop of nobles climbed up high
into stony hills, the steep rock-lands,
through narrow files, an unknown way,
dangerous cliffs over water-snakes' caves.
With a few wise counselors the king rode ahead
to search out the way, till suddenly he came
upon stunted firs, gnarled mountain pines
leaning over stones, cold and gray,
a joyless wood. The water beneath
was stirred with blood. To every Dane
it was a wound mind-deep, cold grief for each
of the Scylding nobles, many thanes' sorrow,
when they discovered Æschere's head
sitting on the cliff beside that water.
The mere welled up —the men looked on—
in hot heart's blood. Time and again
the sharp war-horn sang. The men on foot
all sat down. They saw strange serpents,
dragonish shapes, swimming through the water.
Water-beasts, too, lay curled on the cliff-shelves,
that often slither off at dark daybreak
to attend men's sorrow upon the sail-roads,
sea-beasts and serpents. Away they rushed madly,
thrashing in anger, when they heard the bright sound,
song of the war-horn. A Geatish bowman
cut short the life of one of those swimmers,
the huge serpent dying as the sharp war-shaft

stood deep in its body; swam the more slowly
in flight through the water when death overtook him.
He was quickly assailed in the water with boar-pikes,
hard hooked blades, given mighty jabs,
dragged up the cliff, an awesome thing,
monster from the deep. The warriors gazed
at the spawn of the waves. Then Beowulf showed
no care for his life, put on his armor.
His broad mail-shirt was to explore the mere,
closely hand-linked, woven by craft;
it knew how to keep his bone-house whole,
that the crush of battle not reach his heart,
nor the hateful thrusts of enemies, his life.
His shining helmet protected his head;
soon it would plunge through heaving waters,
stir up the bottom, its magnificent head-band
inset with jewels, as in times long past
a master smith worked it with his wondrous skill,
set round its boar-plates, that ever afterwards
no sword or war-ax could ever bite through it.
Not the least aid to his strength was the sword
with a long wooden hilt which Hrothgar's spokesman
now lent him in need, Hrunting by name.
It was the best of inherited treasures,
its edge was iron, gleaming with venom-twigs,
hardened in war-blood; never in the fray
had it failed any man who knew how to hold it,
dared undertake the unwelcome journey
to the enemy's homestead. It was not the first time
it had to perform a work of great courage.
The son of Ecglaf,[34] clever and strong,
could hardly have thought of his earlier words,
spoken while drinking, as he gave that weapon
to the better swordsman. He did not himself
dare risk his life under clashing waves,
test his courage; he lost fame for that,
his name for valor. It was not so with Beowulf,
once he was dressed, prepared for battle.
XXII Beowulf spoke bravely, Ecgtheow's son:
"Famed son of Healfdene, wisest of princes,
remember all well, now that I am ready,
gold-friend of warriors, what we spoke of before,
that if I lose my life while at work in your cause,
you will still be to me as a father always.
Be shield and protector of my young men here,
close battle-comrades, if this fight claims me;
and also the treasures which you have given me,
beloved Hrothgar, send back to Hygelac,
lord of the Geats. He will understand
when he sees such gold, the son of Hrethel
will know full well that I had found
a ring-giving lord of all manly virtues,
rejoiced in his good while I was able.
And be sure that Unferth, that well-known man,
has my family treasure, wonderful wave-sword,

[34] I.e., Unferfth; see note to line 497a, above.

hardened, sharp-edged. With Hrunting I will find
a deserving fame or death will take me!"
After these words the man of the Weders
turned away boldly, would not wait
for answer, farewell. The surging waters
received the warrior. After that plunge,
it was most of the day before he found bottom.
Soon enough she who war-thirsty held
the kingdom of waters for a hundred winters,
fierce and kill-greedy, saw that some human
came to explore the water-devils' home.
Then she snatched him up, seized the good warrior
in her horrible claws; but none the sooner
broke into his body; he was ringed all around,
safe from puncture; her claws could not pierce
his close-linked rings, rip the locked leather.
Then the angry sea-wolf swam to the bottom,
carried to her den the lord of those rings,
clutched him so hard he might not draw sword,
—no matter how brave— and terrible water-beasts
attacked as they plunged, strange sea-creatures
with sword-like tusks thrust at his armor,
monsters tore at him. The noble prince
then saw he was [in] some sort of hall,
inhospitable, where no water reached;
a vaulted roof kept the rushing flood
from coming down; he saw firelight,
a flickering blaze, bright glaring flames.
Then he saw the witch of the sea-floor,
towering mere-wife. He put his whole force
behind his sword-edge, did not withhold
the two-handed swing; the sharp ring-patterns
sang hungrily, whined round her head.
But then he discovered his battle-flame would not
bite through to kill; the edge failed its man
at need, though before in many hand-fights
it often had carved through strong helmets,
mail-coats of the doomed. That was the first time
a word could be said against the great treasure.
Still he was resolute, not slow in courage,
remembered his fame, the kinsman of Hygelac.
The angry champion threw away the sword,
bejeweled, ring-patterned; it lay on the ground,
strong, bright-edged. His own strength he trusted,
the strength of his hand-grip. So must a man,
if he thinks at battle to gain any name,
a long-living fame, care nothing for life.
Then he seized her shoulder —welcomed that feud—
the man of the War-Geats against Grendel's mother,
combat-hardened, now that he was battle-furious,
threw his opponent so she fell to the ground.
Up again quickly, she gave him hand-payment
with a terrible crush, again grabbed him tight.
Then that strongest man of champions afoot
stumbled wearily so he fell to the ground.
She sat on her hall-guest and drew her broad knife,
a sharp weapon, to buy back her son,

her only kinsman. Across his chest
lay the iron net; it saved his life
as she hacked and stabbed, would give her no entry.
The warrior Geat might have perished then,
Ecgtheow's son, somewhere under the earth,
had not his war-shirt given good help,
hard ring-netting, and holy God
controlled the fight, the mighty Lord,
Ruler of skies, decided it rightly,
easily, once he stood up again.
XXIII Then he saw among the armor a victory-bright blade
made by the giants, an uncracking edge,
an honor for its bearer, the best of weapons,
but longer and heavier than any other man
could ever have carried in the play of war-strokes,
ornamented, burnished, from Weland's smithy.[35]
The bold Scylding drew it from its magic scabbard,
savage in battle-lust, despairing of life,
angrily raised the shearer of life-threads,
swung hard on her throat, broke through the spine,
halved the doomed body; she toppled to the ground:
the sword was blood-wet, the man rejoiced.
Then the cave-light shone out, a gleam from within,
even as from heaven comes the shining light
of God's candle. He looked through the chamber,
moved along the wall, raised his weapon,
single-minded, Hygelac's thane,
still in a fury. Nor was that blade idle,
useless to the warrior, but quickly he meant
to repay in full each bloody snatching
Grendel had made, visiting the West-Danes,
much more often than just the one time
when fifteen men of the Danish nation,
Hrothgar's beloved hearth-companions,
he had killed in their beds, ate them sleeping,
and another fifteen bore off to his lair,
a hateful gift. A full reward
for such sinful crimes the fierce champion
paid him back, for there he saw
Grendel lying battle-weary,
armless, lifeless from the hurt he'd received
in the fight at Heorot. The corpse sprang open
as he cut deep into it after death,
a firm-handed battle-stroke, and chopped off his head.
Soon the wise men above who gazed with Hrothgar
at the turbulent water saw blood drifting up,
a churning foam; the spreading stain
was dark, lake-wide. The gray-bearded elders
spoke quietly together about the brave Geat;
they did not think to see him return,
said he would not come to seek the king again
with another victory; it seemed to many
that the wolfish woman had ripped him to pieces.
Then the ninth hour came. The valiant Scyldings
gave up the cliff-watch; the gold-friend departed,

[35] On Weland, see note to line 454, above.

went home with his men. The Geatish visitors
still sat, heartsick, stared at the mere.
They wished, without hope, they could see their lord,
their great friend himself. Below, that sword
had begun to melt in battle-bloody icicles;
that it melted away was as much a marvel
as ice itself when the Father unwinds
the bonds of frost, loosens the freezing
chains of water, Who keeps the power
of times and seasons; He is the true God.
The man of the Weders took nothing more
from the dark gift-hall, despite heaped treasure,
except that head and the hilt, jewel-bright.
Already the sword had melted away,
its blade had burned up; too hot the blood
of the poisonous spirit who had died within.
And soon he was swimming who at battle withstood
the mortal attacks of two evil creatures,
rose through the waters; the currents were cleared,
the broad expanse, now the alien spirit
had finished her days and this fleeting life.
And thus the man came, protector of sailors,
strong swimmer, to land; rejoiced in the weight
of the great water-booty he carried with him.
They clustered around him, his thanes in their armor,
gave thanks to God for return of their prince,
that they saw him alive, happy and whole.
From the mighty man they took shirt and helmet,
quickly unstrapped him. The waters subsided,
the lake beneath clouds still stained with blood.
Then they left that place by the narrow path.
They marched glad-hearted, followed the trail,
reached familiar ground; brave as kings,
they carried that head away from the cliff
—it was hard going for both pairs of men,
stout-hearted warriors— four men it took
to raise on a war-spear Grendel's head,
laboriously guide it back to the gold-hall.
In marching formation they came to the hall-door,
the fourteen Geat-men, brave, battle-ready,
and the lord of those men marched right among them;
proud with retainers he came across fields.
That prince of thanes then entered the hall,
brave in his deed, honored in fame,
a man battle-tested, he greeted Hrothgar.
Then Grendel's head was dragged by its hair
across the floor to the benches where warriors drank,
to the nobles and queen, terrible before them.
All the men stared at the awesome sight.
XXIIII Ecgtheow's son then addressed the king:
"Behold, son of Healfdene, Scylding leader,
this gift from the sea we have brought you gladly,
a token of victory, which you look on here.
Not very easily did I save my life
in battle under water; performed this work
with greatest trouble; at once the fight
was decided against me, except that God saved me.

In that battle I could not use Hrunting
though that weapon is still good,
but the Ruler of men granted the favor
that I see on the wall a bright sword hanging,
gigantic heirloom —most often He guides
the friendless, distressed— so that I found
the right weapon to draw. When my chance came
I cut down the monsters, those hall-guards, with edges;
the wave-sword burned up, quenched in that blood,
a hot battle-pouring. From my enemies
I plundered this hilt, revenged their crimes,
the many Danes killed, as was only fitting.
Now I can promise you safe nights in Heorot
without further sorrow, with the men of your troop,
and each dear retainer picked from your people,
the youths and the veterans; you will have no need,
O lord of the Scyldings, for fear in that matter,
dark man-killing, as you did before."
Then the strange gold hilt was placed in the hand
of the gray-bearded king, wise war-leader,
old work of giants; after the fall of devils
it came to the hands of the lord of the Dane-men,
from magic smithies; once the fierce spirit,
long God's opponent, guilty creature,
and his murderous mother had quitted this world,
it came to the power of the best overlord
between the two seas, of all world-rulers
in Scandinavia who gave good treasures.
Hrothgar spoke, examined the hilt,
great treasure of old. There was engraved
the origin of past strife, when the flood drowned,
the pouring ocean killed the race of giants.
Terribly they suffered, were a people strange
to eternal God; their final payment
the Ruler sent them by the rushing waters.[36]
On its bright gold facings there were also runes
set down in order, engraved, inlaid,
which told for whom the sword was first worked,
its hair-keen edges, twisted gold
scrolled in the hilt, the woven snake-blade.
Then all were quiet. Wise Hrothgar spoke:
"Now can he say, who acts in truth
and right for his people, remembers our past,
old guard of homeland: this prince was born
the better man! Your glorious name
is raised on high over every nation,
Beowulf my friend, your fame spreads far.
Steadily you govern your strength with wisdom.
I will keep a friend's vows, as we said before.
You shall become a help to your people,
a long-lasting hero. Not so was Heremod[37]

[36] The carving on the hilt refers to the destruction of a race of giants in the Great Flood of Genesis 6:4 (see note to line 114, above). It is not clear from the original Old English wording whether the sword-hilt is engraved with pictures or merely words about the flood. Note, too, that once again the details from biblical history are included from the Christian narrator's point of view; there is no direct indication that Hrothgar recognizes the scene, although some critics have argued that his ensuing "sermon" (1697-1781) against the dangers of pride bespeaks an intuitive awareness of the moral lesson that medieval commentators read into the giants' destruction by the flood.

[37] See note to line 898, above.

to the sons of Ecgwela, the Honor-Scyldings;
grew not to their joy, but killed Danish men
in his own hall, bloodily. Swollen in heart,
he cut down companions, raging at table,
till exiled, alone, a famous prince,
was sent from man's joys, notoriously bad,
though God had given him the joys of great strength,
had set him, mighty, above all men.
Despite good fortune his thought grew savage,
his heart blood-thirsty; never a ring
did he give, for glory, to the Danish men.
Joyless he lived and unhappy he died,
suffering long for that harm to his people.
From this may you learn a man's true virtues!
For your sake I tell it, wise in my years.
It is always a wonder how God the Almighty
in His full understanding deals out to men
their wisdom of mind, their lands, nobility.
He rules everything. Sometimes He lets
a high-born heart travel far in delight,
gives a man holdings, joy of his birthright,
stronghold of nobles, puts in his control
great tracts of land, such wide kingdoms
that lacking true wisdom he cannot imagine
his rule at an end. Happily he lives
from feast to feast. No thought of harm
from illness, age, or malicious tongues
darkens his mind, nor does conflict anywhere
sharpen its blade, but the whole world
[XXV] turns to his pleasure. He knows no worse
until, within him, his portion of arrogance
begins to increase, when his guardian sleeps,
the soul's shepherd. Too sound is that sleep,
bound up in cares; the killer very near
who shoots his bow with treacherous aim.
Then he is hit in the heart, struck under helmet
with the bitter arrow,[38] the dark commands
of the wicked demon, and he knows no defense.
Too brief it seems, that long time he ruled.
Angry and covetous, he gives no rings
to honor his men. His future state
is forgotten, forsworn, and so is God's favor,
his portion of honor from Heaven's hall-ruler.
Then it finally happens, the body decays,
his life-house fails him, only a loan;
death-doomed, he falls. Another succeeds him,
reckless, unmourning, gives out his gifts,
the noble's old treasures; heeds not, nor fears.
Guard against that awful curse,
beloved Beowulf, finest noble,
and choose the better, eternal gains.
Turn not to pride, O brave champion!
Your fame lives now, in one strong time.

[38] The basic idea of Hrothgar's warning against hubris predates Christianity, though the particular metaphor of demonic "arrows" of temptation is certainly a medieval Christian commonplace, influenced by imagery from the biblical book of Psalms (e.g., 11:2 or 91:5-6).

Soon in their turn sickness or war
will break your strength, or the grip of fire,
overwhelming wave, or sword's swing,
a thrown spear, or hateful old age;
the lights will darken that were your eyes.
Death overcomes you all at once, warrior.
"Thus, fifty winters, I ruled the Ring-Danes
under these skies and by my war-strength
kept them safe from spear and sword
throughout middle-earth— such rule that no one
under the heavens was my adversary.
And look, even so, in my homestead, reversal:
—if joy, then sorrow— once Grendel became
my nightly invader, our ancient enemy.
I bore great heart-care, suffered continually
from his persecution. Thanks be to God,
the Eternal Lord, I came through alive,
and today may look at this huge bloody bead
with my own eyes, after long strife!
Go now to your seat, enjoy the feast,
honored by your battle. Many are the treasures
to be divided when morning returns."
Blithe in his heart, the Geat moved at once
to take his seat as the wise king bade.
Then again as before, for the courage-famed,
holders of the hall, a second feast came,
with as many delights. The protecting dark
came down on the hall-thanes. All the men rose.
The gray-haired king was ready for bed,
the aged Scylding. Immeasurably tired,
ready for sleep, was the great Geat warrior.
At once a hall-thane led him forth,
weary from his venture; with every courtesy
tended the needs of the noble foreigner,
provided such comforts as battle-voyagers
used to have in those days.
Then the great-hearted man slept undisturbed.
The hall towered high, golden in darkness.
The guest slept within till the black raven,
the blithe-hearted, announced the dawn,
heaven's joy. Then sunrise came
and the warriors prepared to return to their people;
the brave visitor would set his sail
for their far land, hoped soon to see it.
Then the valiant Geat asked Ecglaf's son
to carry Hrunting, keep the great sword,
cherished iron; thanked him for the loan,
said he thought it a good war-friend,
strong in battle, did not blame its edges.
Beowulf was noble, generous in spirit.
And then the travelers were ready to leave,
equipped in their harness; their Dane-honored prince
marched to the high seat where the other leader
was sitting in state; the hero saluted him.
XXVI Beowulf spoke, Ecgtheow's son:
"Now we voyagers, coming from afar,
would like to say that we wish to seek

our Hygelac again. We have been entertained
most properly, kindly, brought every good thing
we could possibly ask. You have dealt well with us.
If ever I can do anything on earth
to gain your love more, lord of warriors,
than my fighting thus far, I will do it at once.
If I ever hear, across the far seas,
that neighboring peoples threaten you with battle,
as enemies have moved against you before,
I will bring to your side a thousand thanes,
warriors to help you. I know this of Hygelac,
lord of the Geat-men, young though he is,
our nation's shepherd, that he would support me
in word and deed, that I might continue
to show you honor, by help of spear-wood
aid you with strength when you need men.
If, on the other hand, Hrethric decides,
a king's son, to come to our court,
he will find only friends.[39] Distant lands
are the better sought by one himself good."
Hrothgar replied, made a speech in answer:
"The all-wise Lord has sent these words
into your mind. No man wiser
have I ever heard speak so young in years:
great in your strength, mature in thought,
and wise in your speeches. If the son of Hrethel[40]
should ever be taken in blood-angry battle,
sickness, the sword or spear kill your lord
and you should still live, I would fully expect
the Geats could not choose a better king
anywhere alive, a hoard-guard for heroes,
if it pleased you to rule the land of your people.
Your character pleases me better each moment,
my dearest Beowulf. You have brought it to pass
that peace-bond, friendship, shall tie our peoples,
Geats and Spear-Danes, in common kinship,
and strife shall sleep, malicious attacks
which they weathered before; so long as I rule
this broad kingdom we shall give treasures,
and many shall greet each other with gifts
across the gannet's bath. The ring-necked boat
shall carry overseas gifts of friendship,
the strongest tokens. I know our peoples
will stand fast knitted toward friend and foe,
blameless in everything, as in the old manner."
Then still in the hall the shield-guard of nobles,
kinsman to Healfdene, gave him twelve treasures,
bade him go with gifts, seek his own dear people,
journey safely, and come back quickly.
Then the good king, of a noble race,
great Scylding prince, held that best thane
round the neck and kissed him; his tears ran down,
streaked his gray beard. Wise in his age,
he expected two things, but one the more strongly,

[39] On the undertones of Beowulf's reference to Hrethric, see note to line 1165, above.
[40] I.e. Beowulf's uncle, King Hygelac.

that never again would they look on each other
as in this brave meeting. That man was so dear
that he could not withhold those deep tears;
fixed in his heart by the bonds of thought,
a deep-felt longing for the beloved man
burned in his blood. Then Beowulf left him,
a fighter gold-proud, rejoicing in treasure,
marched over the turf. Their long-ship waited,
ready for its captain, rode at anchor.
As they traveled seaward, the gifts of Hrothgar
were often praised. He was one king
blameless in everything, till age took from him
the joy of his strength —a thing that harms many.
XXVII Then the young soldiers, brave-hearted men,
came to the ocean, the locked ring-shirts,
their body-guards, clinking. The coast-guard saw
the return of the nobles, as before he had seen
their landing in armor. No insults reached
the guests from the bluff, but he rode toward them,
declared that the Weders would surely welcome
the return of that ship with bright-armored men.
Wide, sea-worthy, the ship on the beach
was laden with war-gear, ring-prowed and tall,
with the treasure and horses. The high mast towered
over Hrothgar's hoard-gold. Then Beowulf gave
a sword to the ship-guard, bound with such gold
that later on the mead-bench he was the more honored
by that fine treasure, an heirloom of old.
The hero departed in his swift-moving ship,
steered for blue water, set Denmark behind.
The mast was rigged with the sea-wind's cloak,
great sail in its ropes; the planking thundered.
No hindrance the wind behind the crest-glider
as it boomed through the sea, slid over water,
foamy-necked floater winging on waves;
its iron-bound prow cut across currents
until they could see the cliffs of Geatland,
familiar headlands; thrust by the wind,
the deep keel drove hard toward the beach.
There was the harbor-guard, ready on the shore,
who long had waited, scanning the ocean
on watch for the men coming from afar.
The broad-beamed ship was moored to the beach
by strong anchor-ropes, that the force of the waves
might not destroy the handsome wood.
The chief then ordered the treasure unloaded,
gems, gold plate. They had not far to go
to find their lord, the giver of treasures,
Hygelac, Hrethel's son, who dwelt at home,
in his hall with his thanes, there near the sea-wall.
His buildings were splendid, the king a great ruler
mighty in hall, and Hygd very young,
wise, and courteous, although few winters
Hæreth's daughter as yet had passed
within that stronghold. Nor was she thereby

the more close-fisted, a niggard in gifts
to men of the Geats. Modthrytho,[41] however,
that mighty queen, did terrible crimes.
None of the boldest among the retainers
dared to approach her, unless a great lord.
Whoever looked into her eyes in broad daylight
could count on the garrote, the death-bonds prepared,
woven by hand, an arrest, and thereafter
the charge quickly settled with the edge of a sword;
the sharp shadow-pattern would suddenly fall,
make known its death-evil. Not queenly
customs in a lady, however beautiful—
to take the lives of beloved men,
a woman, peace-weaver, inventing false charges.
The kinsman of Hemming put a stop to all that.
Men round the table told more of the story,
said that she caused less harm to the people,
malicious trouble, once she was given,
adorned in gold, to the young champion
of the highest nobility, once she arrived
on Offa's[42] bright floor over shining seas;
she made the journey at her father's bidding.
There she used well the days of her life,
famous for goodness upon the high-seat,
kept noble love toward the leader of heroes,
the best chief, as I have heard,
in all the world, from sea to sea.
Therefore that Offa was honored by nations,
spear-braving warrior, received a multitude
of victories, gifts; in wisdom he held
his homeland long. From him sprang Eomer,
comfort for heroes, kinsman to Hemming,
grandson of Garmund, strong man in battle.

XXVIII Then the tested warrior amid his men,
hand-picked comrades, walked up the shore,
the wide sea-beach; the world-candle shone,
bright from the south. They had survived the journey,
now went in quickly to where they knew
that their protector, killer of Ongentheow,[43]
the good young war-king, dealt out rings
inside his sea-fort. Hygelac was told
of Beowulf's return, that there in his homestead
the defender of warriors, his shield-companion,
came from the battle-sport alive and unharmed,
walked through the yards to his court in the hall.
It was speedily cleared, as the ruler ordered,
its benches made ready for the men marching in.

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[41] "Hygd … Modthrytho" etc.: The narrator abruptly compares the good queen of the Geats, Hygd (Hygelac's wife), to a bad queen of legend whose exact identity is hard to discern from the original Old English text at this point. Chickering's translation follows a majority opinion in taking the legendary queen's name as *Modthryth(o)*. R. D. Fulk's more recent and plausible reading of lines 1927b-1928a (1931b-1932a in the original) takes the proper name as *Fremu* (the Old English word that Chickering translates as the attributive adjective 'mighty' in the following line). Whichever view is correct, the larger point of the contrast is clear: Hygelac's queen, Hygd, is *not* like the violent, ungenerous woman alluded to in lines 1927b-1952.

[42] I.e., Offa I, a legendary king of the continental Germanic tribe called the Angles. One famous Anglo-Saxon king, Offa II of Mercia, traced his lineage back to this legendary King Offa.

[43] I.e., Hygelac; this is the first in a protracted, confusing series of references to the Geats' ongoing feud with their neighbors the Swedes, whose king, Ongentheow, Hygelac has killed in battle.

Then he sat down with him, kinsman with kinsman,
he who survived those terrible fights,
after he had loyally greeted his sworn lord
in formal speech, with earnest words.
The daughter of Hæreth[44] went down the hall
pouring mead-cups, was a friend to the men,
bore the strong drink to the warriors' hands.
Then Hygelac began to question with courtesy
his comrade in hall. Great curiosity
about their adventures led him to words:
"How did you fare, my beloved Beowulf,
upon your journey, taken so suddenly,
seeking the strife over salt water,
battle at Heorot? And did you better
the well-known grief of Hrothgar the king?
Cares of the heart, sorrow-surgings
boiled within me; I did not trust
that venture's outcome. Often I asked you
not to attack that murderous spirit,
but to let the South-Danes test out Grendel
themselves in battle. Great thanks to God
I now give here, at your safe return."
Beowulf replied, Ecgtheow's son:[45]
"Our famous meeting, my lord Hygelac,
is scarcely a secret to much of mankind,
such crashing battle Grendel and I
set dancing in hall, where so many times
he grieved the Scyldings, humbled those victors,
made life a misery. I avenged all that
so well that none, no kinsman of Grendel
wrapped in foul sin, not any on earth
who lives the longest of the evil race,
can boast of that dawn-clash. I arrived and greeted
Hrothgar in ring-hall; the famous man,
kinsman of Healfdene, gave me a seat
with his own sons once he had learned
my journey's purpose. The gathering rejoiced;
never have I seen, in all my days
under heaven's roof, a greater mead-feast
of noble retainers. His famous queen,
peace-weaver of nations, walked through the hall,
encouraged the striplings; time and again
before she was seated she gave gold bracelets.
At times his daughter took vessels of mead
to the veteran nobility throughout the whole hall;
I heard the men give her the name Freawaru
when she passed to those heroes the gem-studded cup,
She has been promised, young, gold-laden,
to the gracious Ingeld, son of King Froda.[46]

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[44] I.e. Queen Hygd, who is shown here performing ceremonial functions comparable to those of Wealhtheow at lines 617-621.

[45] Beowulf's long answer (lines 1996-2158) to Hygelac's request for news essentially recaps what has happened in roughly the first 2000 lines of the poem. The repetition may try modern readers' patience, and scholars have sometimes explained it as a vestige of oral recitation or of the divisibility of the poem into originally separate "lays" (see introduction, section III.3). On the other hand, close readers of Beowulf's speech here will learn important details that were not noted in the previous sections of the poem; see, for example, notes to lines 2021 and 2086, below.

[46] The intended "peace-weaver" marriage of Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, is a detail we learn of here for the first time, though the narrator has already foreshadowed its disastrous outcome (see note to line 85, above). In the lines that follow here (2029-2065a) Beowulf himself forecasts that the marriage of Freawaru to Ingeld, prince of the Heathobards, will ultimately fail to settle the feud between that

The Scylding king has brought this about,
the guard of his kingdom, accepts the opinion
that with the young woman he'll settle his share
of the killings and feud. But seldom anywhere,
after a slaying, will the death-spear rest,
even for a while, though the bride be good.
"The lord of the Heathobards may well be displeased,
and each of his thanes, his nation's retainers,
when the Danish attendant walks in their hall
beside his lady, is honorably received.
On Danish belts swing shining heirlooms,
sharp as of old, the Heathobards' ring-treasures
for as long as they could wield those weapons,
[XXIX] till they finally led into that shield-play
their beloved companions and their own lives.
Then at the beer-feast an old fighter speaks,
who sees that ring-hilt, remembers it all,
the spear-death of men —has a fierce heart—
begins in cold sorrow to search out a youngster
in the depths of his heart, to test his resolve,
strike blade-spark in kin, and he says these words:
'Can you, my comrade, now recognize the sword
which your father bore in the final battle,
under grim war-mask for the last time,
that precious iron, when the Danes killed him,
controlled the field, when Withergyld fell
in our heroes' crash at Scylding hands?
Now some son or other of your father's killers
walks in this hall, here, in his pride;
exults in his finery, boasts of his slayings,
carries that treasure that is rightfully yours.'
He continually whets the young man's mind
with cruel words, until a day comes
when the lady's retainer, for his father's killings,
sleeps bloody-bearded, hacked by a sword,
his life forfeited. The slayer will escape,
get away with his life, he knows the country.
Then, on both sides, broken like swords
the nobles' oath-swearing, once deadly hate
wells up in Ingeld; in that hot passion
his love for the peace-weaver, his wife, will cool.
So I count it little, the Heathobards' loyalty,
friendship so firm, peace-sharing with Danes,
think it less than the truth. Now let me turn
again to Grendel, that you may know fully,
my treasure-giver, how the hand-combat
came to an end. Once heaven's jewel
had passed over earth, the angry spirit,
dread night-terror, came seeking us out
where still unharmed we kept guard in the hall.
Then was Hondscio taken in battle,
fated for death, the first to fall,
sword-belted warrior; Grendel killed

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tribe and the Danes. Beowulf vividly imagines (lines 2028-2062) some future occasion when, in Ingeld's hall, the feud will be enflamed again when Heathobard warriors see their own ancestors' weapons carried by some retainer of their new Danish queen, Freawaru. The explicit lesson about "peace-weaver" marriages here resonates with the skepticism implied about them through the digressions on Sigemund and Hildeburh (see notes to lines 872 and 1064, above).

that good young thane and then he devoured
his entire body, swallowed him up.
No sooner for that did he mean to depart
from the hall of gold empty-handed,
bloody-toothed killer; mighty and baleful,
he tested my strength; his war-claw seized me.
His glove hung down, a huge pouch, magical,
strangely seamed. It had been wrought
with cunning spells, a devil's strength,
and hard dragon-skins. The fierce evil-doer
wanted to stuff me into it, guiltless,
as one of many.[47] It was not to be so
that night, once I rose, stood up in anger.
It is too long to tell how I gave that enemy
full hand-payment, return for all evils
that nation had suffered, but there, my king,
I won for your people some honor through deeds.
He fled down the path, remained alive
for a little while, yet his right hand stayed
behind at Heorot, guarded a trail
quite plain to see— in pain he fled,
sick to the heart, died on the mere-bottom.
"For that hard struggle the Scyldings' friend
gave plated gold, reward enough,
many jeweled weapons, when morning came
and all were gathered in the great feast-hall.
There was song and story: an aged Scylding,
widely learned, told of the old days;
at times the fighter struck the harp to joy,
sung against chant-wood, or made a lay
both true and sorrowful; the great-hearted king
fittingly told a marvelous tale;
then again in his turn, wrapped in his age,
the old warrior lamented his youth,
his lost war-strength; his heart moved within him
as, wise in winters, he remembered it all.
And so in that hall we enjoyed our ease
the whole long day until another night
returned to men. Grendel's mother
swiftly made ready to take her revenge,
an unhappy journey. Her son had died
in battle with the Weders. The monstrous woman
avenged her son, snatched and killed
one man boldly. There Æschere died,
wise old counselor, in her fierce attack.
Nor had they the chance, the men of Denmark,
when morning returned, to burn his body,
to lay on the pyre the beloved man:
she had carried him off in a fiend's embrace,
took his body beneath the mountain stream.
This, for Hrothgar, was the worst assault,
the greatest sorrow of all he'd endured.
In his angry grief the king implored me
by your life, Hygelac, to show my courage
in the press of waters, put life in danger,

[47] Grendel's magical pouch was not mentioned in the earlier parts of the poem.

that I might work fame; he promised full reward.
It is now known afar that under the waves
I found the keeper of the terrible deep.
Down there, for long, we fought hand to hand;
the mere seethed in blood, and I cut off the head
of Grendel's mother in that deep [war]-hall
with her own great edge. With no small trouble
I returned with my life, not doomed at that time;
and the nobles' protector, kinsman of Healfdene,
gave me once more many treasures.
XXXI "That nation's king thus kept to good custom;
indeed, I have hardly lost all that booty,
reward for strength— the son of Healfdene
gave me [treasures] at my own choice,
which I wish, great king, to bring to you,
to show my good will. All my joys
still depend on you: I have few relatives,
and no chief kinsman except you, Hygelac."
He ordered brought in the boar's-head standard,
high-crowned helmet, great iron shirt,
ornamented war-sword, then said this speech:
"All this battle-gear Hrothgar gave me,
wise and generous; he asked especially
that I first tell you the history of his gift.
He said King Heorogar,[48] the Scyldings' leader,
had owned it long. No sooner for that
did he make it a gift to brave Heoroweard,
the iron chest-guard for his own son,
loyal though he was. Enjoy it all well!"
Then, as I've heard, four swift horses,
exactly matching, followed that treasure,
apple-dark steeds. With good heart he gave
both treasure and horses. So ought a kinsman
always act, never weave nets
of evil in secret, prepare the death
of close companions. With war-bold Hygelac
his nephew kept faith, his man ever loyal,
and each always worked for the other's welfare.
I also have heard that he gave Queen Hygd
the golden necklace, that Wealhtheow gave him,
wondrous treasure-ring, and three sleek horses
under gold saddles. After that gold-giving
the shining necklace adorned her breast.[49]
Thus Ecgtheow's son had shown great courage,
famous in battles, renowned for good deeds,
walked in glory; by no means killed
comrades in drink; had no savage mind:
brave and battle-ready, he guarded the gift
that God had given him, the greatest strength
that man ever had. Yet his youth had been miserable,
when he long seemed sluggish to the Geatish court;
they thought him no good; he got little honor,
no gifts on the mead-bench from the lord of the Weders.
They all were convinced he was slow, or lazy,

[48] "Heorogar": I.e., Hrothgar's older brother; see lines 61 and 466b, above.
[49] On this necklace, see lines 1192b-1208, above.

a coward of a noble. A change came to him,
shining in victory, worth all those cares.[50]
Then the battle-bold Hygelac, protector of nobles,
had them bring out the heirloom of Hrethel,
covered with gold; at that time in Geatland
there was no greater treasure in the form of a sword;
he laid that blade on Beowulf's lap
and gave him lands, seven thousand hides,[51]
a hall, and gift-throne. Both of them together
had inherited land within that nation,
the native right to hold the homeland,
but the higher in rank ruled the kingdom.
It came to pass[52] in later days—
after crash of battles, when Hygelac had fallen
and swords cut down Heardred his son
under the shield-wall where Battle-Scylfings,
hardened war-makers, had sought him out,
flushed in his victory, violently swung
on Hereric's nephew— after that dark time,
the kingdom passed into Beowulf's hands.
He ruled it well for fifty winters—
by then an old king, aged guardian
of the precious homeland— until a certain one,
a dragon, began to rule in the dark nights,
towering stone-mound; the entrance beneath it
lay unknown to men. Some man or other[53]
crept inside it, reached out toward
the heathen treasure, took in his hand
.... [54] adorned with treasure. He [avenged] that later,
though he'd been tricked while lying asleep
by the cunning thief: the people soon knew,
all house-dwellers, that the dragon was angry.
XXXII Not deliberately, for his own desires,
did he injure the dragon, break into his hoard,
but in desperate trouble this [slave] of nobles,
I know not who, fled angry blows,
homeless, roofless, entered that place,
a sin-troubled man. When he looked inside,
[fear] and terror rose in that guest.
But the [frightful] shape ……
……. …….
…… when fear overcame him
[he seized] the treasure-cup. There were many like it,
ancient treasures, within that earth-hall,

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[50] "Yet his youth had been miserable …" etc.: The stories of Beowulf's ignominious youth alluded to here are otherwise unknown to us.

[51] The "hide" was not a fixed measurement of land in terms of physical area but rather a relative measure based on productivity, a single "hide" being whatever amount of land would be necessary in a given region to sustain a single household. Hygelac's gift of land to Beowulf is obviously vast.

[52] Many readers find the transition here unsettlingly abrupt, so much so that some view these lines as a seam, where the poet has connected originally separate narratives of Beowulf's youth (up through his return to Geatland) and of his death fifty years after the killing of Hygelac. On the other hand, the highly allusive quality of the references to Geatish history continues a pattern already begun (see note to line 1964, above) and that will continue, in even more complex fashion, for the remainder of the poem (see notes to lines 2354, 2445, and 2599 below).

[53] Abruptly introduced, this unnamed man who plunders the dragon's hoard is later described as an exile or outlaw, driven by desperation to the act (lines 2216-2221a and again at 2280b-2283a). The manuscript of *Beowulf* is badly damaged in this section, and much of the passage about the theft from the dragon's hoard has had to be conjecturally restored by modern editors and translators.

[54] At this point in the manuscript, extensive damage has left some parts of the text completely unrecoverable. The lines of dots here and at lines 2223-2225 indicate the places and approximate extent of the now-lost text.

where someone had hidden, in the early days,
the immense legacy of a noble race,
their precious belongings, buried by a grieving,
thoughtful man.[55] Death swept them off
in those distant times, and the one man left
of the nation's war-troop who survived the longest,
mourning his friends, knew his fate,
that a short time only would he enjoy
the heaped treasures. The waiting barrow
stood high in the fields near the breaking waves,
new-built on the headland, its entrance hidden.
That keeper of rings carried down into it
the goods worth burial, nobles' treasures,
plated gold, spoke few words:
"Hold now, earth, now that heroes may not,
the treasure of princes. From you long ago
good men took it. Death in battle,
awful life-loss, took every man,
all of my people, who gave up this [life],
who knew hall-joys. Now I have none
who might carry sword, [polish] the cup,
gold-plated vessel; the company is gone.
The hardened helmet now must lose
its golden plates; the stewards sleep on
who were meant to burnish each battle-mask;
so too the war-coat that withstood in battle
the bite of iron across shield-clashings;
it decays like its warrior. Rusted, the chain-shirt
cannot follow close by the war-leader,
far beside heroes. No harp-joy,
play of song-wood— no good hawk
swings through the hall, nor the swift roan
stamps in the courtyard. An evil death
has swept away many living men."
Thus in his grief he mourned aloud,
alone, for them all; in constant sorrow
both day and night till the tide of death
reached his heart. The old dawn-scorcher
then found the hoard in the open barrow,
that hateful burner who seeks the dead-mounds,
smooth flame-snake, flies through the dark
wrapped round in fires; earth-dwellers
[fear him greatly.] It is his to seek out
[treasure] in the earth, where he guards for ages
heathen gold; gains nothing by it.
Three hundred years that harm to the people
held one of its hoards, dwelt in the earth,
mighty in powers, until a lone man
kindled its fury; he took to his master
the gold-plated flagon, asked guarantees
of peace from his lord. The hoard had been pilfered,
its treasure lessened, and pardon granted

[55] The poet explains (lines 2226b-2265a) how the hoard was first hidden in the barrow by another exile, this time described as the last survivor of a once-great people. As a meditation on the theme of exile, the so-called "Lay of the Last Survivor" incorporated into the text of *Beowulf* at lines 2242-2261 contains many elements in common with other famous Old English poems, especially the elegiac verses known today as "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer."

the miserable man; his lord looked upon
the gold of the ancients for the first time.
By then, also, the dragon had wakened
and with it new strife. It slithered and sniffed
along the stone walls, found a footprint.
Cleverly, in secret, the outlaw had stepped
past the dragon's head. Thus, when the Ruler's
favor holds good, an undoomed man
may easily survive dangers in exile.
The dragon searched the ground, wanted to find
the man who had sorely harmed him in sleep.
Fierce-hearted, hot, round the outside
of the mound he turned; but there was no man
in that wilderness. He rejoiced in the thought
of flame-work, [a fight]; returned now and then
into the barrow-cave, looked for his cup.
Then he saw that someone had disturbed his gold,
high treasures. The hoard-keeper waited,
miserable, impatient, till evening came.
By then the barrow-snake was swollen with rage,
wanted revenge for that precious cup,
a payment by fire. The day was over
and the dragon rejoiced, could no longer lie
coiled within walls but flew out in fire,
with shooting flames. The onset was horrible
for the folk of the land, as was its ending
soon to be hard for their ring-giving lord.
XXXIII The visitor began to spew fire-flakes,
burn the bright halls; the glow rose high,
a horror everywhere. The fiery terror
left nothing alive wherever it flew.
Throughout the night sky the burnings were visible,
cruelest warfare, known near and far;
the Geatish people saw how the burner
had raided and hurt them. He flew back to the hoard,
the mysterious hall, just before day.
His flames had set fire to men and their houses;
he trusted his barrow, its deep walls,
his strength in fire; his trust was to fail.
Then to Beowulf the disaster was told,
soon made plain, for his own home was burned,
finest of buildings, the hall in fire-waves,
gift-throne of Geats. To the good king
it was great anguish, pain deep in mind.
The wise man believed he had angered God,
the Eternal Ruler, very bitterly,
had broken the old law; his breast welled
with dark thoughts strange to his mind.
The dragon had razed the land along the sea,
the people's stronghold, their fort near the shore.
For that the war-king, guard of the Weders,
planned a revenge. The shielder of warriors,
lord of his men, commanded them fashion
a wonderful battle-shield entirely covered
with strongest iron; he knew well enough
that linden-wood could not [help] him
against such flames. The king, long good,

was to reach the end of his seafaring days,
his life in this world, together with the serpent,
though long it had ruled the wealth of the hoard.
Then the ring-giver scorned to approach
the dragon with troops, with a full army;
he did not fear a fight with the serpent;
its strength and fire seemed nothing at all
to the strong old king, since he had endured
much violence before, taken great risks
in the smash of battles, after he had cleansed
Hrothgar's hall, rich in his victories,
crushed out Grendel and his kin in battle,
a hateful race. Nor was it the least
hand-to-hand combat where Hygelac lay,
when the Geatish king, in the fierce battle-rush
far off in Frisia, the friend of his people,
Hrethel's son, died from sword-drinks,
struck down and slain.[56] Beowulf escaped
by his own strength, did hard sea-duty;
he held in his arms the battle-outfits
of thirty [warriors] when he turned to the sea:
No need to boast about that foot-fight
among the Hetware who bore shields against him;
few returned to seek their homes
after facing the brave, the daring man.
Across gray seas Ecgtheow's son,
alone and lonely, swam to his homeland.
There Hygd offered treasure and kingdom,
rings and the high-seat; she did not believe
her son could hold their native land
against the foreigners now that Hygelac was dead.
No sooner for that, through any counsel,
could the wretched nobles convince the hero
to be Heardred's lord; he would not take
the royal power. Still he supported him
among his people with friendly wisdom,
kept him in honor, until he grew older,
could rule the Geats. Then outcasts came,
seeking him out, Ohthere's sons,
across the sea; had rebelled against Onela,
lord of the Scylfings, best of the sea-kings,
of those who gave treasure in Swedish lands,

[56] The death of Hygelac on a raid to Frisia has been alluded to briefly at lines 1199-1211 and will be mentioned again at 2910-2917. The point of these repeated references is not merely to explain how Beowulf became king of the Geats, but to clarify what is at stake for his people in the outcome of Beowulf's fight with the dragon. Hygelac's death among the Franks (or Hugas) is but one event in a much longer, bewilderingly complicated history of violence in which the Geats are ensnared. Unfortunately, the *Beowulf*-poet has doled out this bits of this history only piecemeal, through obscure allusions, and out of chronological order. When brought together and placed in proper sequence, several key events are alluded to: before Hygelac became king of the Geats, during the reign of his older brother Hæthcyn, the sons of King Ongentheow of the Swedes (or "Scylfings") attacked Hæthcyn's men at a place called Sorrow Hill (lines 2467-2473). In retaliation, the Geats then attacked the Swedes, and on this expedition both King Hæthcyn and King Ongentheow were killed at the battle of Ravenswood (lines 2474-2485 and in greater detail at 2918-2994). But Hæthcyn's younger brother, Hygelac, rallied the Geats to victory over the remaining Swedes. Thereafter Hygelac reigned in strength, with Beowulf acting as his champion, killing the Frankish hero Dæghrefn, among others (line 2497). On one raid against the Franks and Frisians, however, Hygelac was killed; only Beowulf survived the expedition, and he returned to Geatland where Hygd offered him the throne. Beowulf refused, however, offering instead to protect the kingdom until Hygelac's young son, Heardred, should be be old enough to succeed his father (lines 2349b-2371a). Once king, Heardred welcomed two Swedish princes, Eanmund and Eadgils (sons of Ohthere, grandsons of Ongentheow), who had rebelled against the reigning king of the Swedes, Onela. Viewing Heardred's action as a sign of renewed hostility, Onela attacked the Geats and killed both King Heardred and one of his nephews, Eanmund. Onela permits Beowulf to rule as king of the Geats in Heardred's place (lines 2374b-2385). Beowulf equips Eanmund's surviving brother, Eadgils, who leads a force back to Sweden, where he kills Onela (lines 2386-2391).

a famous prince. That was the end
for Hygelac's son, when his hospitality
later earned him a death-wound by sword,
and Ongentheow's son turned about
once Heardred lay dead, returned to his home,
let Beowulf hold the royal chair
and rule the Geats. He was a good king.
XXXIIII He later found a way to pay back the conquest
of the Geatish people; was a friend to Eadgils,
supported in his exile the son of Ohthere,
sent him an army, good troops and weapons,
across the sea. The Swede made his journey,
cold in his cares, took the king's life.
And so he survived, the son of Ecgtheow,
every encounter, each awful conflict,
heroic battles, till that one day
when he had to fight against the worm.
Angered to the heart, the king of the Geats,
one among twelve, went to find the dragon.
He had heard by then how the feud began,
fiery destruction; the jeweled cup
had been laid in his lap by the thief's hand.
He was thirteenth in the troop of men
who had been first, the cause of disaster,
an abject captive; he sadly showed
the trail to that shore. Against his will
he led them to where he knew a cave,
a certain barrow, between cliff and beach,
near the crash of waves. Inside, it was heaped
with delicate gold-work. The terrible guard,
ready for combat, protected those riches
ancient in the earth; no easy bargain
for any man to try to acquire them.
The war-brave king sat down on the cliff,
and wished good luck to the men of his hearth,
the Geatish ring-giver. His spirit was sad,
restless, death-ripe; immeasurably near
the fate that was coming to the old man,
to seek out his soul, parting the two,
his life from the body. Not much longer
would Beowulf's life be wrapped in his flesh.
And now he spoke out, Ecgtheow's son:
"Many times in my youth I faced battle-rushes,
saw many wars; I remember it all.
I was seven years old when the treasure-giver,
gold-friend of Geats, took me from my father.
King Hrethel[57] kept and fostered me well,
kept kin in mind, gave jewel and feast.
In no way was I, a man of his stronghold,
more hateful to him than his own sons,
Herebeald, Hæthcyn, or Hygelac my lord.
For the eldest brother a death-bed was strewn,

[57] I.e. Beowulf's grandfather, the father of Herebald, Hæthcyn, and Hygelac. The reference is confusing because the events narrated hereafter—about King Hrethel's death from sorrow over the accidental killing of Herebald by Hæthcyn (lines 2425-2466)—happened *before* the complex history of Geatish wars just referred to in lines 2349b-2391. The story of Herebald's death underscores the limitations of a system of justice based on vengeance or monetary compensation: because Herebald's killer was also Hrethel's own son, the old king could find no legal or emotional solace for the death.

undeservedly, by his kinsman's error:
Hæthcyn shot him, his brother, his leader,
with an arrow from his bow curved and horn-tipped;
missed his mark and struck his brother,
one son's blood on the other's shaft.
There was no way to pay for a death so wrong,
blinding the heart, yet still the prince
had lost his life, lay unavenged.
"So it is bitter for an old man
to have seen his son go riding high,
young on the gallows; then may he tell
a true sorrow-song, when his son swings,
a joy to the raven, and old and wise
and sad, he cannot help him at all.
Always, each morning, he remembers well
his son's passing; he does not care
to wait for another guardian of heirlooms
to grow in his homestead, when the first has had
such a deadly fill of violent deeds.
Miserable, he looks upon his son's dwelling,
deserted wine-hall, wind-swept bedding,
emptied of joy. The rider sleeps,
warrior in grave; no harp music,
no games in the courtyard, as once before.
XXXV "Then he goes to his bed, sings his cares over,
alone, for the other; all seems too open,
the fields and house. Thus the Weder-king
carried in his heart overflowing grief
for Herebeald; he could not ever
settle the feud against the slayer,
no sooner could hate his warrior son,
do hostile deeds, though he did not love him.
Because of this sorrow that hurt him so,
he left man's joy, chose God's light,
gave to his sons, as a good man does,
the land and strongholds when he went forth.
"Then war returned to Swedes and Geats,
a common hatred across [wide] water,
fierce battle-rage once Hrethel died
and Ongentheow's sons made bolder threats;
proud, war-keen, they wanted no peace
kept over water, but at Sorrow Hill
made gruesome ambush, malicious slaughter.
My kinsmen and leaders avenged that well,
both feud and outrage, as was often told,
though the older one paid with his life,
no easy purchase: Hæthcyn fell,
the lord in battle, Geatish leader.
The next morning, as I have heard it,
the third brother brought full vengeance
back to the slayer with keen edges,
once Ongentheow sought out Eofor:
his helmet broken, the old Scylfing
crashed down, sword-pale; the hand could recall
enough of the quarrel, did not withhold the blow.
"I earned those treasures that Hygelac gave me,
paid him with battle as fate allowed me,

with glittering sword; he had given me land,
my native home. He had no need
to go to the Gifthas, to Swedes or Spear-Danes
for some worse fighter to buy with gifts.
Always I walked before him on foot,
his man at the point, and so, life-long,
shall I do battle, while this sword serves,
which then and now has held up well
ever since the time, in front of the hosts,
I slew Dæghrefn, the champion of the Hugas,
with my bare hands. He never brought back
his breast-ornament to the Frisian king:
the standard-bearer fell in combat,
a prince, in valor; no edge killed him—
my hand-grip crushed his beating heart,
his life's bone-house. Now the edge of the sword,
hand and hard blade, must fight for the treasure."
Beowulf spoke, made his battle-vows
for the last time: "Often I dared
many battles in youth; I wish even now,
an old folk-guard, to seek a quarrel,
do a great deed, if the evil-doer
will come to me out of his earth-hall!"
He then addressed his faithful men,
brave in their helmets, for the last time:
"I would not carry sword or weapons
against the serpent if I knew how else
to grapple proudly, wrestle the monster,
as I did with Grendel; but here I expect
the heat of war-flames, his poisonous breath,
and so I am dressed in shield and armor.
Not one foot will I retreat
from the barrow-keeper, but here by the wall
it must go between us as fate decides,
the Lord, for each man. My heart is bold,
I forego boasting against this war-flyer.
Wait on the barrow safe in your mail,
men in your armor, to see which of us
shall better survive the wounds dealt out
in the rush of battle. It is not your business,
nor fitting for any, except me alone,
to test out his strength against this monster,
do a hero's deed. I must succeed,
win gold by courage, or battle seize me,
final life-hurt take your lord away!"
The famous champion stood up with his shield
brave behind helmet, in hard war-shirt,
went under stone-cliff, trusted the strength
of a single man; hardly the coward's way!
Then he who survived, good in his virtues,
in manly customs, who endured many wars,
the din of battle when foot-troops clashed,
saw a stone arch by the barrow-wall,
and a stream flowing out, its waters afire
with angry flames; he could not get through,
enter the passage, without being burned,
come near the hoard for the dragon's flames.

Then the king of the Geats, angry as he was,
let a word rise up, fly out from his breast,
a strong-hearted bellow; his voice clanged,
war-bright echo, under gray stone.
Hate rose up: the dragon had heard
the voice of a man; there was no more time
to ask for a peace. First came his breath,
a flickering fire, out from the stone,
hot battle-hiss; the earth shook.
Down by the barrow the lord of the Geats
swung his shield toward the strange terror;
coiled and scaly, its heart was bent
on seeking battle. The good war-king
had already drawn his heirloom sword,
an edge not dull. The sight of the other
brought fear to each of those destroyers.
The brave man braced against his shield,
lord of his troop, as the angry serpent
coiled itself up; in armor he waited.
Then coiling in flames it came slithering forth,
rushed to its fate. The shield protected
the famous king in life and limb
a shorter time than he had hoped;
for the first time, on his final day,
he managed as he could when fate did not give him
glory in battle. The Geatish king
swung up his hand, slashed the glittering horror
with his heirloom sword, so that the edge broke,
bright on bone-scales, bit less deeply
than its great ruler needed in danger,
hard pressed in battle. After that war-stroke
the barrow-guard grew more savage,
spewed deadly fire; those war-flames leapt
and danced about; the Geatish gold-friend
did not boast then about his victories.
His naked war-sword had failed in need,
as it never should have, his land's best blade.
It was no easy journey when Ecgtheow's son,
renowned and brave, had to leave the field,
make his dwelling in another place,
as each man must, give up loaned time.
Not long after, the terrible fighters
closed once more. The hoard-guard took heart,
his belly swelled with fierce new hissing.
Enveloped in flames, he who earlier
had ruled his people felt keen pain.
But not at all did the sons of nobles,
hand-picked comrades, his troop stand round him
with battle-courage: they fled to the wood
to save their lives. Only one
felt shame and sorrow. Nothing can ever
hold back kinship in a right-thinking man.
XXXVI He was called Wiglaf, Weohstan's son,

a worthy shield-bearer, Scylfing prince,
kinsman of Ælfhere;[58] saw his liege-lord
tortured by the heat behind his battle-mask.
He remembered the honors that he gave him before,
the rich homestead of the Wægmunding clan,
the shares of common-land that his father had held,
and he could not hold back. His hand seized the shield,
yellow linden-wood; he drew his sword,
known to men as Eanmund's heirloom,
son of Ohthere. Weohstan had slain
that friendless exile by sword-edge in battle,
had brought to the uncle the jeweled helm,
linked mail-shirt, the ancient sword
fashioned by giants. Onela gave him
the polished gear of his dead nephew,
said no words to start up a feud,
though he had killed his brother's son.
Weohstan held them for many winters,
the mail-shirt and sword, till his son was ready
to show as much courage as his graying father.
He gave him then —they lived among the Geats—
a great deal of armor when he went from life,
an old man's journey. This was the first time
that the young warrior had met the battle-charge,
was to withstand it beside his lord.
His resolve did not melt, nor his father's gift
fail him at combat, as the fire-snake found out
once they had clashed, met in battle.
Wiglaf spoke in fitting words
to his armored companions— was grieved to the heart:
"I recall the time, when taking the mead
in the great hall, we promised our chief
who gave us these rings, these very armlets,
that we would repay him for these war-helmets,
tempered edges, if he ever needed us.
For that he chose us from all his forces,
chose as he pleased his men for this journey.
He thought us war-worthy —and gave me these gifts—
because he believed we would be spear-men
good in a battle, eager in helmets;
though he had planned, our chief in his courage,
to do this deed alone, as folk-guard,
because of all men he had done most,
won daring fame. The time is at hand
when our generous lord could use the strength
of good soldiers. Let us go to him now,
help our war-leader through this heat,
fire-horror. As for me, God knows

[58] Wiglaf's crucial role as the one retainer loyal to Beowulf is clear. But in some other respects his loyalty defies expectation. Not only is he untested in combat (line 2620b-2622), but by his lineage he is implicated in the history of hostility between the Swedes and Geats. Wiglaf is described as a "Scylfing [i.e. Swedish] prince" (line 2598b) but also as a kinsman of Beowulf through the "Wægmunding clan" (line 2602b; also 2810a). And we are soon told that Wiglaf's father, Weohstan, was the killer of one of the exiled Swedish princes, Eanmund, to whom King Heardred of the Geats had offered refuge (see note to line 2354a, above). Weohstan's ability to kill Eanmund with impunity, and the fact that he and his son Wiglaf "lived among the Geats" (line 2618b) in the first place, may serve as reminders that Beowulf evidently rules only by the permission of Onela of Sweden—the unpunished killer of Beowulf's own kinsman and former king, Heardred.

I would much rather the fire seize my body
beside my gold-giver, lord and friend.
It is hardly right that we should bear shields
back to our homes unless we can first
kill off this monster, save the life
of the king of the Weders. I know for a truth
that the worth of his deeds is not so poor
that alone among Geats he should suffer,
fall in combat. Now sword and helmet,
mail-shirt, war-gear, must be ours together."
Then he rushed in through deadly fumes,
brought his helmet to the aid of his lord,
said only this: "Beowulf, my leader,
do everything well, as you said, when young,
you'd never permit your good name to fail
alive, brave-minded; deed-famed prince,
now you must guard your life with strength,
use all your might; I will help you!"
After those words the dragon charged
again, angry, a shimmering form
in malignant coils, surged out in flames,
sought hated men. The fire came in waves,
the shield burned to the boss. Mail-shirt offered
the untried warrior no protection,
but the young man bravely went in
to his kinsman's shield, showed quick courage
when his own [was] destroyed by the fiery breath.
Then the war-king recalled [his past glories,]
with huge strength swung his blade so hard
that it caught in the head; Nægling snapped,
Beowulf's sword shattered in battle,
old and gleaming. It was not his fate
that edges of iron might help him in combat.
That hand was too strong, as I have heard,
that broke in its swing every weapon,
wound-hardened sword, that he carried to battle;
he was no better off for all his strength.
Then the land-burner, vicious fire-dragon,
made a third rush at those brave men,
found his chance, pouring hot flames,
caught and pierced him right through the neck
with his sharp fangs; all bloodied he was,
dark life-blood; it flowed out in waves.
XXXVII Then as I [have heard], at the great king's need
the upright prince showed courage beside him,
strength and daring, as was his nature.
He did not mind the head: the brave man's hand
was burned to a crisp when he helped his kinsman—
a warrior in armor, Wiglaf struck
that strange opponent a little lower down,
so that the sword plunged in, bright with ornaments,
and afterward the fire began to die out.
The king could still manage, was not yet faint,
and drew his belt-knife, sharpened by battle,
which he wore on his mail-shirt; the protector of the Weders
finished the dragon with a stroke down the belly.
They had killed their foe —courage took his life—

both of the nobles, kinsmen together,
had destroyed the dragon. So a man should be,
a thane at need! For the great king
it was the last time he gained victory,
his last work in the world. Then the deep gash
the earth-dragon made, the wound began
to burn and swell; he soon understood
that something deadly seethed in his breast,
some poison within. So Beowulf went,
wise-minded lord, to sit on a seat
opposite that earth-wall; he saw how the arches,
giants' stone-work, held up the earth-cave
by pillars inside, solid forever.
Then his loyal thane, immeasurably good,
took water in his hand, bathed the bloodied one,
the famous king, his liege, dear friend,
weak in his wound, and unstrapped his helmet.
Then Beowulf spoke, despite the gash,
the gaping wound —he knew for certain
he had finished his days, his joy in the world,
that his time was over, death very near:
"Now I would want to give to my son
these war-garments, had it been granted
that I have a guardian born from my body
for this inheritance. I ruled this people
for fifty winters, and there was no ruler
of surrounding nations, not any, who dared
meet me with armies, seek out a battle,
make any onslaught, terror, oppression,
upon Geatish men. At home I awaited
what the years brought me, held my own well,
sought no intrigue; not often I swore
deceitful oaths! Sick with my death-wound
I can take joy in all these things;
the Ruler of men need not blame me
for murder of kin, once life is gone,
has left my body. Now you go quickly,
find the treasure under gray stones,
beloved Wiglaf, now that the dragon
sleeps in his wounds, cut off from gold.
Go now in haste, that I may see
the golden goods, have one full look
at the brilliant gems, that by its wealth
I may more easily give up my life
and the dear kingdom that I have ruled long."

XXXVIII Then, as I have heard, Weohstan's son,
hearing the words of his wounded ruler,
quickly obeyed him, took his link-shirt,
ringed battle-webbing, under the barrow's roof.
Once past the seat, the victorious thane
—brave young kinsman— saw red gold, jewels,
glittering treasure lying on the ground,
wondrous wall-hangings; in the den of the serpent,
the old dawn-flier, stood golden beakers,
an ancient service, untended, unpolished,
its garnets broken. Helmets lay heaped,
old and rusted, and scores of arm-rings

skillfully twisted. How easily jewels,
gold in the earth, can overcome anyone,
hide it who will— heed it who can!
There he also saw a golden standard
hanging over the hoard, intricate weaving
of wondrous skill; a light came from it
by which he could see the whole treasure-floor,
gaze on the jewels. There was no more sign
of the dragon, now dead. Then, as I've heard,
alone in the barrow, he rifled the hoard,
old work of giants, loaded an armful
of gold cups and dishes, chose as he pleased,
took the standard too, the brightest emblem.
Already the short-sword of his aged leader,
its edge strong iron, had wounded the guardian,
keeper of treasure from time out of mind,
who kept fire-terror in front of the hoard,
waves of flame, surging on air
in the dead of night, until he died in slaughter.
Now Wiglaf hurried, eager to return,
to bring back the jewels. Curiosity
urged him on, whether he'd find
his lord still alive where he had left him
lying in the open, his strength gone.
Then, with the treasure, he came out to find
his lord, the great king, bleeding still,
at the end of his life. Again he began
to sprinkle him with water, until the point of a word
broke through his breast-hoard: [Beowulf spoke,]
old in his grief, as he saw the gold:
"I give thanks aloud to the Lord of all,
King of glories, eternal Ruler,
for the bright treasures I can see here,
that I might have gained such gifts as these
for the sake of my people before I died.
Now that I have given my old life-span
for this heap of treasures, you are to watch
the country's needs. I can stay no longer.
Order a bright mound made by the brave,
after the pyre, at the sea's edge;
let it rise high on Whale's Cliff,
a memorial to my people, that ever after
sailors will call it 'Beowulf's barrow'
when the steep ships drive out on the sea,
on the darkness of waters, from lands far away."
From round his throat he took the golden collar,
brave-hearted king, and gave to his thane,
the young spear-fighter, his gold-plated helmet,
rings, mail-shirt, bade use them well:[59]
"You are the last man of our tribe,
the race of Wægmundings; fate has swept
all my kinsmen to their final doom,
undaunted nobles. I must follow them."

[59] Beowulf's dying gift of his own armor to Wiglaf may indicate that he wishes the younger man to succeed him as king (see also lines 2796b-2797a). But the poem does not state this explicitly, nor does it anywhere account for the fact that Beowulf, though he has reigned for fifty years, has never produced a son to be his heir.

That was the last word of the old man
from the thoughts of his heart before he chose
the high battle-flames; out from his breast
his soul went to seek the doom of the just.
[XXXIX] It had come to pass for the young warrior
that he saw the man dearest in his life
lying dead on the ground in his terrible wound.
His killer lay there, huge earth-dragon,
robbed of his life, dead from blows.
Never again would the coiled serpent
guard a treasure, but the edges of iron
had taken him down, hard, battle-notched,
forged under hammers, so that the wide-flyer,
stilled by wounds, had come aground
beside the hoard-cave. No more to whirl
through the midnight air, breathing out flames,
proud in his treasure, show his blazing form
high in the dark: he fell to the earth
by the handiwork of the great war-leader.
Indeed, it is said there is hardly a man
among the great heroes anywhere on earth,
though he were valorous in every deed,
who might succeed in a brave war-rush
against such a fiery poison-breather,
or run his hands through heaps in the ring-hall,
if he discovered the guard in the barrow
awake and watchful. That mass of treasure
came to Beowulf only by death;
both man and dragon had ended their time.
Not long after, the battle-late troop,
faith-breaking cowards, gave up their forest;
the ten had not dared to join in the spear-play
when their sworn lord had greatest need.
Deep in their shame they carried their shields,
iron war-shirts, to where Beowulf lay,
looked at Wiglaf. Heart-weary, he bent,
the brave champion, beside his lord's shoulder,
still washed him with water, though it did no good.
He could not, in the world, much as he wished,
keep any life in the old spear-leader
nor change the course of the Ruler's will.
The judgment of God then ruled the deeds
of every man, as He still does now.
Then a hard answer was easily given
by the young retainer to those without courage.
Wiglaf spoke out, the son of Weohstan,
a man sore-hearted, looked at the faithless ones:
"Easily enough can a man who speaks truth
say that the lord who gave you those ornaments,
that fine war-gear you stand in there,
when often he gave to his hall-men, retainers,
sitting on mead-planks, his own thanes—
when the king gave out chest-guard and helmet,
the most splendid goods he could find anywhere,
near or far— that he threw them away,
utterly, terribly, once war came upon him.
The king of our land had no need to boast

about armed comrades. However, God granted,
Ruler of victories, that he avenge himself,
alone, with his sword, when courage was needed.
Small life-shield could I give at battle,
and yet for all that, I still began,
beyond my strength, to help my kinsman.
Ever the slower those deadly coils
once I stabbed with my sword; a weaker fire
poured from his head. Too few defenders
pressed round the king when his worst time came.
Now all treasure, giving and receiving,
all home-joys, ownership, comfort,
shall cease for your kin; deprived of their rights
each man of your families will have to be exiled,
once nobles afar hear of your flight,
a deed of no glory. Death is better
for any warrior than a shameful life!"
XL Then he commanded that the battle's outcome
be told at the palings beyond the cliff-edge,
where noble counselors had sat in dejection
the whole forenoon, their shields close at hand,
expecting either the return of their lord
or his final day. The messenger who came,
rode up the bluff, was not long silent
about the news, but truly enough
told the whole story in the hearing of all:
"Now is the giver of the Weders' joys,
lord of the Geats, laid in his death-bed;
he lies slaughtered by the dragon's thrust.
Beside him his killer is also stretched,
dead from knife-wounds; with his strong sword
he could not cleave, cut into that monster,
not wound him at all. Wiglaf sits there,
the son of Weohstan, watches over Beowulf,
one noble over the other; beside the lifeless
he keeps the head-watch, weary to his heart,
guards both the dead, the loved and the hated.
Now the people may well expect
a time of war, when the death of our king
is known, no secret, to Franks and Frisians.[60]
That feud was forged against the Hugas
when Hygelac landed his fleet in Frisia,
against the Hetware— they gave him a battle,
pressed forward quickly with the greater strength,
till the mailed warrior had to bow down;
he fell in the ranks; gave no rings then,
the prince to his troop. Ever since then
the Merovingian has shown us no kindness.
Nor do I expect from the Swedish people
much peace or friendship: it was known afar

[60] From this point, the messenger begins a summary of the multi-generational conflicts between the Geats and their neighbors to the south (the Franks—referred to as the Hugas, the Hetware, and the Merovingians—and Frisians) and to the north (the Swedes or Scylfings). On specific events alluded to by the messenger, see the summary provided at the note to line 2354a, above. The significance of all this back-story becomes grimly clear: the messenger plainly states twice in the course of his speech (lines 2907-2909 and 2995-3002) that, as news of Beowulf's death spreads, the Geats' neighbors and long-time enemies will descend with ferocity. After all these dire predictions, the narrator concludes the whole speech by stating that the messenger "was hardly wrong [i.e., typical Anglo-Saxon understatement for "he was exactly right"] in his words or prophecies" (line 3025).

that Ongentheow chopped off the life
of Hæthcyn, Hrethel's son, near Ravenswood,
when in their pride the Geatish people
first sought out the Battle-Scylfings.
The father of Ohthere, old in his war-craft,
cunning and terrible, soon struck back,
cut down the fleet-king, rescued his wife,
the aged queen bereft of her gold,
the mother of Onela, of Ohthere too,
and then hunted down his sworn enemies,
until they escaped with their lives, barely,
up into Ravenswood, their king dead behind them.
With a large force he then surrounded
the sword's survivors, wound-weary men,
and the whole night long he threatened more trouble
to the hapless soldiers, said that his blades
would cut them open when morning came,
that some would swing on the gallows-tree
as sport [for the birds]. But help came at dawn
to the heartsick men: they heard the sound
of Hygelac's war-horn, where the valiant prince
came down the path with his own picked troop.

XLI "That bloody trail of Swedes and Geats,
swathe of the killed, was known afar,
how the two tribes stirred up the feud.
Then Ongentheow, together with kinsmen,
wise in age, foresaw a sad fight,
so turned away to find a stronghold,
sought higher ground, had heard stories
of Hygelac's strength, proud war-skill,
did not trust his force to hold the Geats,
the seafaring soldiers, to defend his treasure,
his sons and wife, against battle-sailors.
So he retreated, old, to his earth-works.
Pursuit was offered to the Swedish men;
Hygelac's banners overran that field
once the men of Hrethel attacked the encampment.
Gray-haired Ongentheow was brought to bay
in a bristle of swords; the Swedish king
had to submit to Eofor's[61] judgment.
Angrily, Wulf the son of Wonred
swung out his weapon, so that blood spurted
from under the hair, a glancing stroke.
But it brought no fear to the old Scylfing;
he quickly returned a better blow
for that bloody stroke, a worse exchange
as he wheeled upon him. No answering blow
could the son of Wonred offer in return;
the old man had carved so deep in his helmet
that, covered all over in a mask of blood,
he went down headlong —still not doomed,
though the wound ran freely, but later recovered.
Then the fierce warrior, Hygelac's thane,

[61] The Geatish warrior Eofor was briefly credited earlier, at line 2482b, as the actual killer of King Ongentheow of the Swedes. In the present passage, Eofor's combat on that occasion is told in much greater detail, involving Ongentheow's prior wounding of Eofor's brother, Wulf (lines 2960-2971). The two brothers are richly rewarded by Hygelac, and Eofor is given the king's daughter in marriage.

as his brother lay there, swung his broad sword,
old blade of giants, broke through the shield-wall,
let it crash down on the great iron helmet.
The king fell over, shepherd of his people,
dropped at last, his old life gone.
Then there were many who bandaged the brother,
stood him up quickly once there was room
and they could control that bloody field.
And then one warrior plundered the other,
took from Ongentheow his iron link-coat,
the hilted sword, and his helmet too,
and carried to Hygelac the gray-beard's weapons.
He received them well, promised reward
once they were home, and fulfilled it thus:
the king of the Geats, the son of Hrethel,
once they returned to the land of their people,
paid Wulf and Eofor with immense treasure—
one hundred thousand in land and rings.
No man on earth had cause to reproach him
since they had earned their glory in battle.
And he gave to Eofor his only daughter,
a grace in the home, a pledge of friendship.
"That is the feud, the hatred of tribes,
war-lust of men, for which I [expect]
the Swedish people will seek us out
in a new battle, after they have heard
that our lord is lifeless, he who once held
the hoard and kingdom against all enemies
after the death of the brave Scyldings,
worked in courage for the good of the nation.
Let us make haste to look upon him [now],
the king of our people there on the ground,
and bear him home who gave us rings,
to the ways of his pyre. No small token
shall melt with that heart, but the whole hoard,
uncounted treasure purchased with valor,
and now at the last [bought] with his life.
The fire shall eat them, flames unweave
the precious metals; no brooch-jewels
to be worn in memory, or maiden's throat
honored by gold, but, sad in mind,
nobles bereft of rings and giver
each must wander no short time
in the lands of exile, now that our king
has laid down laughter, every joy.
The spear must be seized, morning-cold,
hefted in hand, on many dark dawns;
no harp music will wake the warriors,
but the black raven above doomed men
shall tell the eagle how he fared at meat
when with the wolf he stripped the bodies."[62]
Thus the brave man told grievous news,
was hardly wrong in his words or prophecies.
The company rose, went down unhappily

[62] As animals who feed on the corpses of fallen warriors, the raven, eagle, and wolf (collectively known as "the beasts of battle") are often mentioned in Old English poems describing war.

under Eagles' Cliff to look with tears
at the awesome sight. On the sand they found,
at his hard rest, with life-soul gone,
the man who had given them their rings many times.
Then the last day of the good man had come,
when the battle-leader, king of the Weders,
died that wonderful death. Before, they had seen
that stranger thing, the huge worm lying
stretched on the sand in front of his enemy.
The terrible armor of the shining dragon
was scorched by his flames. In length he measured
fifty foot-paces. Once he controlled
the air in joys, had ridden on the wind
throughout the night, then flew back down
to seek his den. Now he lay there,
stiff in death, found no more caves.
Beside him were piled pitchers and flagons,
dishes in heaps, and well-wrought swords
eaten by rust, just as they had lain
in the deeps of the earth for a thousand years.
In those days, mighty in its powers,
the gold of the ancients was wrapped in a spell,
so that no man might touch that ring-hall
unless the Lord, Truth-king of victories,
—man's true shield— should give permission
to whom He wished to open the hoard,
to whatever man seemed fit to Him.

XLII Then it was clear that it had not profited
the one who wrongly had hidden away
the glittering jewels under the wall.
First the hoard-guard had slain a man
unlike other men, and then that quarrel
was fiercely avenged. It is a mystery where
a courageous man will meet his fated end,
no longer dwell in the mead-hall with [kinsmen].
So it was for Beowulf when he sought combat,
deadly barrow-guard; he did not know
how his parting from life might come about.
The princes of old had sunk the treasure
so deep with spells, buried till Doomsday,
that he who plundered the floor of treasures
would be guilty of sin, tortured by evils,
bound in hell-chains at devils' shrines.
None the more readily had he earlier seen
the gold-bestowing kindness of the owner.[63]

Wiglaf addressed them, Weohstan's son:

[63] The preceding passage (lines 3047-3075) has been regarded as one of the most crucial in the whole poem and also one of the most difficult to interpret. The narrator says clearly that the gold of the hoard is protected by a "spell" (line 3048) and that no one may touch it—*unless* God allows (lines 3049-3053). But the implications of this are not made plain: has God allowed Beowulf to claim the treasure and thereby shown him special favor? Or has Beowulf unknowingly laid unjust claim to the hoard, so that his death can be understood as a result of breaking the spell? Is the one "who plundered [the hoard," and who will therefore be "guilty of sin, tortured by evils, / bound in hell-chains" (lines 3067-3069a) the dragon? the thief? Beowulf ? Wiglaf? There is much uncertainty, moreover, on how to translate the final two lines of the passage (3070-3071). Chickering renders them as literally as possible, preserving their ambiguity; but other experts believe that the lines have been miscopied at some stage and so cannot be translated as they stand. One favored alternative, involving a correction to the Old English text in the manuscript, is to translate (from line 3067): "so that the man who robbed the place would be guilty of crimes … unless the kindness of the Ruler [i.e. God?] had more readily looked upon him before in his eagerness for gold" [translation C. A. J.]. Unfortunately, by this interpretation, the sense of the lines merely repeats the idea expressed already at 3049-3053 and so does not clarify the poet's final view on Beowulf's culpability under the curse.

"Often many earls must suffer misery
through the will of one, as we do now.
We could not persuade our beloved leader,
our kingdom's shepherd, by any counsel,
not to attack that gold-keeper,
to let him lie where long he had lain,
dwelling in his cave till the end of the world.
He held to his fate. The hoard has been opened
at terrible cost. That fate was too strong
that drew [the king of our people] toward it.[64]
I went inside and looked all around,
saw the room's treasure, when the way was clear;
not at all gently was a journey allowed
under that earth-work. I quickly seized
a huge load of treasure, rich hoard-goods
piled in my arms, carried them Out,
back to my king. He was still living then,
had his wits about him. He spoke of many things,
old in his sorrow, bade me address you,
ordered that you build him a burial mound
on the site of his pyre, high and famous,
for your friend's deeds, since he was the best,
the worthiest warrior throughout the world,
as long as he enjoyed the wealth of his stronghold.
Let us hurry now, make a second [journey]
to see the hoard, bright-[gemmed] gold,
the marvel in the cave. I shall lead you,
that you may examine the rings close at hand,
see enough broad gold. Prepare the bier,
make it ready quickly when we come out again;
then carry our lord, our beloved man,
to where he must dwell long in God's keeping."
The son of Weohstan, sound in battle,
the brave man ordered that they announce
to all warriors, owners of dwellings,
that men of property from near and far
were to bring timber for the king's pyre:
"The fire must gnaw —the flames growing dark—
this prince of warriors who often withstood
the rains of iron, hard battle-hail,
when arrow-storms, string-sent, rattled
loud upon the shield-wall, shafts did duty,
swift in their feathers, well served by barbs."
And then the wise man, son of Weohstan,
chose from the council the best men there,
seven king's thanes in a [gathered] band.
The eight of them went down in the barrow,
beneath the evil roof. He who led them
held a torch, firelight in hand.
No lots were drawn over that hoard
once the men saw how every part of it
lay unguarded throughout the hall,
gold wasting away. Little they mourned

[64] Once more, the poem's judgment on Beowulf seems couched in ambivalence. Wiglaf's words at lines 3073-3082 direct a muted blame against Beowulf for his determination to face the dragon alone, but they end by admitting that fate, not Beowulf's choice, has dictated the outcome.

that hasty plunder of the precious goods,
but carried them out, then pushed the dragon
over the cliff-wall, gave to the waves
the hoard-keeper, let the sea take him.
Then the twisted gold was loaded on a cart,
incredible wealth, and the noble [warrior],
the gray-haired king, was carried to Whale's Cliff.
XLIII The Geatish people then built a pyre
on that high ground, no mean thing,
hung with helmets, strong battle-boards,
bright coats of mail, as he had requested,
and then they laid high in the center
their famous king, their beloved lord,
the warriors weeping. Then on that headland
the great fire was wakened. The wood-smoke climbed up,
black above flames; the roaring one danced,
encircled by wailing; the wind died away
until the fire had broken that bone-house,
had burned to the heart. Sad and despairing,
the warriors grieved for the death of their lord.
In the same fashion a Geatish woman,
her hair bound up, [wove] a grief-song,
the lament [for Beowulf.] Over and over
[she said] that she feared [the attacks of raiders],
many slaughters, the terror of troops,
shame and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke.
Then the men of the Weders built on that cliff
a memorial barrow that was high and broad,
to be seen far off by ocean travelers,
and it took ten days to build that monument
to the famous man. The remains of the pyre
they buried in walls as splendidly worked
as men wise in skill knew how to fashion.
Within this barrow they placed jeweled rings,
all the ornaments the brave-minded men
had earlier taken away from the hoard;
they gave to the earth for its final keeping
the treasure of princes, gold in the ground,
where it lies even now, as useless to men
as it was before.[65] Then round the barrow
twelve nobles rode, war-brave princes.
They wanted to mourn their king in their [grief],
to weave a lay and speak about the man:
they honored his nobility and deeds of courage,
their friend's great prowess. So it is [fitting]
that a man speak praise of his beloved lord,
love him in spirit, when he must be [led]
forth from his life, the body's home.
Thus did the Weders mourn in words
the fall of their lord, his hearth-companions.
They said that he was, of the kings in this world,
the kindest to his men, the most courteous man,
the best to his people, and most eager for fame.[66]

[65] The reburial of all the treasure with Beowulf's remains in the newly constructed barrow seems to go against the king's own wishes that his people should benefit from the hoard (compare lines 2790-2796).
[66] On the ambiguity of the Geats' final word of praise for Beowulf as "most eager for fame," see the introduction, section III.2.