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Preface

The literatures of medieval France and England offer a textual richness and variety that scholars have only begun to make available to readers limited to modern English. Not all the kinds of literature that found favor among medieval readers and hearers have been fortunate enough to find popularizing champions in modern times. The saint's life, the beast epic, the debate, the personification allegory, the short narrative—to name only some prominent forms of writing in the period—remain largely inaccessible today, sometimes even to specialist scholars. The sad truth is that many medieval works that would certainly repay study and appreciation still await modern scientific editions. They must be read in their original manuscripts, or, if they attained printed form in the early modern period, in versions that are normally unreliable and difficult to find. Modern literary scholarship is far from completing the archaeological tasks of this period's reconstruction and assessment.

An exception to this general rule, however, is to be found in the two genres that for most in our time typify and define culture of this bygone age. Medieval epic and romance early won places in the modern literary canon because of the enthusiasms of nineteenth century scholars and revivalists (Alfred Tennyson and Walter Scott are perhaps the best known in the English-speaking world). But even those familiar with *Beowulf* and the Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes (works that have often been translated) probably have little idea of the breadth of the epic and romance traditions to which these poems separately belong. The perhaps surprising fact is that many epics and romances in Latin and the vernacular languages have survived the dangers posed by time and chance. This embarrassment of riches is undoubtedly but a small portion of what once existed.

In assembling an anthology devoted to epic and romance, I have been mindful of these distorting limitations and have attempted to travel several steps beyond the established canon. Of course, it has proved impossible in the confines of a single volume to do more than

suggest the variety of surviving texts that can legitimately claim to be romances or epics in some sense. But this collection, it may be thought, gives a more substantial impression of the legacy of medieval romance and epic than has previously been available in a handy, reader-friendly form. It is intended to complement *Medieval English and French Legends*, a companion volume also available from College Publishing, and *Arthurian Fictions*, which William W. Kibler and I will, *Deo volente*, soon complete. The three volumes should provide an extensive and flexible collection of translated primary texts suited to either the undergraduate or the graduate classroom.

Any survey of the field intended for those who are barely acquainted with it, if at all, can hardly omit acknowledged masterworks. Of necessity, then, this present volume, like its fellows, offers something of a compromise. *Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland*, and Chrétien's *Yvain*, three of the period's best known works, find a place here in complete and new—or newly revised—translations. Also included is a new and complete translation of the *lais* of Marie De France. The collection is rounded out, however, by some texts that, though perhaps unfamiliar, are undoubtedly classics of their kind: the Middle English *Havelok*, *The Taking of Alexandria* (a selection only from this very long work), and *The Chatelaine of Vergi*.

In deciding upon what to include here, I have been guided by what I have come to know of the needs of both a non-academic readership and upper division or graduate students. The aim has also been to provide a semester's worth of material for students in medieval literature courses, a common offering in university English departments. Thus, along with English works that students are not likely to study in survey courses or a Chaucer seminar, we have included a substantially larger number of noteworthy French texts. No German, Italian, or Provençal works have found a place here. These exclusions reflect only judgments of relevance, not of value or interest. Medieval French literature, much of which was composed and consumed in the British Isles, exerted the greatest influence on developing English traditions after the Norman Conquest. Studying the important and representative French texts thus has the greatest utility for students whose overall intellectual project is the mastery of literature in English, broadly speaking. A strong case might even be made that French literature is the master tradition of the Middle Ages in general. Certainly, prominent

texts in this language provided many of the models for the development of vernacular writing in countries as far distant as Iceland.

A final point is that the English and French works included here have been chosen for their complementarity. While sharing much in common, formally and thematically, the selections in each category also reflect, in their substantial divergences, the flexibility and vitality of the body of conventions they draw on for inspiration and inevitably “make new.” These conventions are broadly medieval, and they are as much the recognizable, shaping tradition of the modern European literatures as the unfamiliar contours of an imaginative world that can only be resurrected through the labors of translation and literary scholarship.

Such remoteness requires a somewhat elaborate apparatus to recount necessary facts and provide some discussion of critical issues. The volume begins with a brief historical introduction that traces the important events that define the political and literary history of France and England in the Middle Ages. The historical introduction is complemented by a chronology, which lists in shortened and more easily referenced table form much of the same information. The two sections are each preceded by discussion, necessarily brief, of major literary questions raised by epic and romance. More specific details of literary history and analysis are furnished in the headnotes to each of the selections, which close with suggestions for further reading that are meant to guide the interested reader to fuller discussion in English of literary and historical questions.

I wish to thank Professor Barbara K. Altmann for her help with the translation of the *Song of Roland*. Her generous and gracious support of this project is most appreciated.

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A Brief Historical Introduction

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, the territories that would become France and England were two of the most important provinces of the Roman Empire: Gaul and Britain. Gaul had been conquered by Julius Caesar in the first century B.C.E., and Britain, after an initial foray by Caesar, decisively won for Rome by the legions of the emperor Claudius about a hundred years later. The Romans seized these lands from Celtic tribes. Brother Celts in both Ireland and Scotland were spared the benefits and discontents of Roman rule. Britain and Gaul were soon thoroughly Romanized and, as the new religion spread throughout the empire, their inhabitants were converted to Christianity, though many rural areas undoubtedly remained pagan.

Roman control over both provinces weakened in the early fifth century, especially after Alaric's Visigoths captured and sacked Rome in 410 C.E. The withdrawal of garrisoned legions led, perhaps inevitably, to invasion by the various Germanic tribes settled on the margins of the empire in the west. In southern Gaul, the Visigoths established a large domain that came to include Roman Spain. Northern Gaul fell prey to the Franks, who crossed the Rhine from their homeland in what is now western Germany. They quickly assumed control of lands that had belonged to Rome for more than four centuries. Though it did result in the end of Roman government, this movement should perhaps be considered a migration rather than an invasion. In many areas, the number of Franks was relatively small. Thus they quickly assimilated to their new cultural surroundings, surrendering their Germanic dialects in favor of the spoken Latin (so-called Vulgar Latin) spoken by the Romano-Celtic inhabitants. As this settlement was going forward, Clovis I emerged as a strong and successful leader of this people. Under his leadership (c. 466–511), the Franks were united politically, and their empire came to include much of what is now western Germany, the low countries, and modern France. Wisely, Clovis continued Roman administrative practices and converted to orthodox Christianity, aligning himself with those of the same faith throughout

his realm. In 507, he decisively defeated the Visigoths (who were Arian Christians, a heresy in the eyes of the orthodox). Clovis was prevented only by the Ostrogoth Theoderic, whose people were firmly established in Italy, from seizing all Visigoth territory in the south. The kingdom Clovis established would endure in one form or another until 843, when the treaty of Verdun would parcel it out to the three sons of Louis the Pious (778–840). But Clovis did bequeath his people some years of conflict by dividing it upon his death to his two sons, who became rulers of rivals Neustria and Austrasia. The Carolingian mayors of the palace, administrators for the ineffectual Merovingian successors to Clovis, would unite the twin kingdoms toward the end of the seventh century.

The experience of Roman Britain with Germanic invaders was quite different. After the legions departed, the Britons faced a considerable threat from the Scots and Picts, Celtic peoples living to the north of the defensive wall completed by the emperor Hadrian. Yet it was sea borne Germanic invaders from what is now Holland and Belgium and, perhaps, western Denmark and Germany, that brought an end to the culture developed under Roman rule. Tradition holds that three tribes, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, left their homes across the North Sea to serve the Britons as mercenaries to prevent attack from without. These erstwhile guardians, however, soon launched an invasion of their own. Little is certain about the precise course of events that followed. It is clear, however, that the conflict between the Britons and these Anglo-Saxons led to no peaceful accommodation. The Anglo-Saxons were victorious, seizing most of the land previously held by the Romans, settling as far north as what is now the Scottish lowlands. The natives either fled the island, in a vast exodus that would establish the territory of Brittany in western Gaul, or they decamped to largely mountainous and inaccessible western areas of Britain, there to constitute settlements that would be known as Wales and Cornwall. Unlike the Franks, the Germanic tribes now in possession of Britain had little use for Roman institutions, which rapidly disappeared. The island's once prosperous cities became deserted or shrank drastically in population. Under Roman rule, the Britons had spoken both Latin and various Celtic dialects. The Anglo-Saxons adopted neither language, nor did they convert to Christianity. The society they constituted in Britain was pagan and Germanic. It consisted of seven kingdoms, an unstable

heptarchy of Kent, Sussex, Wessex, Essex, East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumberland. Though strong leaders (most notably Alfred of Wessex in the ninth century) at times extended their authority over neighboring realms, lasting political unity would come only much later, ironically with the Norman conquest in 1066.

Though more decisively severed from Roman traditions than Gaul, Anglo-Saxon Britain did not long remain isolated from the international culture of Western Europe. Missionaries from Christian Ireland made their way to the north of Britain in the seventh century. These monks established monasteries in places like Lindisfarne, Wearmouth, and Jarrow that not only aided in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, but also became important centers of literate culture, vital to the preservation of classical and Christian traditions as the continent descended into a dark age. The Irish were not the only Christians with an interest in converting the Anglo-Saxons. Some years before the monks' arrival, in 597, the pope had dispatched his own mission to the island. Pope Gregory the Great's delegate, Augustine (later St. Augustine of Canterbury), achieved great success with the southern tribes, making his base at Canterbury in Kent. King Æthelbert became the first Christian Anglo-Saxon ruler of the island. Like his Irish co-religionists, Augustine promoted learning and education, bringing a substantial library with him from the continent. This intellectual initiative was continued by scholarly Theodore of Tarsus, who later became archbishop of Canterbury. At the synod of Whitby (663), churchmen from both the Irish north and Roman south reached agreement on contested issues of practice, such as determining the date of Easter.

Especially in the northern monasteries, Christian culture flourished in Britain, aiding in the survival of classical Latin literary culture through the preservation and copying of texts, as well as the composition of new works. The most important international scholar this culture produced was Bede, a Benedictine monk who spent his entire life at the monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow. Bede's writings are extensive and various, including works of theology, history, and science. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, his most important book, offers an account of the triumph of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon society. The Viking raids and then full-scale invasions that began about 787 ravaged monastic foundations, which were often the repositories of considerable wealth. The damage was so great that by the late ninth

century literate culture had declined precipitously.

Bede and his fellow clerics wrote in Latin, the language of the church and of international intellectual life. The blending of Germanic and Christian cultures in Britain, however, also produced a rich literature in Anglo-Saxon (also known as Old English). Not long after the Christian conversion, the Roman alphabet began to be used for the writing of Old English. At first, written Old English was used for strictly utilitarian purposes (e.g., wills and deeds). Such was the status of their native language, however, that the Anglo-Saxons quickly set about creating a literature that drew on both pagan Germanic and Christian traditions. An important feature of Germanic life had been an oral poetic composition and performance in which the genre of heroic epic had held an honored place. The Old English *Beowulf* reveals much about such pre-literate traditions. *Beowulf* offers several accounts of the extemporaneously composed and performed heroic verse meant to entertain and memorialize important occasions in the life of the tribe. Though *Beowulf* was composed in writing, the poem's style reflects an older tradition. The oldest surviving Germanic epic, it preserves saga materials from a pagan golden age that were undoubtedly transmitted orally for a number of generations, perhaps for several hundred years.

Bede's history recounts how a different tradition took shape sometime in the later decades of the seventh century. It seems that a certain brother in the monastery of Whitby named Caedmon was one day "singled out by the grace of God" to compose poetry in the native Anglo-Saxon oral style on religious themes. A short hymn of praise is recorded in Bede's Latin text (a version in Old English survives as well), but Bede says that Caedmon's *oeuvre* was even more extensive, including poems that "interpreted" the Holy Scripture that was read to the illiterate monk. Caedmon's other works are probably not to be found among the considerable number of Old English poems on religious themes that survive, indicating that his example was followed by a number of others. One of these was Cynewulf, whose name is worked into the end of his poems. These treat Biblical subjects (the deeds of Judith from the Old Testament) as well as holy biography (the lives of Sts. Helen and Juliana).

Old English religious verse also includes several Biblical paraphrases (e.g., *Exodus*), lyrical and allegorical works (e.g., *Phoenix*), and sacred

biographies, the most notable of which is *Andreas*, a stirring account of the apostle Andrew's conversion of pagan cannibals. Old English religious literature has an even broader reach. A significant body of original religious prose and translations from the Latin survives as well. Alarmed by an educational crisis that meant many priests were barely literate, King Alfred of Wessex (871–99) commissioned Old English renderings of important Latin works, such as Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, with a view to making them widely available. In the late tenth century, Aelfric, abbot of Eynsham, and Wulfstan, archbishop of York, set a high standard for sermon writing as the church attempted to better address the religious needs of the common people by providing them instruction in their native language.

No such literary efflorescence, in either Latin or the vernacular, took place in Merovingian Gaul, where social conditions were less favorable. By the middle of the seventh century, in fact, Merovingian society was in severe decline, its cities in ruins, its once profitable commerce interrupted. Education and learning had sunk to very low levels. Unlike those in seventh- and early eighth-century Anglo-Saxon England, the monastic foundations in the empire Clovis had established, though extensive, had never come to function as cultural centers. Perhaps this was because spreading a new faith was not their task. Unfortunately, seventh-century Merovingian society was not fortunate enough to have religious leaders of great learning and intellectual energy, such as Augustine of Canterbury and Theodore of Tarsus, nor did it possess the wealth of books these two had brought with them to Britain. While Bede chronicles the triumph of English Christianity and its fruitful amalgamation with pagan traditions, Gregory, bishop of Tours, writes in his *History of the Franks* about the degeneration of learning, law, and religion, as well as the decay of the social order, in seventh-century France. Gregory spent a distinguished career as a bishop, had the benefit of much education, and composed other important works, most notably a life of St. Martin of Tours. In comparison to Bede, however, he seems a minor figure, reflecting the substantial differences between the two cultures. Even Gregory's Latin lacks the stylistic polish and grammatical correctness of his English counterpart. Severely unsettled social conditions made it difficult for him and his contemporaries to serve as more than barely effective caretakers and transmitters of classical and Christian culture. As in England, but

from an even earlier period, Merovingian monasteries suffered grievously from attack, by Saracens in the south, Vikings in the north, and Magyars to the east.

With the coming of the Carolingians in the eighth century, monasticism enjoyed something of a renaissance as social conditions became more settled. Especially during the reign of Charlemagne (742–814), initiatives of reform turned many foundations into educational centers. This development continued, in spite of unceasing threats from within and without, even as Carolingian rule became less effective following the death of Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious. In the closing years of the eleventh century, a new and vital form of monasticism took shape at Cîteaux that would soon come to dominate European society. The reformist zeal of this Cistercian movement produced notable leaders, especially St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). Cistercian devotionism even spawned a literary tradition of spiritualized romance epitomized by the visionary *Quest of the Holy Grail*.

Monasticism in Merovingian and Carolingian France, however, did not provide an environment in which Christian and Germanic traditions could profitably mix and generate a vernacular literature. The linguistic situation did not favor such a development. Literature in Old English emerged at a startlingly early stage in Anglo-Saxon England because those who had displaced Roman culture from Britain had not abandoned their Germanic language, which was obviously quite distinct from the Latin re-introduced by Christian missionaries. Anglo-Saxon was associated with cultural traditions that continued to be embraced with pride even with the conversion; a nostalgic admiration for the unredeemable pagan past endured. In contrast, because it was spoken by a minority who were soon assimilated, Frankish never achieved cultural prominence. Providing it with a written form was never at issue in the Merovingian period.

Moreover, the Vulgar Latin adopted by the Franks was not until the eighth century generally perceived as anything but an inferior variety of the written language of such central importance in both religious life and government administration. Consequently, literary texts in what came to be known as French were apparently not composed until the eleventh century. Medieval French literature begins with the sudden appearance of two masterpieces, the first religious and the second secular: *The Life of Saint Alexis* (c. 1050) and *The Song of Roland*

(c. 1095), which, much like *Beowulf*, memorializes the heroic accomplishments of an earlier generation. Little Latin poetry was composed during the Merovingian period. While more of note survives from Carolingian times, only in the twelfth century would a substantial body of literature in that language begin to be produced in France.

During the eighth century, Anglo-Saxon society remained an unstable mix of kingdoms. Political conditions at the end of the Merovingian era were more conducive to political unity as a strong dynasty came to power. In 732, Charles Martel, the progenitor of the Carolingian dynasty, defeated the Saracens near Poitiers and Tours. His grandson Charlemagne expanded the lands under his control and made substantial progress toward establishing a centralized administration that could better insure social order. In recognition of his political pre-eminence and strong support of the Christian church, Charlemagne was crowned emperor of the west by the pope in 800; there is no doubt that for the space of several generations he was the most powerful ruler in Christendom. Swollen by his many conquests, Charlemagne's kingdom was even more extensive than that of Clovis. Relative security from internal and external attack made possible a renaissance in learning and education, for whose encouragement and direction Charlemagne displayed substantial enthusiasm. This initiative was led, among others, by a well-educated and talented Englishman, Alcuin of York, whom Charlemagne engaged to oversee educational reform. Louis the Pious continued his father's work in all these areas, but with his death in 840 central authority declined quickly. By the end of the ninth century, France, like Anglo-Saxon England, had come to suffer constant attacks from Viking invaders, who settled substantial areas of both countries. In the north of England, a large tract of land, the Danelaw, was ceded by treaty to the Scandinavians. Similarly, the later Carolingians came to terms with the Norsemen who settled in the Cotentin peninsula during the early decades of the tenth century after terrorizing the kingdom for many years. This area was recognized as a new duchy of Normandy when their leader Rollo became its first duke and, in theory at least, accepted the overlordship of the French throne.

Though its Latin culture had declined significantly since the age of Bede, a strong vernacular literary tradition persisted in Anglo-Saxon England when William of Normandy conquered the kingdom in 1066,

first defeating the Anglo-Saxon king Harold at Hastings and then prosecuting a successful campaign that ended with his coronation in London on Christmas Day of that same year. William quickly forced the native aristocracy from his new possession, installing Normans or other Frenchmen of his choosing into all important church positions as vacancies fell open. The territories of the kingdom were parceled out to a French-speaking nobility, which introduced feudal practices. England thus became trilingual, with Latin, French, and English all in use (and, of course, various Celtic dialects as well in Wales and Scotland). Intellectual and religious life continued to be conducted largely in Latin. As a spoken language, French did not much extend its influence beyond the ruling class William brought with him. There was no attempt, because there was no need in a rigidly hierarchical feudal society, to challenge the linguistic allegiance of the common people. However, the well-established tradition of using written English for legal, literary, and devotional purposes largely came to an end as French became the privileged vernacular alongside Latin. There were notable exceptions to this general rule, however. At the monastery in Peterborough, for example, a continuation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was written in English until 1154; *The Owl and the Nightingale*, a twelfth-century debate poem that draws on learned traditions, shows that English was chosen by some writers of the period who addressed educated, perhaps even aristocratic, readers.

There is no doubt, however, that native literary traditions were strained or declined because of rivalry with French, which remained the language of aristocratic patrons in the country until the fourteenth century. Under William and his successors, especially the Plantagenet line that came to the throne in the middle of the twelfth century with the powerful Henry II, the English royal court became one of Europe's most notable centers of literary production, even giving rise to a new literary form of French: Anglo-Norman. Poets like Marie de France were attracted to Henry's court, which was often presided over by his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, perhaps the greatest literary patroness of the Middle Ages. Henry's court was intrigued by its own place within the development of western culture, as bear witness the romances of antiquity that were composed for its edification and entertainment. In works like the *Romance of Eneas*, Henry and his courtiers found mirrors of their drive toward dynastic expansion and the value they placed on an

inner life of refined feelings. Such courtiers were especially entertained by disquisitions about love, which became the great subject of literature in this period. One of the most tantalizingly ambiguous works in this genre seems to have been penned for Henry's court. The Latin treatise *The Art of Courtly Love*, written by Andrew the Chaplain, addresses, with perhaps no little irony, the "rules" that should govern the conduct of love affairs, which are, it is argued, necessarily extramarital. In one section of Andreas's book, Eleanor of Aquitaine and other noble ladies appear a kind of supreme court whose task is to render judgments in difficult "cases," determining what is right and what impractical or dishonorable in the game of love.

The aristocratic class that wielded power in England and France discovered a perfect mythology to express such ideals in the Arthurian stories whose ultimate source was Celtic mythology and saga. Both Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France make reference to "Breton" poets and an apparently itinerant, oral tradition, but French writers at the time also drew on Latin sources, especially Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, which was soon translated into French by the Norman writer Wace. Even as it saw a widespread deepening of Latin culture, the twelfth century witnessed the emergence and flourishing of a number of vernacular forms in addition to the Arthurian romance. An extended narrative in verse, the romance was used to treat widely varied subjects. The Anglo-Norman poet Wace, for example, in addition to treating English history and Arthur in his *Brut*, also composed a romance tracing the history of the Normans. Though Chrétien's romances focus on love as the knight's most important formative experience, Anglo-Norman romancers, catering to the different tastes of their audiences, told tales of disinheritance, exile, struggle, and eventual vindication. Middle English writers in the thirteenth centuries often followed this fashion, as *Havelok* attests. As it had in Anglo-Saxon England, the saint's life enjoyed great popularity, with masterpieces like the *Life of St. Alexis* in France and *The Life of St. Katherine* in England. Comic forms such as the beast epic and the fabliau (a short bawdy tale) also emerged and found an audience, first in France and then in England. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is, among other things, an anthology of medieval genres, giving some idea of their impressive range and variety. Among the tales are several fabliaux, an extended romance, a beast epic tale (with barnyard animals functioning as human characters), a

saint's life, and a sermon. All these genres had achieved prominence by the middle of the thirteenth century in France.

Alongside the romance, however, the most enduring literary genre that emerged on the continent was the *chanson de geste* or "song of history." These long narrative poems celebrated the exploits of national heroes (especially those associated with the reign of Charlemagne) and, in addition to being read, were sung or chanted in public, at least in the early decades of their popularity. Though often associated with the twelfth century and conceived as precursors of the romance, the *chansons de geste*, in one form or another, enjoyed a substantial popularity until the end of the French Middle Ages. The chronicle poems of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which are often biographical in the manner of Guillaume de Machaut's *The Taking of Alexandria*, draw on and expand this epic tradition. Unlike the romance, this literary tradition never found a reflex in English; Chaucer includes no example in the *Canterbury Tales*. However, Anglo-Norman literature saw the emergence of works that resemble the epic in their subject matter and treatment. The popular thirteenth-century romance *Gui de Warewic*, which was soon adapted into Middle English, treats issues of dynastic succession, love, and even Christian devotionalism as it relates the accomplishments of a local English hero.

The literary richness of the later Middle Ages in France and England (roughly 1100–1500) was made possible by the relative security of feudal society, its comparative wealth, and its investment in learned traditions, the intellectual inheritance of Greece and Rome. Poets were often educated at cathedral and monastic schools, or even took degrees at the universities that emerged to flourish during the thirteenth century. Undoubtedly, there were widespread popular traditions of storytelling that have often left little trace. For example, the Breton tellers of tales mentioned by Chrétien and Marie de France were likely professional entertainers who traveled from court to court or marketplace to marketplace. However, the vernacular poets of the time whose texts have been recorded generally addressed a more restricted audience, one associated generally with some court or patron even though their works also circulated more widely in written form. Their poetry largely reflects the tastes and interests of the ruling classes. The reading and literary public of France and England expanded considerably in the last two centuries of the Middle Ages as literacy was

extended to an increasingly powerful bourgeois and professional class (to which poets such as Guillaume de Machaut and Geoffrey Chaucer often belonged). Such a public became increasingly interested in devotional works as a concern with the inner spiritual life deepened, encouraged by changes such as the institution of private confession by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1204.

By the early fourteenth century, England and France saw the emergence of powerful rulers, who exploited the development of something like national sentiment. The successors to Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious (d. 840), had presided over something like a second Merovingian age in which royal authority grew so weak that the last of this line, Louis V (986–7) was not as powerful as most of the dukes and counts who were nominally his vassals. The kings of the new royal house, the Capetians, ruled France until 1328 and, through their descendants, until the death of Louis XVI during the French Revolution. At first, they were much less powerful than the great nobles, over whom they were sovereign, at least in theory. The accession of Philip II Augustus (reigned 1180–1223), however, led not only to more effective and centralized administration, but successful outmaneuvering of France's chief rival, England. At the battle of Bouvines, Philip and his allies defeated the forces of King John I of England and his allies. John was forced by this defeat to cede the French possessions he had inherited from his father, Henry II of England. During the thirteenth century, French royal power increased with charismatic and successful rulers such as Louis IX (reigned 1226–70), who was later sanctified, and Philip IV the Fair (reigned 1285–1314). In England, the decline under John of the vast Angevin empire eventually led to conflict between his son Henry III (reigned 1216–72) and his barons, even as England endured a series of further humiliations at French hands. All this changed with the accession of Henry's son Edward I (1272–1307) and his successors, especially Henry V (reigned 1413–1422), who established a strong central authority, defended the northern border against the Scots, and challenged for possession of French territories, and even for the French kingdom itself in a series of wars beginning in 1337 and ending, with English defeat, in 1453. This Hundred Years War is the defining event of the political history of the two kingdoms in the High Middle Ages. Socially and culturally, however, it is the Black Death that, reaching Europe in 1347, most affected the life of

its two peoples, killing perhaps as much as a quarter of the population of England and France and leading to unrest and revolt among the lower orders: the Jacquerie in France, followed by the Peasants' Revolt in England. In neither instance, however, was the feudal order decisively challenged. The rule of king and nobles persisted until the end of the period in both kingdoms, with Charles VIII (reigned 1483–98) in France adding both Brittany and Burgundy to areas under royal control and Henry VII (reigned 1485–1509) restoring authority after a dynastic crisis, the Wars of the Roses.

During the High Middle Ages, the feudal kingdoms of England and France shared not only a political system, centered on the aristocratic court, that survived and flourished despite the changing fortunes of kings and dynasties alike. These two countries also shared connections that were the twin legacies of William's conquest and of Henry II's establishment of a huge kingdom that included England, Normandy, and other vast areas of France. The enduring presence of the French language at the upper levels of society in England, as well as the international prestige of French literature, brought such influence that when literature in English began to grow in popularity during the fourteenth century it developed largely through French models. The most notable poets of the age, Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower, were influenced not only by French romances of the twelfth century, but by the love allegory dream vision that had taken shape in the thirteenth century after the appearance of the *Romance of the Rose*, a sprawling text composed by two authors that, among other things, addresses the linked experiences of love and seduction. As not in the classic romances, where narrators report the actions of fictional characters, the *Rose* features an "I" narrator who relates his own.

This shift toward subjective experience is to be seen not only in Chaucer's early poetry, such as *The Legend of Good Women*, where the narrator recounts a dream in which he is asked by divine authorities to tell the stories of virtuous women, or in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, likewise a collection of stories framed by an elaborate allegory in the manner of the *Rose*. Much of the late medieval literature of this kind belongs to the genre of the *dit* or "tale," whose concern with subjective experience, however fictionalized, provides the ideal form for authors eager to write about their own experiences of writing. Even when Chaucer and Gower follow another literary fashion, the collection of

short narratives with dramatized tellers, they are concerned to represent themselves within their works. In *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, Chaucer includes “himself” as one of the pilgrims journeying toward the holy shrine and has not little fun with this self-portrait as the hapless poet finds disfavor with his initial effort at reciting a poem and is required instead to relate a tale in prose. Such literary games illustrate the growing importance of the author, who is now identified more closely with the works s/he produces. The last two centuries of the Middle Ages in France witness the emergence of a number of notable authors, including Christine de Pizan (1364–1430). Her career exemplifies the reach and variety of literary production in the time. Christine’s works range from a collection of lyric poems, to short narrative *dits*, to longer prose works on intellectual and moral themes, including her *Book of the City of Ladies*, which argues against antifeminist male authorities for a just assessment of the accomplishments of women.

Chronology

Abbreviations: c. = about; d. = died, fl. = flourished, ME = Middle English, OE = Old English

DATE	ENGLISH HISTORY	FRENCH/EUROPEAN HISTORY	LITERARY HISTORY
350		Martin, Bishop of Tours, (fl. 340–c. 400).	
400	Roman legions leave Britain (409).	Rome sacked by Visigoths (410).	St. Augustine of Hippo (fl. 390–425). St. Jerome completes translation of Bible into Latin (c. 405).
425	St. Patrick's mission to convert Irish (c. 435).	Salian Franks living west of Rhine, with centers at Tournai and Cambrai.	Ausonius, Gallo–Roman poet, (fl. 330–90).
450	Last appeal of Romano–Britons to Rome (c. 446). Conquest of Britain by Angles, Saxons, and Jutes and perhaps other Germanic tribes begins. Hengest and Horsa settle in	Merovech, founder of Merovingian line (d. 456). Visigoths extend rule over Southern Gaul.	

DATE	ENGLISH HISTORY	FRENCH/EUROPEAN HISTORY	LITERARY HISTORY
	Kent (c. 450).	Vandals sack Rome (455).	
475	Saxons settle in Wessex and Sussex (c. 470–500).	Clovis I (r. 482–511) takes over administration of Roman Gaul in the north and unifies Franks there.	
500	St. David in Wales. Romano-Britons defeated at battle of Mt. Badon (c. 510).	Clovis defeats Visigoths (507) and adds southern Gaul to empire. Benedictine order founded (529).	Boethius writes <i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> (c. 525). Venantius Fortunatus, Latin poet in Northern France (fl. 560–600).
525		Merovingian dynasty rules over Clovis's empire until 737, but power resides with mayors of the palace after 639.	Gregory of Tours (fl. 570–94), bishop and author of <i>History of the Franks</i> , also writes life of St. Martin of Tours.
550	St. Columba founds mission at Iona off northern coast.		Gildas writes <i>Conquest of Britain</i> (c. 547).
575	Battle of Dyrrham (577). Britons left only with Wales and Dunnonia. Establishment of principal		

Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, known as the Heptarchy.

- 600 Pope Gregory the Great sends Augustine to convert the Angles and Saxons (597).
 Æthelfrith of Bernicia defeats Britons near Chester (c. 615).
 Edwin king of Northumbria (616–32) converted by Paulinus (627).
 Irish missionary Aidan founds monastery at Lindisfarne (c. 635).
 Oswald of Northumbria defeats British Cadwallon at Heavenfield (635).
 650 Mercia converted (656).
 Synod of Whitby (663) confirms primacy of Roman over Irish practice.
 675
 Caedmon's *Hymn* composed (c. 670).
 First literary work in Old English that survives in written record.
 Caedmonian poems: *Genesis A*, *Daniel*,
 Early OE heroic poetry such as *Widsith*, *Deor*, and *Waldere* (c. 650).

DATE	ENGLISH HISTORY	FRENCH/EUROPEAN HISTORY	LITERARY HISTORY
	St. Wilfrid converts Sussex (682). Theodore of Tarsus, archbishop of Canterbury (669–90).	Charles Martel (c. 688–741), founder of Carolingian dynasty.	<i>Christ and Satan</i> (c. 700?). OE <i>Exodus</i> (c. 690?).
700	English missions to continent.	Arabs land in Spain (711). St. Boniface in Germany (711).	Flourishing of northern monastic literary culture at Lindisfarne, Wearmouth, Jarrow, and Whitby.
725		Charles Martel defeats Saracens at Poitiers (732).	Bede completes <i>Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i> (731).
750	Offa king of Mercia (756–96).	Reign of Charlemagne (768–814).	<i>Beowulf</i> composed (750?).
775	Viking raids begin (c. 787).	Charles defeated by Basques (or Gascons) at Roncesvalles (778).	Cynewulf composes OE religious poetry: <i>Elene, Juliana, Christ II</i> (c. 800–50). Alcuin of York undertakes educational administration for Charlemagne (c. 782).
800	Vikings sack Lindisfarne (793).	Charles crowned emperor by Pope Leo III in Rome (800). Reign of Louis the Pious (814–840).	Rabanus Maurus, theologian and pupil of Alcuin (fl. 805–856).

- 825 Einhard composes *Life of Charles* (c. 829), first biography of a western ruler since antiquity.
- 850 Northumbria falls to Danes (867).
- 875 Reign of King Alfred (871–899). Wessex only kingdom not conquered by Danes.
- Treaty between Alfred and Guthrum establishes Danelaw (886).
- 900 Mercia subject to Wessex (919).
- Athelstan of Wessex defeats Scots and others at Brunanburh (937).
- 950 Scandinavian kingdom of York ends (954).
- England united under Wessex (954).
- Oaths of Strasbourg (842), first written text in early Old French.
- Alfredian translations of Latin texts begun (787).
- OE *Andreas* (c. 890?).
- Séquence de sainte Eulalie* (c. 880), first saint's life in Old French.
- Anglo-Saxon chronicle begun (891).
- OE *Judith*, *Phoenix* (c. 915?).
- OE *Battle of Brunanburh*, poem in AS chronicle.
- Vikings besiege Paris (885).
- Founding of monastery of Cluny (909). Under direction of abbot Odo (926–44), reforms of Cluny and daughter houses.
- Viking leader Rollo made first duke of Normandy by Charles III (911).

DATE	ENGLISH HISTORY	FRENCH/EUROPEAN HISTORY	LITERARY HISTORY
	St. Dunstan becomes archbishop of Canterbury.		
	Monastic revival (960–88).		
975			Major OE poetry manuscripts assembled (978–1016).
	Danegeld first levied (991).		OE <i>Battle of Maldon</i> composed.
	Battle of Maldon (991).	Reign of Hugh Capet (987–96), founder of Capetian line.	Ælfric's <i>Catholic Homilies</i> (c. 992), <i>Lives of Saints</i> (c. 993–8).
	Canute becomes king of England, Norway, and Denmark (1015).	Peace of God movement begins (989).	Wulfstan's <i>Sermo Lupi ad Anglos</i> (1014).
1025	Edward the Confessor becomes king (1042).	Reign of Henry I (1031–60).	
1050	Harold becomes king (1066).	William becomes duke of Normandy (1035).	<i>Life of Saint Alexis</i> composed (c. 1050).
	Harold victorious at Stamford Bridge (1066).	Split between Rome and Constantinople (1054).	
	William, duke of Normandy, defeats Harold at Hastings (1066).		

- 1075 Reign of William I (1066–1087).
 Domesday survey (1086).
 Mother house of Cistercian order founded (1098) at Cîteaux.
 First Crusade (1096–99).
 Council of Clermont (1095).
 St. Bernard of Clairvaux (fl. 1110–1153).
- 1100 Reign of Henry I (1100–35).
Song of Roland composed (c. 1100).
 Peter Lombard, theologian, (fl. 1135–1160).
- 1125 Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204).
 Second Crusade (1147–9).
 Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* composed (c. 1136), translated into French by Wace in 1155.
 French romances of antiquity (including *Romance of Eneas*) composed (c. 1150–65).
 Marie de France (fl. 1160–1210).
 Chrétien de Troyes (fl. 1154–1191).
 Andreas Capellanus, *De Honestate Amandi* (c. 1184).
- 1150 Reign of Henry II (1154–89).
 Henry had married Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152, gaining control over vast French territories.
 Norman barons invade Ireland (1169).
 Becket murdered (1170).
- 1175 Conquest of Ireland begins (1171).
 Reign of Richard I (the Lionhearted) (1180–1223).
 (1189–99).

DATE	ENGLISH HISTORY	FRENCH/EUROPEAN HISTORY	LITERARY HISTORY
		Saladin takes Jerusalem (1187). Third Crusade begins (1190).	Composition by some 20 authors of vast cycle of beast epic, the <i>Roman de Renart</i> (c. 1174–1250).
1200	Reign of John I (Lackland) (1200–1216). John defeated at Bouvines by French (1214). John forced to sign Magna Carta (1215). John loses most of Henry II's French possessions. Arrival of Franciscans and Dominicans (1221–4).	Foundation of University of Paris (c. 1200). Fourth Crusade begins (1201). Crusaders sack Constantinople (1204). Fourth Lateran Council (1214). Yearly confession mandatory. St. Francis founds Franciscan order (c.1209).	Geoffroi de Villehardouin composes <i>The Conquest of Jerusalem</i> , eyewitness account of Fourth Crusade (c. 1210). Troubadour poetry in southern France (fl. 1100–1200). Vulgate cycle of Arthurian romances composed (c.1215–35). ME <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i> (c. 1200). ME <i>Katherine</i> group (c. 1200). <i>Romance of the Rose</i> composed by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun (c. 1220–1290?).
1225		Albigensian crusade (1209–1229).	Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i> translated into Latin

- (1225–30).
- Reign of Louis IX (1214–70).
- 1250 University College founded at Oxford (1249).
- Barons' War (1263–7).
- Reign of Edward I, also duke of Aquitaine (1272–1307).
- 1275 Edward undertakes conquest of Wales and Scotland.
- Peterhouse, Cambridge founded (1281).
- 1300 Rebellion of Robert Bruce (1306).
- Battle of Bannockburn (1314).
- Civil war (1321–2).
- Rutebef, Parisian poet (fl. 1248–85).
- St. Bonaventure at University of Paris (fl. 1257–74).
- St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* (1267–73).
- Reign of Philip IV (the Fair) (1285–1314).
- Fall of Acre (1291).
- Estates General first meet (1302).
- Papacy at Avignon (1309–78).
- Jews expelled from France (1306).
- ME Layamon's *Brut* (c. 1277–90).
- Marco Polo's *Description of the World*, composed in Franco-Italian (c. 1300).
- Guillaume de Machaut, poet and musician (1300?–1377).
- Life of St. Louis*, composed by Jean de Joinville (1309).
- Death of Dante (1321).

DATE	ENGLISH HISTORY	FRENCH/EUROPEAN HISTORY	LITERARY HISTORY
1325	Reign of Edward III (1327–1377). Hundred Years War begins.	Reign of Philip VI (1328–50). Valois dynasty begins.	Jean Froissart, poet and chronicler (1337– c. 1404).
	Battle of Crécy (1346).	Black Death (1347–50).	Eustache Deschamps, poet, (c. 1346– c. 1406).
1350	Battle of Poitiers (1356).	Reign of John II (the Good) (1350–64).	Langland composes ME <i>Piers Plowman</i> (c. 1362).
		Jacquerie, peasant revolt (1358).	Oton de Granson, poet (fl. 1365–1397).
		Peter I of Cyprus conquers Alexandria (1365).	English used to open Parliament (1362).
		Reign of Charles V the Wise (1364–1380).	Wyclif translates Bible into English (c. 1380).
	Death of Black Prince (1376).	French recover Normandy and parts of Aquitaine (1369–77).	Geoffrey Chaucer, ME poet (fl. 1370– 1400).
			<i>Canterbury Tales</i> (begun 1387).
			ME <i>Gawain</i> poet (fl. c. 1380).
			John Gower, ME poet (fl. 1370–1408) <i>Confessio Amantis</i> (1390).

- 1375 Peasants' Revolt (1381).
 Repression of Lollardy begins (1399).
 Richard II deposed. Accession of Henry IV (1399).
 Richard II murdered (1400).
 Reign of Henry V (1413–22).
 Great Schism (1378–1417).
 Council of Constance ends Great Schism (1415–7).
 Revolt in Paris (1413).
 Joan of Arc (1412–1431).
 Reign of Charles VII (1422–61).
- 1400 Richard II murdered (1400).
 Reign of Henry V (1413–22).
 Great Schism (1378–1417).
 Council of Constance ends Great Schism (1415–7).
 Revolt in Paris (1413).
 Joan of Arc (1412–1431).
 Reign of Charles VII (1422–61).
- Philippe de Mézières, crusader, poet, and propagandist (fl. 1350–1405).
 Christine de Pizan, woman of letters, (c. 1364–c. 1430).
 Alain Chartier, poet (c. 1385–c. 1430).
 Thomas Hoccleve, ME poet (fl. 1395–1450).
Regiment of Princes (1411–2).
 Charles d'Orléans, poet, (1394–1465).
 John Lydgate, ME poet (fl. c. 1400–50).
The Fall of Princes (1431–8).
 Christine de Pizan initiates "Quarrel of the Rose" (1402).
 Chartier encourages "Quarrel of the

DATE	ENGLISH HISTORY	FRENCH/EUROPEAN HISTORY	LITERARY HISTORY
1450	Henry VI deposed (1461). Wars of the Roses (1455–85).	Franco–Burgundian treaty (1435). Expulsion of English from SW France, their last possessions (1453). Constantinople falls to Turks (1453). Reign of Louis XI (1461–83).	Belle Dame Sans Merci” (c. 1430). Paston family letters composed in England (1422–1529). Gutenberg begins printing at Mainz (1450). Thomas Malory pens <i>ME Le Mort d’Arthur</i> (1469–70).
1475	Henry Tudor defeats Richard III at Bosworth Field (1485). Henry VII becomes first of Tudor line.	Reign of Charles VIII (1483–98). Columbus lands in West Indies (1492).	William Dunbar, Scottish poet, (fl. 1490–1520). William Caxton prints first book in English (1474).

Sources: Paul Szarmach, M. Teresa Tavormina, and Joel T. Rosenthal, eds., *Medieval England: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).
William W. Kibler and Graver A. Zinn, eds., *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

A Note on the Translations

The translations in this volume are based on the standard editions detailed below. Our aim throughout has been to provide readable, modern English versions that remain as faithful as possible to the original. Sometimes stylistic considerations have taken precedence over strict fidelity. This is most evident in the translation of *Beowulf*, where verbs have at times been supplied to make the meaning of sentences clearer to the modern reader. Similarly, it has sometimes not proved useful to follow the division of lines into sentences and other forms of punctuation found in standard editions. We have been guided throughout by the needs of the non-specialist reader, for whom this book is primarily intended.

Beowulf: Klaeber, Fr. 1950. *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*. Third Edition: Boston: D.C. Heath.

Song of Roland: Brault, Gerald J., ed. and trans. 1978. *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University.

The Taking of Alexandria: Palmer, R. Barton, ed. and trans. 2002. *Guillaume de Machaut: La Prise d'Alixandre* (The Taking of Alexandria). New York: Routledge.

Yvain: Kibler, William W. 1983. Kibler's translation is based on his own edition of the Guiot manuscript. New York: Garland.

Marie de France: Ewert, A. 1944. *Marie de France: Lais* Oxford: Blackwell.

The Chatelaine of Vergi: Whitehead, F. 1944. *La Chastelaine de Vergi*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Havelok: Smithers, G.V. 1984. *Havelok*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Epic

Epic: An Introduction

The human soul never ceases to be modified by its encounter with might, swept on, blinded by that which it believes itself able to handle, bowed beneath the power of that which it suffers....For violence so crushes whomever it touches that it appears at last external no less to him who dispenses it than to him who endures it. So the idea was born of a destiny beneath which the aggressors and their victims are equally innocent, the victors and the vanquished brothers in the same misfortune....The day comes when fear, defeat or the death of beloved companion crushes the warrior's soul beneath the necessity of war. Then war ceases to be a play or a dream; the warrior understands at last that it really exists.¹

—Simone Weil

At the center of every epic, including those composed in the Middle Ages, stands the hero, a significant figure from the history of the people whose poetry memorializes his accomplishments. Emerging in a bygone era that witnessed the fulfilling of their destiny (a time of conquest, self-defense, often heroic defeat), the epic hero embodies national, cultural, and even religious ideals. He is always a larger than life figure whose victories, suffering, and transfiguration are worthy of celebration and emulation; the stories in which he figures usually form but a part of a larger cycle of legendary materials that, like the poetry that gives them form (invariable in meter, style, and vocabulary), is passed down from one generation to the next. The events and characters of an entire epoch provide the context from which the hero's individual drama emerges.

The themes of epic are conventional and easily catalogued: the growth of kingdoms and their decline, the rise and fall of dynasties, the encounters between champions of matched strength, and the con-

¹ Simone Weil, "The *Iliad*, or Poem of Might" in George A. Panichas, ed. and trans., *The Simone Weil Reader* (New York: David McKay, 1977), pp. 153, 167, 169-70. Further references noted in the text.

flicts, resolvable only by violence, that divide men of honor. Epic poetry traces events across an impressive expanse of space and time, approaching the writing of history (which is perhaps in some sense its more scientific and dispassionate form), but such works also feature an intense focus on individual destiny. Death in battle is what the epic hero lives to achieve, for his only theater of action is war, but his passing, however glorious, marks the end of an era and a fall into ordinariness for those he leaves behind to suffer his absence. Judged by standards used to measure the actions of ordinary men, the epic hero's virtue is always problematic. The perseverance, even ruthlessness, he shows in achieving his destiny must border on solipsism and immoderation because he represents the power and fearfulness of pure force exerted on behalf of the self. And yet he also bears the burden, sometimes unconsciously, of the destiny of the folk from which he springs and of the divine forces that favor and, often, direct his efforts on behalf of his nation. The connection is simple and obvious: if he fails, then so do they. The mystery the epic hero is fated to explore is always the same: the irresistible attraction of the warrior's life, a path marked equally by horror and the promise of a glory that is achieved by the death dealt to others and, in the end, endured as well.

Epic poetry, in other words, celebrates violent death inflicted and suffered in battle. War thus provides not only the subject matter of epic, but also its animating and transcendent values. Epic heroes, as much in the poetry of the Middle Ages as in that of ancient Greece, discover their reason for living in the "encounter with might," and in this encounter they must come to acknowledge that war "really exists." As Simone Weil points out in her celebrated essay on the *Iliad*, the epic hero cannot see the battle of hand against hand through an idealizing lens that renders invisible its physical devastation. Neither he, nor the poet who memorializes his deeds, is able to ignore the spilling of blood, the shattering of bone, the animal cries of the fatally struck, the complex, even fascinating horrors of dismemberment. The face of battle is anatomized, often in minute detail, by Homer—and, we might add, by the epic poets of the Middle Ages as well. Such poetry is both brutally honest and honest in its brutality. This passage from the *Song of Roland* is typical:

The battle is extraordinary, a meleé.
Count Roland does not hold himself back,

Strikes with his lance while the shaft lasts.
After fifteen blows he breaks and shatters it.
He draws Durendal out naked, his good sword,
Spurs on his horse, goes to strike Chernuble,
Smashes his helmet, gleaming with gems,
Cuts through the body and scalp,
Slices through his eyes and face,
The shining mailshirt, its rings closely linked,
And the whole body right to the man's crotch,
Then through the saddle, beaten with gold.
The blade comes to its rest in the horse,
Splits the spine, never finds a joint there.
He throws him down dead on the lush grass.

(Lines 1320–1334)

Confronted by such a spectacle, the epic hero must recognize that the power he exerts on the bodies of others will inevitably crush his as well—this is the “necessity” of war, as Weil terms it. Victors and vanquished become “brothers in the same misfortune.” Living in such recognition is a form of death in life, for the epic hero must be as devoted as to the suffering of annihilation as to its infliction. But such devotion, Weil fails to note, provides the hero's courage with its necessary stiffening. The man who fights in the expectation of escaping the making of war with his life cannot overcome entirely his instinct to flee. At the least, he enters combat with a moderating caution that makes truly heroic accomplishment impossible. This is why the epic hero has no time, or even thought, for the pursuits of “ordinary” life like feasting or sport. He is allowed neither the pleasures of romantic passion nor the joys of family. For him peace offers not the chance to live—instead, inactive, he rusts like the harness he wears, a useless weight upon the land.

War can be justified as self-defense—as the legitimate means for the assertion of rights to a homeland, or the extirpation of alien, threatening belief, or the restoration of humane rule. Thanks to St. Augustine, even Christianity, a religion founded on notions of self-abnegation and the forsaking of vengeance, has proven able to develop a notion of “just” war in which Christians can participate without undue threat to their immortal souls. War has even in our own time—if not without paradox—been waged so that war might end. But, for the epic hero,

war needs no such rationalization, though he may well recognize, and even endorse, the rightness or value of a cause. For him, war is what makes life worth living—or, more properly, it is the only thing he lives for. And that is because only war provides the theater where the drama of the hero's self-actualization can play out. On the battlefield he can “win” honor, reputation, and an exalted standing among his peers. Only actually bearing arms justifies a lifetime spent training to fight. Such single-mindedness is necessary in a world of encounters with edged weapons—powered only by human muscle, it is true, but wielded at arm's length.

War, as theorists such as John Keegan surmise, likely made a somewhat late appearance in human history, after the last ice age.² War arose, it seems, when settled communities of shepherds or farmers offered the prospect of “easy meat” to the bands of roving hunters who lived on their borders. However pragmatic its origins, though, war soon acquired for almost all societies a transcendent value when, in response to iron laws of seizure and protection, a specialized class of warriors came into being. For in primitive societies, war became not only the obligation of all able-bodied men, but the especial responsibility of those destined for its life-long practice by birth, training, and the possession of effective weapons (which became, before the end of the second millennium B.C.E., those made of rare and expensive bronze or iron that required many hours of expert fashioning). Epic poetry gives voice and form to the accomplishments and values of such men, becoming in the process their most obvious and enduring memorial. Thus, as Roland contemplates the battle that will likely result in the death of his entire force, he cheers his retainers—the Twelve Peers—with the thought that “no miserable song will be sung about us” (line 1014). If poetry celebrates the epic hero, the epic hero is comforted, in his labor and pain, by the prospect of communal, poetic memorial. And, as Roland's admonition makes clear, the hero remains firm in his resolve to fight and die with courage also because he fears an ignominy and shame that likewise might live long after him. In other words, if he fails to uphold his simple code (bravery to the death in the face of the enemy), he becomes the subject of a different kind of song, one that will vilify rather than glorify him.

²John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

In the Middle Ages, the Germanic peoples who overran and settled the Roman Empire admired essentially the same values that moved Achilles to eschew a long life, lived unexceptionally, for a short one that confers eternal glory. The Saxons, Franks, Lombards, and others celebrated how conquest provided the booty that signals social distinction. It is the symbolic value of such “winnings” that gives rise to Achilles’s anger against Agamemnon, for the leader of the Greeks would take the woman captive claimed fairly as a trophy by his ostensible subordinate, whose superior strength and skill in war he resents. The Germanic tribes made this ethos of accomplishment and esteem even more central in the societies they formed. For they acknowledged war’s indispensable role in sustaining the warrior band that became the structure of tribal or clan life. This can be seen quite clearly in *Beowulf*, all of whose kings rely heavily on bands of trusted followers who share their tables and halls. Even in the much later *Song of Roland*, the pan-Germanic custom has left its evident traces, with Roland’s Twelve Peers, whose brotherhood has military, but not a ruling function, contrasting with the assembly of Charlemagne’s other barons, who have the responsibility for advising their king on matters of policy and whose collective will he either cannot, or is loath, to oppose.

The leader of the Germanic *comitatus* or “band of comrades,” as the Roman historian Tacitus termed the institution, was determined sometimes by hereditary claim, but also by proven superiority in war, so important was such ability judged to be. The leader and those who served him were joined till death by pledges of mutual support and protection. Without war, such bonds served no significant purpose until, under feudalism in the High Middle Ages, they became the basis for systems of land tenure and taxation. The Germanic king was a treasure giver, a bestower of rings, and if he could not provide victory, he could not obtain those precious objects that, distributed by his generosity, insured the continued service of the thanes or retainers who were his bodyguards, but also the nucleus of the tribal army. The victories that his thanes made possible by loyal service furnished the wealth with which the king then rewarded and supported them. Such a social system depended for its continued flourishing on conquest. But the warrior’s aim in battle was only in part to keep the oath he had sworn to his lord and repay with strength and courage (or blood if need be) the bread he had eaten and the gifts he had enjoyed. He

fought, above all else, to win glory, which, for him, was praise in the mouths of other men. The Germanic warrior code encouraged devotion to several virtues, such as generosity, loyalty, and graciousness—but a desire for the esteem of his peers was chief among them. The *Beowulf* poet's final comment on the hero whose life he has celebrated is that he was of all kings, of all men too, *lofgeornost*, "the one most eager for praise."

It is the highest compliment the poet can bestow, and it bespeaks an ethos that, though transformed by its encounter with Christianity and the emergence of feudalism, is still recognizable in that complex set of ideals and practices that the later Middle Ages termed "chivalry." For example, in his verse biography of Pierre I of Cyprus, the fourteenth century's most famed knight and crusader, Guillaume de Machaut echoes Roland's sentiment that valor wins the praise of other men, expressed communally by laudatory poetry. The esteem of a warrior's peers justifies the poet's memorial, including the hero's enrollment in an ideal *comitatus*, the company of the nine worthiest champions of all time, from the Greeks and the time of the Old Testament down to the present day. Summarizing Pierre's accomplishments (in a passage not included in this volume), Guillaume has this to say:

He was so valiant—here's the main point
—That it would be honorable and fitting
For him to be numbered among the nine worthies;

.....

For just as we've been saying
In all we've related about him,
Nothing made him stand out as much
As did honor—so saw every man.
And Mars favored and exalted him
So that he often sought out war
In which he found a hundred to his four.
Yet victory and honor were his,
And so, lords, if I honor him,
You should not think it strange.

(Lines 8855–2; 8855–8862)³

³ The complete French text of Machaut's poem, with facing English translation, is to be found in R. Barton Palmer, *Guillaume de Machaut: La Prise d'Alexandrie* (The Taking of Alexandria) (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Unlike the modern professional soldier, the epic hero does not “hope for peace and train for war.” For him war is the normal state of affairs, not an aberration brought about by some human failing (such as madness, greed, hatred, or cruelty). The praise the epic hero is eager for can come only from his success in the trial of battle. Without war, the epic hero is nothing, even though it is war that reduces him to the “same misfortune” that those cut down by the strength of his will and arm must endure. Simone Weil is right about this epic “equity,” the hero’s perception that he is no different from the men he kills, but she draws the incorrect conclusion:

From the power to transform him into a thing by killing him there proceeds another power, and much more prodigious, that which makes a thing of him while still living.

He is living, he has a soul, yet he is a thing (155).

Misreading the encounter between Achilles and Priam at the end of the *Iliad*, Weil does not see that Achilles, acknowledging the feelings of loss he shares with the old man, has not become one of those miserable beings who without dying have become things for the rest of their lives. Why in her view would Achilles become someone for whom each new dawn ushers in the same necessity? It is because, like other epic heroes, his “soul daily suffers violence which every morning must mutilate its aspirations because the mind cannot move about in time without passing through death.” And so, Weil concludes, “in this way war wipes out every conception of a goal, even all thoughts concerning the goals of war” (170).

But this is surely wrong. For Achilles does have something that sustains him: the goal of war, as the champions of the *Iliad* conceive it. For war, and only war, holds out the prospect of a compensation for the death-in-life “thingness” to which the terrible exchange of might subjects him. Achilles struggles, fights, suffers, and delivers himself to destruction so that he might gain an undying reputation for excellence, the esteem of generations yet unborn. Only a modern Western intellectual like Weil would read the story of Achilles differently, as an object lesson that because “nothing is sheltered from fate” we should “never admire might, or hate the enemy, or despise sufferers” (183). For Homer it is precisely because “nothing is sheltered from fate” that the warrior who struggles in the sure and certain knowledge of his own annihilation merits the admiration of his peers. Such a belief is at the

moral center of epic poetry, however difficult Weil—and we too—might find it to understand. For unlike Homer, we have seen the matched strength of ancient warfare give way, since 1914, to that “storm of steel” (as one famous account of warfare on the Western Front terms it) which can deal out anonymous and impersonal death, from what is often a great distance, to any who dare to take a stand on the battlefield. There is little or no glory in a mechanized slaughter that forces men to shelter underground. Writing after the humiliating German defeat of France in 1940, Weil had witnessed the effects of modern warfare close at hand. We now believe, with her, that war dehumanizes those who wage it even when their struggle and sacrifice are redeemed by some morally defensible goal. We, too, think that “unless protected by an armour of lies, man cannot endure might without suffering a blow in the depth of his soul” (182). And that belief demonstrates how much epic poetry belongs to our past, not our present.

The texts included here illustrate how medieval culture adopted and then adapted Germanic notions of the heroic life, eventually incorporating martial ability and the warrior’s desire for the praise of his peers into the more elaborate code of behavior we call chivalry, an important element of which is the fusion of heroic and Christian values. The two most famous epic texts of the Middle Ages are undoubtedly the Old English *Beowulf* and the Old French *The Song of Roland*, works whose kinship of ideas is not obscured by many differences in detail and emphasis. Roland and Beowulf commit themselves fully to the epic life, and they remain faithful to this vision of purpose, dying, but only after achieving a final victory in battle. Our concluding epic tale (a selection from a longer verse biography) is known well only to specialists, but it has great value in illustrating the strong appeal and persistence of chivalric ideals even at the end of the Middle Ages. The capture of the city of Alexandria in 1365 by a force of crusaders led by Peter I of Cyprus was, beyond doubt, the signal event of that century. And, just as in the past, Peter found a poet to memorialize his deeds in the person of the greatest poet then living in France, Guillaume de Machaut, who was apparently so inspired by Peter’s example that he abandoned his work as a poet and musician of refined love, devoting the last years of his life to memorializing the man who was universally acknowledged as the ablest knight of his epoch.

Beowulf

Introduction

In the fifth and sixth centuries, what had been Roman Britain for nearly four hundred years was invaded and conquered by sea-borne invaders from the Germanic tribes settled in what is now modern Holland and Denmark, chief among them the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons. Such is the testimony of a monk named Bede, who, a descendant of these successful and warlike adventurers, celebrated in his *History of the English Church* (finished in 731) the conquest of most of the British Isles by the people now generally known as Anglo-Saxons.

The pagan kingdoms established by the Anglo-Saxons were in due time converted to Christianity by missionaries from both Ireland and Rome itself (these latter dispatched by Pope Gregory the Great). By the middle of the seventh century, the Anglo-Saxons were Christians, and, if the common people for the most part had absorbed the new faith rather superficially, the monasteries in the north (foundations encouraged at first by the Irish) became important centers of learning. This religious culture flourished during the eighth century and found its secular counterparts in the brilliant court culture of the northern kingdoms: Northumbria (particularly during the rule of Ceolwulf [729-37]) and Mercia (especially the reign of Offa the Great [759-96]). Because it celebrates the heroic, secular life, yet sensitively handles the question of its characters' religion, *Beowulf* may well have been composed and initially written down by a poet in the service of one of these great lords. However, the linguistic evidence the poem provides is ambiguous, indicating a compositional date of perhaps a century earlier (c.650) or a century later (c.850); some scholars have even argued for a tenth or eleventh century date. In any event, the unique manuscript of *Beowulf* was prepared in this period. The copy that has come down to us was made about the year 1000—this date is much more certain. Yet we do not know, and probably never will, how many copies intervened between it and the original, or how and why the poem was passed down over the course of at least two centuries. The poem's survival since the Middle Ages must be due, at least in part, to

chance and the interests of an antiquarian collector in the early modern period. No contemporary Anglo-Saxon writer makes reference to *Beowulf*, at least in any text we now have, and *Beowulf* stands alone in Old English literature as an epic poem of length and complexity. So modern scholars must rely on the probabilities that informed speculation provides in order to answer (always very provisionally) basic questions of its genesis, reception, and cultural significance.

Such matters are far from simple, as the huge body of scholarship devoted to elucidating them during the past two centuries demonstrates. But this much can be seen clearly in the poem. Though written by a Christian who had learned of a different way of living, its rules laid out in the Beatitudes, *Beowulf* is a hymn of praise to the hero whose life exemplifies the still-attractive ethos of the pre-Christian heroic world. First, in his youth, Beowulf serves as the loyal retainer of powerful lords: Hygelac, king of the Geats, his own kinsman; and Hrothgar, king of the Danes, whom Beowulf seeks out across the sea in order to win glory. After the deaths of Hygelac (in a disastrous expedition against the Frisians) and his son Heardred (in the continuing war against the neighboring Swedes), Beowulf is chosen as the people's king and, with his own company of warriors, defends the Geats in war and peace for fifty years. The hero's accomplishments are strictly the stuff of warrior life, even though the two adventures that the poem emphasizes take the reader beyond purely human conflict to a near mythic defense of human society against malevolent creatures of supernatural power. As a young man, Beowulf shows his immense strength and endurance by defeating hostile sea monsters during a swim over the ocean that lasts for days. But this is merely a preliminary to two more difficult and important struggles in Denmark, where Beowulf first kills the man-eating, though vaguely human Grendel (who had held sway at night in Hrothgar's hall for twelve years) and afterward his mother. She takes her vengeance on Hrothgar's household and then retreats to the bottom of a monsters' lake, where Beowulf must seek her out. Following a desperate struggle that almost costs him his life, the hero kills her with her own magic weapon.

After a long and successful reign in his homeland, Beowulf is shocked when his hall, like Hrothgar's, comes under attack from a frightful dragon, its ire awakened by the theft of some of its hoarded treasure. Knowing that he alone is suited for the task, Beowulf deter-

mines to kill the dragon, which he manages, but only with the help of one of his retainers (the others flee to save their lives) and only after suffering a poisonous and fatal bite. Dying, Beowulf is cheered by the thought of what good the dragon's immense treasure can do his people. But, as they survey the prospect of renewed war from enemies who will find encouragement in their king's demise, the Geats decide to return the treasure to the earth in the barrow they will raise up on the pyre where Beowulf's body is burned with great reverence and ceremony. Mourning the passing of their peerless ruler, they can only imagine one future, and in it they must endure conquest and enslavement.

The earliest surviving epic poem in English, *Beowulf* treats characters (many undoubtedly historical, some, like the hero, drawn ultimately from folktale), actions, and settings that belong to the Germanic past of the Anglo-Saxons. Like its materials, the poem's values are traditional as well, with the exception of the several passages where the poet explicitly draws Christian connections (such as characterizing Grendel and his kin as belonging to the race of Cain). In his presentation of both the Danes and Geats, the poet does not shrink from referring to pagan practices without condemnation, especially the ship burial of Shield and the pyres on which the bodies of others, including Beowulf himself, are burned. While the attempts of the Danes to counter Grendel's terror by making sacrifice to heathen gods are deplored, in general the poet is careful not to condemn the characters for whose life and ethos he otherwise expresses an admiration both nostalgic and powerful. In short, he makes his readers aware that Beowulf, Hrothgar, and the others lived in an age that did not know the dispensation of Christ. And yet he does not allow the heathenism of the Geats or Danes to prevent him from a respectful and praiseworthy evocation of the common Germanic past. It likely occurred to him that Beowulf's most signal quality—his eagerness for the esteem of his peers—could only with difficulty be reconciled with the important precepts of the Christian life. And yet, such was his admiration for the warlike life of his people's ancestors that he composed a poem in honor of a celebrated champion, one whose heroism (it is true) makes itself more evident in near-mythic encounters with the forces of darkness who would oppress or destroy human society. That he succeeded in appealing to attitudes and values shared by his audience (and by readers in centuries afterward) is strongly indicated, if not proved, by the poem's survival.

Not only the values, but also the literary tradition within which the *Beowulf* poet worked was inherited from the pagan past. The poem makes reference to how heroic poetry had functioned, during the time of the hero, to memorialize and celebrate the warrior's life. In Heorot, Hrothgar's hall, the *scop* (a "shaper" or poet) sings about the creation of the world in a hymn to the joys of creation that fittingly celebrates the building of the hall itself, which is the outward sign of Hrothgar's ability to build a larger society from the tribes he has conquered in war. After Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, a poet composes and recites extempore a poem to celebrate the hero's accomplishment, setting his deed within a larger context of Germanic legend, including Sigemund's victory over a dragon. And finally, during the feasting in Heorot, the poet recites a lay devoted to a key event in the Danish past, the struggle between the Danes and the Jutes in the hall of Finn, their ruler, who proves at first victorious, but later, with the passage of time, is himself killed to avenge the earlier death of Hnaef, leader of the Danes. The picture of poetry making that emerges in *Beowulf* emphasizes the oral character of the verse (recited, as it is composed, without the aid of writing), its traditional subject matter (which can easily be adapted to memorialize a signal deed of the present), and its communal performance. How the *Beowulf* poet himself composed his work has been a matter of great scholarly debate for the last half century. The consensus now, though some would demur, is that he used the stylistic techniques of the oral Germanic tradition (especially those handy blocks of words or easily filled patterns of words usually called formulas), but, with the aid of writing, managed to create a more complex and literate work. Thus, in form as well as content, *Beowulf* offers a blending of pagan and Christian cultures. It is thus a testimony that the heroic values of the common Germanic past retained their appeal for a Christian poet and his readers or hearers.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Beowulf

Listen! We have heard proclaimed the mighty power
Of the Spear-Danes, those kings of the clans,
How such noblemen did what needed courage!

Shield, son of Sheath, often stole the mead benches
From troops of enemies, from many tribes;¹ 5
He struck fear into fighting men in those years.
Though first found abandoned,² recompense was his fate.
He grew tall under heaven, took joy in the honors he gained,
And then other peoples who lived over
The whale's path were pressed hard to obey him 10
And tend him their tribute. He was a capable king!
Afterward a boy was born to him,
A child in the dwellings, and God destined him
To help the tribe. He had seen their terrible need,
How for so long they had suffered 15
Having no master. The Measurer of Life,
Wielder of Glory, gave worldly honors to him.
This Beowulf,³ Shield's son, was well-fated—his fame
Was known far and wide through the northern lands.
Any young warrior should do the same: act wisely 20
By parceling out the precious things his father possesses,
And then, when he's old, companions who freely choose
Will stand at his side when war needs waging;
The folk will fulfill their oaths. By feats worthy of fame
A prince is destined to prosper among every people! 25

¹ "stole their mead benches"—that is, Shield defeated these tribes in war and deprived them of independence.

² Shield is a founding, though the first in the line of Danish kings. His patronymic, which makes him son of Sheath (i.e., an ear of wheat), is likely not to be taken literally, but as an indication of his mythological status: the mysterious stranger who comes bearing a sign of fertility.

³ Beowulf the Dane is not the hero of the poem.

Shield then had to go, the gray-haired man,
 As destiny decreed, into the Lord's dominion.
 Afterward, to the sea's border, they were to bear him,
 His own companions, just as he had commanded,
 That king of the Shieldings, while he still ruled his speech. 30

The beloved leader of the land had held sway a long time.
 There at the shore stood the ring-prowed ship,
 Icy and ready to sail forth, a vessel suiting a ruler.
 Then they laid to rest their lord of rings,
 The well-loved leader, in the hold of the ship, 35
 Put the man of great fame by the mast. Much treasure,
 Rich things from far-off regions had been loaded up.
 Never have I heard of a ship more fittingly
 Provisioned with weapons of war and gear used in battle,
 With swords and mailshirts. Many special things 40
 Were placed on top of him; these were appointed
 To sail far with him across the fearful sea.
 But on him they did not bestow fewer baubles
 And treasures of their tribe than did those men
 Who had sent him forth at the very first 45
 Alone over the ocean, a boy not very old.
 At the last they stood a golden standard
 High over his head, let the current hurry him off,
 Offered him to the ocean. Their hearts sank in sadness,
 Their minds were marred by misery. No men 50
 Could truly say, no sages counseling in the hall
 Or retainers under the sky, who received that cargo.

Then in the burg, Beowulf of the Shieldings,
 Beloved king of his clan, held the high seat a long time,
 Known to the tribes—his noble father had followed another path 55
 And left the world behind—until at last princely HalfDane⁴
 Was born to him, and that man ruled as long as he lived,
 Grizzled and fierce in the fight, a generous Shielding ruler.
 To him, in appointed order, were henceforth born four

⁴This name is usually understood as indicating that the king in question had a Swedish mother.

Children into the world, chiefs of the battle host, 60
Heorogar and Hrothgar and noble Halga,
And I heard thatwas the queen,⁵ the bed
Companion of Onela, he of the courageous Shilfings.

Victory in battle was bestowed on Hrothgar,
Honor in war, and so his esteemed retainers readily 65
Did his bidding until that band of youths grew bold,
A mighty host of men. In his mind this desire burned:
That he should give the clans the command to build
A place to gather, a meadhall that was grander
Than any sons of men had ever heard mentioned. 70
And in such a place he would parcel out everything
To young and old alike, all that God granted him,
Except the lands held in common and the lives of men.
The work, I heard, was then proclaimed far and wide
To many a clan throughout this middle earth: 75
They should use their skill to shape the tribe's hall.
The time came to pass and all was prepared for
This greatest of halls. The name he gave it was Heorot,
That lord whose words wielded power far and wide.
Hrothgar stood by his boast, shared out rings, 80
Fine treasures at the feast. The hall towered high,
Horn-gabled; it awaited the flames battle brings,
A blaze lit by enmity; it would not be long afterward
That strife for the sword to settle was fated to be aroused
Between the father and his son in law after the fearful fight.⁶ 85

But on this day the strong spirit endured the hours
With difficulty—he found his dwelling in darkness
—As he listened every day to the loud

⁵ Passages in the unique manuscript of the poem which are indecipherable or which show a lacuna of some kind are indicated by ellipses in the translation.

⁶ This passage alludes to the destruction of Heorot by fire in the course of the renewal of hostilities between the Heathobards and the Danes. The burning of Heorot is referred to often in Scandinavian legend, though the circumstances of the event differ in these various accounts. In reporting his experiences to his lord, King Hygelac of the Geats, *Beowulf* predicts how the feud between the Danes and Heathobards might be renewed—see lines 2020-2069.

Celebration in the hall. The harp was struck for song,
 And the poet's sweet voice resounded. He who could spoke 90
 How mankind started, told a story from many years ago;
 He sang how the Almighty shaped the earth,
 A shimmering and shining meadow that the ocean encircled;
 How the One who gloried in victory set the sun and moon
 To light the way for men living on the land; 95
 How He made lovely every corner of the earth
 With green limb and leaf, gave the gift of life
 To all that dwells there and even now draws breath.

In this way the heroes of that household lived in happiness,
 Enjoyed their blessings, until that solitary stalker started 100
 On his course of evil, that creature from Hell.
 The name of this grim ghoul was Grendel,
 A well-known wanderer of the wasteland who lorded it over
 The moors, the fens, the fastness. The marches that monsters haunt
 Is where that damned being had found his dwelling 105
 Ever since the Creator condemned him as one from
 Among Cain's kin—the eternal King
 Avenged the killing, the murdering of Abel.
 Cain found no reward in that crime, for the Ruler
 Banished him far from mankind, punishing the misdeed. 110
 From Cain all manner of misbegotten creatures first took life,
 Giants and elves and gruesome monsters,
 The same titanic beasts that battled the Lord
 Time and again. God took revenge upon them.⁷

Now the monster, when darkness descended, made off 115
 To seek the huge house so he could see how the Ring-Danes
 Had settled in after downing their fill of drink.
 Inside he stumbled upon a band of stout warriors,
 Asleep now that the feast was finished. They knew not the sorrow,
 The dread destiny measured out to men. The devilish thing, 120
 Grim and blood-greedy, fierce and full of cruelty,
 Sprang at them, snatching from their sleep

⁷ The reference here is to Genesis 4, 6.

Thirty retainers. Then he retreated from the hall,
Boasting of the booty he'd taken, making his way back,
There, with the slaughtered to sate him, finding his den. 125

Afterward, with the dawn bringing light, just as day broke,
Men could easily witness Grendel's power in war.
Then, after the feast, a fierce cry of woe rang out,
A loud lament in that morning. The famous lord,
That peerless prince, took his seat, happiness stolen from him. 130
The man was mortified by pain, mourned his retainers
When the tracks of the evildoer, the terrible ghoul,
Were shown him. That struggle was too stern to suffer,
Too loathsome, and too enduring! It was no longer time,
But the very next night that the creature did the same, 135
Committed murder again, and yet mourned not at all
For the feud and crime. Such things were too fast in him.
Then the man who elsewhere sought some place to sleep,
A bed somewhere beyond, in the outbuildings,
Was easy to find—for the hall fighter's anger 140
Had been tokened, its truth signaled
Fully. Afterward the man who fled the fiend
Secreted himself farther off and safer.
And so the beast held sway, battled against the right,
One against the others, until the best of halls 145
Loomed empty. It was a long time,
Twelve winters, that Hrothgar endured this woe,
That the friendly lord of the Shieldings suffered this shame
And signal sorrow. And so it became widely known
To men, to the sons of warriors, through the songs 150
Of misery that were sung, that Grendel was matching strength
Against Hrothgar, waging a war of hate,
Of violent outrage, of vengeance for many a year,
A fight that never found its ending. He would fix
On peace with no man of the Danish people, 155
Would not finish the feud or make terms for money,⁸

⁸ The reference here is to the Germanic practice of settling blood feuds by the payment of some monetary compensation.

Nor did any counselor have cause to expect
 Some sharing of shiny metal from the slayer's hands.
 Instead that devil, a dark shadow of death,
 Battled against boys and old men alike in that household. 160
 He took to hiding, then launched his assaults. In everlasting night
 He was king of the misty moors. Men do not know
 Where such denizens of Hell drift away in their turnings.

Thus the enemy of mankind, the lone traveler all men hated,
 Often committed many crimes, worked deadly deeds 165
 Whose end was destruction. He took to living in Heorot,
 The dwelling richly adorned, during the dark nights.
 But he could not draw near the gift-throne to get
 Treasure because of the Measurer, could not know His love.
 These were days of misery for the friendly Shielding lord; 170
 They brought harm that broke his heart. Many a highborn man
 Took his seat in council and tried to settle on
 The best course for Hrothgar, whose heart was stout,
 What he should do against these sudden assaults.
 Sometimes they made offerings of animals 175
 At devilish shrines, pleaded in their prayers
 That the slayer of souls provide assistance
 In this time of crisis. This was their custom;
 Such was the hope heathens had. They thought of Hell
 In their minds, had no knowledge of the Measurer, 180
 The Judge of life. The Lord God was unknown to them,
 Nor—this is sure—could they praise the Shield of the heavens,
 The Wielder of glory. Woe to him who finds himself
 Shoving his soul into the flame's embrace
 When faced with awful misery! Such a man should expect no
 relief 185
 Or that anything might change! A favorable destiny awaits those
 Who after their death day can seek out the Lord
 And expect protection in the embrace of the Father.

In this way the son of HalfDane endlessly suffered
 His time of woe; nor could the wise warrior 190
 Turn aside the trouble. That struggle was too stern,

Too hateful, too long-lasting that harried this tribe;
The anger brought woe. It was the worst of night slaughters!

Hygelac's retainer learned in his homeland,
That able man of the Geats, about what Grendel was doing; 195
In his might, this man was the strongest
Of all mankind during that time of this life,
A noble warrior unlike all others. He ordered a fine
Ship prepared, proclaimed he would seek out
The warlike king across the pathway the swan swims, 200
That famous Danish king, since he needed fighters.
Men of wisdom hardly worried themselves
To thwart his departure, though they held him dear.
They encouraged the man in his daring, consulted oracles.
The good retainer of the Geats then chose 205
Fighting men, the finest from among those he
Could find. Fifteen in all made their way
To the wooden ship. The warrior served as guide;
This man, sea-crafty, escorted them to the ocean's edge.
The time went by. The boat floated on the waves, 210
The ship was beneath the cliffs. Men ready to shove off
Stepped onto the prow—the tidal currents ebbed,
The seawaters splashed over the sand. Sailors stowed in
The hold of the ship treasure that shone brightly;
War gear was readied. The warriors pushed out 215
The timbered craft on a trip they chose.
The boat with its foamy neck, most like a bird,
Hurried by the wind, made its way over the waves of the deep
Until around the first hour of the following day
It had ranged so far with its ringed prow 220
That the seafarers were able to catch sight of the coast,
Shining seacliffs, steep dunes,
Broad shore meadows. They had sailed over the ocean.
The crossing came to its end. Quickly the company of Geats
Sprang up onto the sandy shore land 225
And tied close their wooden ship. Their mailshirts clanked,
The gear they wore in war. They gave thanks to God:
Making their way over the waves had proven easy.

From his wall the sentry of the Shieldings spied them
 (He was appointed to stand guard over the seacliffs) 230
 As they bore their boards of painted wood over the gangplank,
 The fighting gear ready for battle. He burned to find out,
 His mind running with thoughts, who these retainers might be.
 Then he moved off, making for the shore on his horse,
 That man of Hrothgar's household, and he brandished proudly 235
 The wooden-hafted battle spear, spoke words fit for counsel:
 "Who are you warriors, wearing armor that is yours to own,
 Protected by linked steel, who over the pathway of the sea
 Have come here, sailing the high-keeled craft,
 Across the waves to this place? Hear my words! It is now some
 time 240
 That I've watched the shore, standing guard
 So no enemies could enter into Danish lands,
 So no war band carried by the sea might cause harm.
 In no way have shieldbearing men ever been stirred
 To arrive in this land more openly. You had not heard spoken 245
 Words of permission from those who make war here.
 You had no leave to enter from those linked by kinship.
 I've never seen a bigger man walk this earth than one among you,
 A warrior wearing his weapons. He is no stay at home fighter,
 A soldier whose arms only hang on him—unless his appearance
 lies, 250
 His matchless looks. Now I must learn who
 Your kinfolk are before you travel far from here
 As harmful spies into the land of the Danes,
 Before you draw one step closer. You who dwell far off, sailors
 Over the bottomless sea, now pay heed to this single 255
 Thought of mine. You would do best to make known
 At once where you have come from."

The eldest answered the man,
 The head of the troop unlocked his hoard of words:
 "We are of the tribe, the people of the Geats. 260
 We are Hygelac's hearth companions as well.
 My father was famous among the clans,
 A noble leader of the host, named Edgetheow.

He lived many winters before he left this life,
An old man departing the dwellings. Every man of wisdom 265
Readily remembers him round this wide earth.
With great respect we have come here
Seeking your lord, the son of HalfDane,
That protector of the people. Provide us good advice.
We are on an important mission to that famous man, 270
The ruler of the Danes. And it shall not remain secret
At all, so I expect. You are aware, if what
We have heard tell is in fact the truth,
That among the Shieldings some kind of sinful beast,
A mysterious, hateful being, makes known 275
Its unbounded anger through terror in the dark night,
Through humiliation and murder. In this matter I might
With all respect offer him some advice,
How that good king might confound the criminal creature
(If an end, a finish is ever fated 280
To come to the old man for the murder that crushes him),
And how the pain that aches his heart might be eased.
It may be instead he will suffer days of strife
And brutal hurt as long as that best of houses
Still stands there on its steep ground.” 285

The guard held forth, sitting on his horse,
A fighting man who felt no fear: “Every wise shield warrior,
If he thinks to do right, must recognize that words are words,
But doing what you say is something else.
What I find is that this troop of fighters has friendly intentions 290
Toward the Shielding lord. Go on your way, and shoulder
Your weapons and wargear. I will be your guide.
Likewise I will require my young retainers
To protect your ship, that newly tarred craft
Sitting on the sand, against every enemy. 295
They will guard it with respect until the time the ringprowed
Craft, carved of wood, carries back the beloved man
Across the streams of the sea to the land of the Geats.
Fate will keep safe such a man served by able fighters,
And in safety he will survive the bustle of battle.” 300

Then they made ready to go—the ship remained at rest,
 The boat, wide-bottomed, riding its ropes,
 Held back by the anchor. Boar ornaments
 Of hammered gold shone bright, fire-hardened,
 Above the helmets' cheek pieces—they held safe the lives 305
 Of the grim-faced warriors. The men of war moved fast,
 The troop went quickly until they could look
 Upon the timbered hall, glittering and adorned with gold.
 For those who then lived on the earth, it was the most famous
 Dwelling under heaven, and its mighty master waited within. 310
 Light from that place gleamed through many lands.
 Their gallant guide showed them the path
 Toward the hall of that mighty man so they could
 March there together. That man at arms
 Turned his horse, then spoke these words: 315
 “Now I should go. May the Father Almighty
 Hold you safe from harm and in honor
 On your mission. I'll make my way back to the sea,
 There to guard against any force of foes that might come.”

The path was paved with stones; the street helped guide 320
 The band of warriors. Their mailshirts,
 Hard and handmade, glimmered. The shiny iron rings
 In their clothes rang out as they reached
 The hall, heroes wearing their wargear.
 Those weary from the sea set down the wide shields, 325
 The boards hard in the rain of battle, against the side of the hall;
 They shifted closer to the benches; the shirts of metal clanked,
 The war clothing of the warriors. The spears stood
 Stacked together, the seamen's tools of war,
 Ashen staves gray at the tip. That gang all in steel 330
 Was made worthy by its weapons. Then a warrior bravely
 Inquired about the kinfolk of the challengers:
 “From what homeland did you haul these fine shields,
 These war shirts gray in hue and helmets used in battle,
 This heap of wargear? I am Hrothgar's 335
 Spokesman and counselor. Never have I caught sight of a troop
 Of so many men from afar who are more fearless than you.

Because you are adventurous and bold, not because
You've suffered banishment, this is why you've come to Hrothgar."
The man brazen in battle was the one to speak back. 340
The courageous chief of the Geats uttered these words afterward,
A hero fierce in his helmet: "We are fighters
Who share Hygelac's hearth. My name is Beowulf.
I wish to speak with the famous son of HalfDane,
The man who is your master, about the mission 345
We have undertaken, that is if he will allow us
To meet with a man who is as good as he's held to be."
Wulfgar spoke—he was prince of the Wendels,
And his worthiness was well known to many,
What he had done, his war and wisdom: "I will ask 350
The friendly protector of the Danes, the Shielding prince,
The giver of treasure, the king known to the clans,
About your coming since this is your request,
And I will then repeat his response to you,
Whatever the good man thinks to tell me." 355

Wulfgar then quickly went to where Hrothgar, hoary and gray,
Sat on the bench beside his retainer band.
The brave man stepped ahead until he stood before the shoulders
Of the Danish king. He knew the custom of that company.
Wulfgar spoke these words to his friendly lord: 360
"Travelers from afar have arrived here
Over the ocean's breadth, a band of Geats;
Those champions call their chief
Beowulf. This is the boon they would have granted,
That they, my lord, might wrangle words with you. 365
And you should not refuse to respond
To these good men, Hrothgar, gracious lord.
Dressed in war gear, these men seem worthy enough,
Equipped for battle. Certainly the eldest appears able,
Who showed the warriors the way to this place." 370

Hrothgar spoke, the protector of the Shieldings:
"I became aware of him when he was a boy;
His father, an old man, was called Edgetheow;

Hrethel of the Geats⁹ gave him his only daughter
 In marriage; his son, grown hard in battle, has now 375
 Sailed to this land, has sought out a loyal friend.
 The tale that has been told us by seafarers,
 Those who have brought gifts from the Geats
 Here in gratitude, is that in his grip
 There is the might of thirty good men, 380
 That he is a man brave in battle. Holy God
 In His mercy has sent this man to us,
 The Danish people, or so I suppose,
 So he might still Grendel's strife. I will offer
 The good man gifts of gold for his daring deeds. 385
 Go at once and ask that company of kinsmen
 To come in so that all together they can talk to me.
 Tell them in the words you say that they are welcome
 Among the Danish tribe." Then the man whose fame
 Had spread far strode to the door, told the seamen to enter: 390
 "My victorious sovereign, ruler of the Danes, has asked me to say
 That he has learned much of your lineage.
 Now that you have sailed over the flooding seas,
 You men of unyielding courage have found welcome here.
 Make you way inside wearing your wargear, 395
 Your fierce helmets hasped on your head, to see Hrothgar.
 Let the shields that shelter in battle, as well as the wood shafts
 That deal death, await here what this council decides."

The mighty man rose up, surrounded by many a warrior,
 A fierce band of fighters. A few did wait outside, 400
 Guarding the weapons, as their warlike leader told them.
 The host moved off together, guided by that man, and hastened
 Under Hrothgar's roof. The warrior tried in battle went in,
 Stern under his helmet, until he stood by the hearth.
 Beowulf spoke—his mailshirt sparkled, 405
 The ironchained armor fashioned with the smith's skill:
 "Greetings, Hrothgar! I am the kinsman
 And young retainer of Hygelac. In my youth I have undertaken

⁹ Hrethel is Hygelac's father and Beowulf's grandfather.

Many a stouthearted venture. Your strife with Grendel
I came to know there in my native land. 410
Seafarers say that this is the reason your hall,
The unmatched dwelling, stands idle and unused
By every warrior after the evening light
Finds itself hidden under the dome of heaven.
And so my own clan, the wisest and most clever 415
Men among our folk, furnished this advice,
Lord Hrothgar, that I seek you out over the sea.
They did so because they know well my strength.
They themselves looked on when in my wargear
I came forth from the sea, streaming with the blood of foes. 420
I killed five giants, humbled their kin, struck down
Sea serpents by night, endured days of terrible danger.
I repaid shame done the Geats—the creatures sought trouble
So I brought them down. And now in battle
Against that ghoul Grendel, I alone shall settle all accounts, 425
Bringing the fight to the beast. Lord of the Danes,
This is the boon I beg of you,
Who fights for the Shieldings, this one favor.
Do not refuse what I ask, ruler of men,
Noble friend of peoples, for I have come far for this alone. 430
Let me, with my company of men,
This bold war band, make Heorot safe again.
Men have told me that the monster
Renounces weapons in his recklessness.
Thus I here refuse—so that my lord Hygelac 435
Might in his heart be happy with me
—Unsheathing my sword or shouldering my broad shield,
The board of yellow wood, to the fight. But I will
Grapple with this devil and duel to the death,
Foe against foe. The one whom death grips fast 440
Must trust in the decision of the Maker.
I believe he will, if he can bring it off,
As he frequently has, eat up unafraid
The gang of Geats, the company of my kinsmen,
Here in the hall where battle rages. So you'll have no need to 445
Bury my head. Instead, he'll hustle me off,

Now dripping with blood, if death is my destiny.
 He'll bear off the bloody corpse, eager to eat it.
 The solitary stalker will feast on me unfazed,
 Dirtying the distant moors. No need will then drive you 450
 To waste time wailing over my lifeless form.
 If this fight finishes me, hurry on to Hygelac
 This good mail shirt that guards my breast.
 No hauberk is finer than Hrethel's heirloom,
 For Wieland forged it.¹⁰ Let fate go as it will!" 455

Hrothgar held forth, helm of the Shieldings:
 "For past favors performed, my friend Beowulf,
 And in your great-heartedness, you agreed to seek us.
 Your father struck up terrible strife
 When it chanced he cut down Heatholaf, from the kinfolk 460
 Of the Wilfings. Because they were wary of war,
 The Geats could not guard him close.
 Across the sea Edgetheow sought out the Danes,
 Over the welling waves, the well-born Shieldings.
 At that time I was king of my Danish kinsmen. 465
 Little more than a boy, I was lord of the broad kingdom,
 The treasure city of our tribe. Heorogar had already died;
 My eldest brother had left behind this life,
 The son of HalfDane—he was the better man!
 Afterward I settled the feud, paying the blood fee. 470
 Across the back of the ocean I sent ancient treasures
 To the Wilfings. Edgetheow swore me his warrant.
 It gives my heart great sorrow to tell
 Any man what was the grimness Grendel
 Humbled me with in Heorot, the schemes and sudden 475
 Attacks his hate contrived. The company in my hall,
 My fellowship of warriors, is now few. Fate has
 Swept them away with Grendel's terror. God can easily
 Halt that grim ghoul from doing what he does!
 Drunk with beer and downing our ale, boasting 480
 Champions have, time and again, made this challenge,

¹⁰ Wieland is a famous smith of Germanic legend.

That, wakeful on a bench, they'd wait in the beer hall,
Their blades fierce, to face Grendel's fighting strength.
As dawn broke, when the day shone forth its light,
The building fit for the well born would run with blood, 485
The benches of the ale drinkers dripping with gore.
The meeting hall was marked with slaughter. And fewer loyal men,
Retainers I loved, were mine to rule—death had removed the others.
Sit now to the feast and tell this fellowship what your spirit feels,
Give voice to your thoughts. You are a man who glories in
victory.” 490

Then benches were cleared so that the Geatish band
Might sit together as a troop in the high hall;
Those fellows, filled with daring, found their seats.
Their fighting strength had earned them fame,
The servant did his office, carried the costly cup, 495
Bore in the bright, sweet mead. At times the minstrel sang
Clear-voiced in Heorot. Warriors were happy in the hall,
That gang, by no means small, of both Geats and Danes.

Unferth spoke, the son of Edgelaf,
Sat at the feet of the Shielding lord, 500
Spoke to the bitterness he felt. Beowulf's venture,
The mission of that daring seafarer, he found most insulting
Since he could not stand that any other stalwart
Of this middle earth might do more deeds under the heavens
That needed bravery than he brought to pass himself: 505
“Are you the Beowulf who engaged with Breca
On the open ocean in a bout of swimming,
Where you two in your foolishness tried out the flood?
Because of a reckless boast you risked your lives
Out in the deep of the ocean main. No man, 510
Friend or foe, could dissuade the two of you
From this sad stunt that saw you swim out to sea.
There you stroked the streaming currents with your arms,
Passed over the ocean's pathways; your hands pushing the water,
As you made your way over the deep. The ocean welled with
waves, 515

With the surgings winter brings. In the realm water rules, you two
 Struggled seven nights. He bested you in the swimming.
 Greater strength—this is what Breca had. Then in the morning
 The sea hurried him into the homeland of the Heathorams;
 The beloved man made off to his own land, 520
 The country of the Brondings, his own kinsmen too,
 A bright and peaceful burg where he protected the people,
 Their houses and hoarded treasure. Truly he carried out
 All that he, this son of Beanstan, had boasted against you.
 So I say you will surely get the worst of it 525
 (Though in war's tumult, you've always proved your prowess,
 In fierce fighting) if near at hand while one night passes
 You wait, still wakeful, for Grendel to make his way here."

Beowulf spoke, the son of Edgetheow:
 "Hear me, my friend Unferth, you've uttered much 530
 Balderdash, drunk with beer, about Breca,
 Telling what that man did. The truth I defend
 Is that mine was the greater strength in swimming. My struggles
 On the deep were more desperate than any ever endured.
 We two, then boys yet ungrown, warranted 535
 And boasted—we were still in the time of
 Our youth—that we would risk our lives
 Out on the distant deep, and that is what we did.
 Swimming through the tides, we took naked swords
 Hard in our hands. We had the hope they would 540
 Ward off whales. He could not wander, as he swam,
 Far from me through the fast flowing current,
 Or drive faster through the deep. I'd not depart from him.
 We found ourselves all alone on the ocean
 As five nights fled by, but soon swells separated us, 545
 Currents surging swiftly, ice-cold storms;
 Night fell full of bitterness, and the northwind
 Grew deadly grim against us, as the waves worsened.
 The weather roused the wrath of the fish in that sea.
 Against these hateful foes, my hauberk 550
 Hard and hand-linked, afforded help.
 The mail shirt made of steel shielded my breast,

Its decorations all of gold. A deadly being bent on evil
Bore me to the bottom, embraced me hard,
Its fangs fierce. Yet fate was kind in what it afforded me: 555
I cut through the creature with my sword,
A blade crafted for battle. My hand brought low
The fish in that turbulent fight.

This was how these fierce foes threatened me
Again and again with destruction. The sword dealt with them. 560
I served them with the blade, as was suitable.
They struck down no slaughter that slaked their hunger,
These deadly foes that destroy. They might not dine upon me
Or sit down to a feast on the ocean floor.
It went otherwise. When dawn broke, pierced by the blade 565
(The sword put them to sleep), they lay lifeless
Up on the sand. After that they seemed
Unable to strike down sailors on their seafaring
Across the frothing flood. The sun shone from the east,
The bright beacon of God; the waters became still, 570
And I could catch sight of ocean cliffs,
Sea walls driven with wind. Destiny often spares
A fighter not yet doomed when his daring holds firm!
But fate brought it about that I beat down
Nine serpents with my sword. Never have I heard said 575
That any fight under heaven fought at night was harder;
Or that men were more desperate on the deep-driven main.
Yet I escaped alive wrestling with enemies who opposed me.
The venture wearied me; then the waves bore me up,
The flood flowing with the tide, to the Finnish shore. 580
The tide reached its height. Never have I heard tell
That you have dared such dangerous adventures,
Or struggles where swords were unsheathed. Breca has still never
(Neither of you has) seen a fearsome feat of this kind
To its finish, a fight that proved fatal as we battled, 585
Or found his blade stained with the blood of foes. I do not boast.
Yet you brought down your own brothers, your dearest kinsmen,
And that is the fact. That feat shall earn you
Misery in hell, no matter that you are rather clever.

I tell you, son of Edgelaf, and tell you truly: 590
 Grendel should never have committed so many crimes,
 That grim ghoul, against your king,
 Wrongs in Heorot that brought Hrothgar low, had your heart,
 Your spirit, been as fierce in the fight as you say.
 Things have gone otherwise. The foe found he need not fear
 much 595
 Any blood feud, any bitter clash of blades,
 From your tribe—the Shieldings who have known triumph.
 Instead, he collects his loathsome levy, lets no man live
 Among the Danish folk. As his mind moves him,
 So he kills and crams down corpses, never considering 600
 Some Dane might stand up and do battle. But now I will bring
 The fight to him, show real fierceness and strength
 In but a short while. Let any man go sure of his safety
 Back to his mead when the morning light
 Of another day, the sun adorned with splendor, 605
 Shines its light from the south on the sons of men!”

Then the giver of heirlooms, hoary and battle-hardened,
 Took heart; he trusted in the deliverance to come,
 The ruler of the highborn Danes. The protector of his people
 Heard in Beowulf a steadfastness that knew no surrender. 610

Laughter made itself heard from the men; the talk grew loud;
 Their words welled up with joy. Wealhtheow went forth,
 Hrothgar’s queen, and paid heed to both clans.
 In the hall, wearing her gold, she greeted the king,
 And that well-born woman gave the cup 615
 First to the lord of the Danish lands,
 Bid the well-loved leader to take pleasure
 In downing his drink. The king who had gloried
 In triumph treated himself to feast and cup.
 The woman of the Helmings wended her way through the hall, 620
 Bringing to boys and men among the war bands
 The cup decorated with treasure, until the time came
 This queen of great worthiness, gleaming in the jewels she wore,
 Brought the mug full of mead to Beowulf.

She spoke thoughtfully to the Geatish chief, thanked the good
man 625

That with words of hard-won wisdom he'd fulfilled her wish,
For she had wanted to put her faith in some warrior
Who could save her from this sorrow. He accepted the cup,
The warrior fierce in the fight, from Wealhtheow.
And then he uttered this boast, eager for battle to come. 630

Beowulf said this, the son of Edgetheow:
"I sought, when I set out across the sea and took my
Seat in the oceangoing ship among my seafaring men,
Bringing to pass with my band what the renowned leader
Of your folk desired—or I'd fall dead in the fight, 635
Held fast in the grip of my foe. I shall either finish the feat
That takes bravery and suits the well-born,
Or I'll endure the end of my days in this meadhall."

This speech, the boasting words the Geat spoke,
Stirred the woman. Striking in her gold adornments, 640
That noble queen of that clan went and sat by her king.

As had happened before in that hall, haughty words were
Spoken; the fellowship found itself happy.
From the tribe that had known triumph, a joyful sound arose.
The son of HalfDane determined to seek out 645
His nighttime rest. He knew the monster
Had intended to bring battle to his hall from the time
When they caught sight of the sun gleaming and shining
Until the darkening dusk, shifting with shadows,
Came creeping over all of creation, 650

A misery moving under heaven. The men rose together.
Hrothgar wished Beowulf well and handed over
The house for him to guard well, granted him
Rule over the winehall. Hrothgar spoke these words:
"Never before, since first I knew how to bear 655
Sword and shield, have I entrusted this hall,
The mighty meeting place of the Danes—to any man but you.
Take now and defend the best dwelling ever built;
Let your deeds be brave, show the daring your strength bestows on
you.

Stand watch against our foes! You will fail at no wish 660
 If you last through this difficult trial with your life!“

Then Hrothgar, chief of the Shieldings, and his hearth
 Companions went their way from the hall.
 The warleader intended to take Wealhtheow,
 The queen, to their bed. The glorious king had 665
 Determined that a hall guardian should defend against Grendel,
 As that band learned. Beowulf held a special office
 From the Danish ruler, and was to watch against demons.
 The Geatish prince put trust in the power of his strength,
 And the protection God provides, as no man can doubt. 670
 Then he took off his hauberk, removed the helmet
 From his head, handed his ornamented sword,
 Forged from the choicest steel, to the hall servant.
 He wished him to guard the gear used in war.
 Then the good man, Beowulf of the Geats, 675
 Spoke boasting words before he took to his bed:
 “I do not think myself weaker in warfare,
 In the business of doing battle, than Grendel deems himself;
 And so not with the sword will I send him to eternal rest
 And kill that creature, though I certainly could. 680
 He is not skilled in striking blows, can't swing a sword or
 Hack through my shield, though he might well be horrifying
 In the killing he commits. Instead we two shall
 Swear off wielding swords—if he is so daring he'll wage
 This war without any weapons. And then wise God, 685
 The Holy Lord, may hand out glory
 To one side or the other as He thinks suitable.”
 The man brave in battle lay down and the bolster
 Softly took the seaman's face, while by his side
 Many a daring sailor dropped asleep in the hall. 690
 Not one of them thought he should from there
 Make his way back to the land he loved,
 The folk or the fair burg where he had been raised.
 For they had come to know how a cruel death
 Had mown down many men among the Danish people 695
 Before this time. Yet the Lord bestowed upon

The Geatish band this fate: victory in the fight,
Help and aid as well, so that all of them through the strength
Of one man might undo their enemy, through the might
Of Beowulf alone. We are aware that this is true: 700
Mighty God has been the Master of mankind
For more than a short time. The shadow stalker then started
Stealing through the dim darkness. The shooters were asleep,
Those who were to hold safe the hall decorated with horns,
All except one. Men had been made aware 705
That the evildoer might not drag them
Into the murkiness when the Measurer did not wish it.
But, wakeful, a warrior, his courage cool, waited
For the fight to be finished, hating his foe.

Then from the moors, from under the misty mountains 710
Came Grendel, making his way; he bore God's wrath.
The wicked monster meant to waylay
Some hero in the hall that stood on high.
Creeping under the clouds, he came where he most certainly
Knew the winehall was, that gilded meeting place of men, 715
Finely ornamented. Nor was that the first time
He had sought out Hrothgar's home;
Yet never before in the days of his life
Had he found fiercer fighters, retainers in the hall.
He came on then, moving toward the meeting place, 720
Happiness driven from him. The hall door sprang open at once,
Held fast by its forged bands, when his hands found it.
Eager for slaughter and filled with anger, he forced open
The building's mouth. In but a moment,
The foe stepped forth on the decorated floor, 725
Hurrying with rage in his heart. A horrid light,
Most like flame, flared from his eyes.
In the hall his glance settled on many men,
A company of kinsmen sleeping side by side,
A fellowship of young fighters. His heart filled with glee. 730
The grim ghoul was very greedy,
Before day broke, to snatch the life from some
Of those bodies. His hope for bountiful feasting

Had been fulfilled. But he was not then fated
 To feed further on any of the human race 735
 After that night. The fighter whose resolve was firm,
 Kinsman of Hygelac, caught sight of how the evildoer
 Determined to deliver his sudden attack.
 The monster did not mean to delay.
 Instead he soon seized, at the first chance, 740
 A sleeping seaman, sank eager teeth into him,
 Chomped through his sinews, choked down his blood,
 Swallowed huge hunks of flesh. In haste he
 Ate up the entire corpse of the unfortunate man,
 The hands and feet as well. He hurried further, 745
 Seized with his claws where he found him sleeping
 The fighter filled with daring. The fiend felt for him
 With his hand. Beowulf quickly grabbed hold of him.
 Anger filled him as he sat up against the arm.
 The shepherd of crimes quickly saw 750
 Something he had not found in other fighters
 Over middle earth, through the many parts of the world.
 The grip of this man was greater! Fear engulfed the monster's
 Heart, his spirit too. None the sooner could he make his escape.
 He was frantic to find the darkness; in haste he would 755
 Seek the fellowship of fiends. His fate at this time
 Was nothing he had known before in the days of his life.
 The capable retainer, Hygelac's kinsman, remembered
 What words he'd spoken that night, scrambled to his feet
 And fought fiercely with the fiend. Grendel's fingers burst. 760
 The monster was frantic to flee; the man moved closer.
 The creature covered in crimes was desperate, if he could,
 To flee far and wide from that place, to plunge
 Into the fastness of the fens. Grendel found that his foe's hand
 Held his fingers captive. The journey that the creature 765
 Eager for evil made to Heorot had earned him anguish!
 The lordly hall loudly resounded. A bitter ale was thus served
 To all the Danes, to all dwelling in the burg, to every
 Brave man and fighter. Both were roused to fierceness;
 The two house guardians showed their anger. Uproar 770
 Ruled the meeting place. It was a marvel that the winehall

Withstood them as they battled bravely and did not burst,
Tumble to that beautiful spot of earth—but it had been built,
Inside and out, to have great strength, with its iron bands
Forged by the cunning of the smith. From the floor 775
Was wrested many a mead bench worked with gold,
As I've heard tell, where the foes fought their hard struggle.
Wise men of the Shieldings had not foreseen
That any man in the ordinary way would be able to
Wreck the building, which was beautiful and worked with horn, 780
Or bring it down with guile—unless the flame's embrace
Should swallow it with fire. A terrible sound arose
Again and again. And this awesome horror terrified
Every man among the Danes, who heard the uproar
As they clung to the wall and listened 785
As the enemy of God sounded out his grim tune,
A howling that held no victory. Hell's captive
Bemoaned the grim anguish that gripped him tight. Beowulf,
Who was the strongest in his might of all men
In that day of this life, still held the demon fast. 790

The protector of heroes would not in any way
Allow the murderous guest to escape alive,
Nor did he think that any would worry what life had been
Measured out to the monster. Beowulf's men
Brandished their swords, precious heirlooms; 795
They sought to keep safe the life of their noble lord,
The well-known chief, where they could.
Entering the struggle, they stayed ignorant of one thing,
These champion fighters of firm resolve
Who were determined to deal blows on every side, 800
Seeking out the creature's soul—they did not know
That no blade used in battle, not even the best iron,
No edged weapon on earth, might cleave into the evildoer,
For he had conjured a spell against weapons that cannot fail,
Against every sharp edge. Such was what destiny shaped: 805
The demon's departure from the world on that day of this life
Should be managed with misery. The strange spirit was fated
To flee far, to where fiends held power over him.

What the creature found, who before felt
 Much pleasure as he perpetrated his crimes 810
 Against humankind (his feud was with God),
 Was that his flesh could not endure for long
 How forcefully the formidable kinsman of Hygelac
 Gripped his hand. Each man was the other's enemy
 As long as both still lived. The gruesome ghoul 815
 Felt pain pass through his flesh. A frightful wound
 Sprung open on his shoulder as the sinews snapped,
 The bone-ropes burst. Glory in battle was granted
 Beowulf. It was Grendel's destiny that he was doomed
 To flee, hurt to the death, take to the fen slopes, 820
 Seek out his desolate dwelling. He saw very well
 His life had come to its limit, to the very last
 Of its destined number of days. After the rush of battle,
 What the Danes desired had come to pass.
 The one who had ventured from afar, valiant 825
 And prudent, had purged Hrothgar's hall,
 Defended it against destruction. Battle in the dark pleased Beowulf.
 The deeds where his daring prevailed. The prince of the Geats
 Fulfilled the boast he had offered the Danes,
 And in this way he avenged all the awful war, 830
 The dreadfulness wrought by evil they had before endured.
 Miserable destiny had doomed them to suffer
 No little affliction. Clear evidence of this appeared
 When the champion who'd shown courage hung the limb,
 The arm and shoulder that had provided power 835
 To Grendel's grip—below the gabled roof of Heorot.

And as the day dawned, so I have heard,
 Battle warriors in their bands went to that treasure hall.
 Princes of the tribes trod the paths from near
 And far, from distant stretches, to stare at the marvel, 840
 The footprints of the foe. In no way did Grendel's going
 From this world worry any of the warriors who
 Gazed on the tracks of the fiend, his glory now failed,
 How, his spirit weary, he found his way back,
 Defeated in the fight, to the monsters' mere. 845

Doomed, put to flight, Grendel had gone down this path,
Life bleeding out of him. There the waters brimmed with blood,
The terrible tumult of currents swirled
With steaming gore, welled with the blood shed in battle.
Destruction was his destiny, and Grendel lay dead there, 850
Joyless at last, his life given up in the fen retreat,
His heathen soul. Hell received him in that place.

The older retainers left the lake,
Many young men too, on a merry mission,
Proudly riding their mounts from the mere, 855
Those horse-borne warriors. There Beowulf's glory in war
Was made known. Many men said, and often,
That between the seas, both south and north,
There was no champion across the compass of the earth,
Under the expanse of heaven, no abler 860
Shield bearer, no one more suited to the throne.
Certainly they did not belittle their beloved lord,
The kind Hrothgar, for he was a capable king.
At times, those men brave in battle
Let the bay mares run at a gallop, race along 865
Where they thought fitting the pathways over the land,
Where the track was known good. At times, the king's thane,
A singer of songs, was mindful of stories he'd heard,
And he remembered many, a huge host
Of legends from ancient times. One word led to another, 870
Linked as meter demanded. The man then decided
To show his craft by dealing with Beowulf's deed.
With remarkable speed he recited a suitable lay,
Mixing his terms. He told all the tales
He had heard spoken about Sigemund,¹¹ 875
His deeds of daring, extraordinary accomplishments,
The strife Wael's son endured, his endless expeditions,
His works, his skirmishes, and the wickedness the sons of men

¹¹ Although Sigemund is a well-known figure in Germanic legend, but other sources make no mention of an encounter with a dragon. Such a fight, however, is often attributed to his son Siegfried, as in the medieval German poem the *Nibelungenlied*, the eventual source of Wagner's operatic treatment.

Did not know well—except Fitela, his companion,
 When Sigemund would speak of such matters, 880
 As an uncle to his nephew, for in every encounter
 They shared the danger. Shoulder to shoulder,
 They sent to sleep with their swords a good many
 Among the race of giants. After the day of his death,
 Sigemund was fated to enjoy no little fame 885
 After, strife-strengthened, he slew a serpent
 Who held sway over a treasure hoard. Under the gray stone,
 The nobleman's son ventured on his own
 The dangerous feat, and Fitela was not with him.
 Yet such was the man's fate: piercing the marvelous beast 890
 With his sword so that its blade stuck in the wall,
 A noble thing of steel. The dragon, slain, surrendered its life.
 The courageous man then moved quickly
 To take and enjoy the hoard of treasure
 As he wished. The warrior loaded up the seagoing ship. 895
 That son of Waels stowed in the ship's hold
 Those shiny heirlooms. Heat melted the serpent.

Sigemund was the most celebrated champion,
 That shield of warriors, throughout the tribes of men,
 Famed for his deeds of daring (he profited from what he did) 900
 From the time that Heremod's strength subsided,
 His might and bravery.¹² That man was betrayed
 Into the force of his foes, the Jutes,
 Quickly killed. The crushing cares in his heart
 Oppressed him too long. To his people, to all 905
 The wellborn, Heremod became a worry while he lived.
 Many a wise man in his prudence bewailed
 What Heremod, dominated by stubbornness, often did,
 Those who'd trusted he would remedy their troubles,
 That this prince's son was destined to prosper 910
 And resemble his father, rule over the realm and tribe,
 The hoard and stronghold, the kingdom of heroes,

¹² In Danish legend, Heremod was a man of great strength and wisdom who, becoming king, showed himself so cruel and criminally minded that the nobles plotted his murder.

The homeland of the Shieldings. For all humankind
And those who cared for him, the kinsman of Hygelac
Wrought gracious works. Wrongdoing overcame Heremod. 915

At times running fast, the Danes raced along
The sandy lanes. By then the morning light had been
Shoved from the sky and sent on its way. Many men
Whose courage held firm went to the hall there on high
To stare at the strange wonder. And the sovereign himself, 920
Who held the hoard, steadfast in his honor,
Trode the path there with a troop of no little size,
Their eminence easy to see—and, along with him, his queen
Passed over the path to the meadhall with a company of women.

Hrothgar spoke—he strode toward the hall, 925
Stood by the post, gazed up at the steep roof
Glittering with gold, and at Grendel's paw:
“For the thing we see here, let us say thanks to the Almighty

At once! Many injuries have I endured,
Horrible hurt at Grendel's hands. God may always work 930
One miracle after another, the Shepherd of glory.

Not long ago I held out no hope at all
I'd receive any remedy for these troubles
Till my life came to a halt, while the finest of halls stood
Stained with blood, streaked with the gore of battle. 935

Wise men far and wide learned of these woes,
And they did not believe that what is built on this land
Or its people should ever find protection from enemies,
From demons and deadly spirits. Now a daring man,
Aided by the power of God, has accomplished the task 940
That all of us in times past could not compass

Despite our wisdom. Listen! Whoever the woman was
Among that generous people who gave birth to him,
She could certainly claim, if she yet lives,
That the Old Measurer was mild-hearted to her 945
In the conceiving of children. My choice now,
Beowulf, best of warriors, is to take you as my son
And care for you in my soul. In days to come, keep well

This new bond and you shall not want for any worldly
 Desire that moves you, as far as mine is the power. 950
 Many times, and for less daring deeds, have I given gifts,
 Honorable treasures from the hoard, to lesser men
 Who did not prove to have such prowess in the fight.
 The deed you did will make your glory endure
 For all time. May He who rules over creation requite 955
 You graciously and with such goods as He just now did!“

Beowulf spoke, the son of Edgetheow:
 “That work of battle, the struggle that was waged,
 We dared venture to the end and with eagerness,
 The hardship like nothing I had known. I would rather 960
 You had been able to gaze upon the ghoul
 In his gear, as he grew weary of dealing death.
 My hope was to grab hold of him at once,
 Seize him powerfully and pin him to a bed of slaughter.
 And then, held back by the strength in my hands, 965
 He should squirm and struggle if he could not fight free.
 I was unable, the Measurer did not allow me,
 To stop him from slipping away, nor was the strength
 Of my hands enough to hold him. The evildoer proved
 Too powerful and fled down the path. Yet he left his paw 970
 To safeguard his life, to stand watch over his tracks,
 His arm and shoulder too. But in no way did
 The misbegotten beast buy himself safety.
 The ghoul greedy for evil will live no longer,
 For his crimes have condemned him and hurt has 975
 Bound him tightly in a deadly embrace
 With shackles of suffering. There the creature, still youthful,
 Marked by wrongdoing, must await some final judgment,
 How in His majesty the Measurer will sentence him.”

The son of Edgelaf was a less outspoken warrior 980
 And dared utter no more boasts about deeds of battle
 Once the prince’s power in fighting
 Was clearly revealed by the hand on that high roof,
 By the fiend’s fingers. In front, each had

A strong nail most like steel; 985
The claws of the heathen creature craving battle
Were awful and strange. Every man said
That no hardened blade would bite into him,
And that no peerless steel would prove able to strike off
The beast's paw, bloody now from the battle. 990

Afterward the command went out at once that the clan
Should adorn Heorot with their hands. There were many,
Warriors and women alike, who worked to refit
That winehall, where guests were housed. The weavings on the walls
Glimmered with golden threads. Certainly every warrior who 995
Gazed on them thought it a glorious sight.
That bright dwelling was quite broken up;
This building forcefully wrought within by forged iron
Had its hinges torn off. Only the roof was unharmed
And unbroken after the monster, 1000
Doomed by his wrongdoing, turned away in flight,
Despairing for his safety. And escape will not prove easy;
Let him flee who will! For any man, feeling so forced,
So pressed, must seek the place prepared
For those who bear souls and dwell on the earth, 1005
Who count themselves the sons of men, since that is
The place where his body, fast on its bed of death,
Will sleep after the feast. It was time, the appointed hour,
When the son of HalfDane should make his way to the hall.
The prince himself wished to partake of the feasting. 1010
Never have I heard that any tribe, any great band of thanes,
Bore themselves better around their treasure giver.
Warriors who had won glory sat down on the benches
And rejoiced in the merrymaking. With mirth, they drained
Many a cup of mead, those kinsmen 1015
In the steeply towering hall of the steadfast
Hrothgar and Hrothulf. Heorot was filled
With friends; in no way did the Shielding folk
Practice treachery at that time.¹³

¹³ The narrator here alludes ironically to Hrothulf's apparent betrayal of Hrothgar's sons.

The son of HalfDane then handed Beowulf 1020
 A golden banner as an emblem of his glory,
 An embroidered battleflag, a helmet and hauberk.
 The people looked on while a well-known and prized blade
 Was borne to the battle warrior. Beowulf drained his cup
 With satisfaction. He sensed the gifts should not shame him 1025
 Before the fighting men, those that were meant to be his.
 And no story I've heard says any stout-hearted man
 Bestowed on another at the ale bench in a better fashion
 Four such treasures that glimmered with gold.
 Around the helmet's top, worked with wire, 1030
 A boar crest protected the head from above,
 So that no file-sharpened sword might shatter
 Or harm the helmet, hard in the shower of battle,
 When the fighter with his shield must go forward against the foe.
 Then the protector of heroes ordered eight horses, 1035
 Mares with plated harness, led inside the mead hall,
 Underneath the eaves. Across one was
 A saddle artfully adorned, studded with jewels.
 It was the seat the noble ruler fought from
 Whenever the son of HalfDane set his mind to join 1040
 The fight and swordplay. In the front of the troop, where men
 Fall slain, the prowess of the man famed in war never failed.
 And then the Danish prince, kin to Ing, presented
 All these precious things to Beowulf to protect,
 The horses and weapons, told him to use them well. 1045
 This was how the glorious leader, treasure guardian
 Of retainers, fittingly recompensed those violent feats
 With horses and hoarded wealth. No man could hold these shameful
 If his intent is to tell the truth as justice asks.

After this, the ruler of those retainers rewarded each 1050
 Of the soldiers who had made the sea voyage with Beowulf,
 Gave them treasure from the hoard and heirlooms too
 On the mead bench, and he commanded gold be paid
 For that man at arms whom Grendel had
 Wrongfully murdered—and the wretch would have killed more 1055
 Had not wise God withstood what was destined,

As did the might of that one man. The Measurer
 Then held sway over all humankind, as He still does.
 And so in every land understanding is best,
 A prudent mind. A man will pass through much 1060
 Good and evil if he remains on this earth
 For long, here in these times of tribulation.

Gleeful sound and song mixed together
 Before the battle leader, kin to HalfDane.
 The harp was taken up, and a tale often told 1065
 When Hrothgar's poet was asked to proclaim
 A lay before the men on the mead benches.
 It told of Finn's sons, upon whom a sudden attack fell,
 And of the Half-Dane warrior, Hnaef of the Shieldings,
 Who was doomed to meet his death in the land of Frisia.¹⁴ 1070

*Certainly Hildeburh had no cause to praise
 The pledged word of the Jutes; though she had perpetrated
 No wrong, the swordplay swept away her loved ones,
 Her son, her brother too. Since it was fated, they fell dead,
 Struck with the spear. She was a sorrowful woman! 1075
 In no way did the daughter of Hoc without reason
 Bemoan what fate had determined once morning came
 And in the light of day she might look upon
 The gruesome slaughter of kinsmen, where once the greatest
 Of worldly joys had been hers. War swept away all 1080
 Of Finn's fighting men save a very few among them,
 And so in that meeting hall the Jutes could not*

¹⁴ This story of failed peacemaking, treachery, and divided loyalty is also known from a surviving but incomplete lay in Old English, the so-called *Finnsburg Fragment*. Here is a brief outline. The Danish woman Hildeburh had been given to Finn of the Jutes in an attempt to establish peace between the two peoples. Some years later a Danish party, led by Hnaef of the Shieldings, is visiting Finn's stronghold with a party of warriors. For some reason, the feud breaks out afresh between the two war bands at night. Many men are killed on both sides, including one of Hildeburh's son and Hnaef, who is Hildeburh's brother. A stalemate results from the fighting, and Finn concludes an agreement with the surviving Danes, who are to have their own hall, with Hengest now assuming the role of their leader. Finn will bestow as much treasure upon them as he does upon his own household. The enmity between the Danes and the Jutes cannot be suppressed for long. After a winter's delay, Hengest attacks Finn and the Jutes. Finn is killed, his stronghold is ransacked, and Hildeburh is taken back to her own people.

*Bring the fight against Hengest to a finish,
 Or rescue that miserable remnant from
 Hnaef's retainer. Instead the Jutes held out these terms:* 1085
*They'd determined the Danes should have another meeting place,
 Another hall with its high seat, whose rule
 They might share with the sons of the Jutes.
 And in the giving of gifts, Finn, the son of Folcwalda,
 Would do honor to the Danes every day,* 1090
*Offer baubles to Hengest's band of warriors,
 As much precious treasure and plated gold
 As his intention was to tender whenever
 Requiting the Frisian retainers in the beerhall.
 Then they made a strong bond on both sides,* 1095
*A final treaty of peace. Finn proffered
 Oaths to Hengest, did not hesitate in the least.
 In accord with what wise men judged, they would
 Hold true to the dwindled band of Danes with honor;
 No one should shatter the truce by word or deed.* 1100
*And the Danes should never utter dire accusations,
 Though, lordless, they followed the leader who'd laid low
 Their treasure giver—for this they were forced to grant.
 If any man among the Frisians should mention the feud,
 Call to mind the hatred that arises from murder,* 1105
*Then the matter was to be settled by the sword's edge.
 The pyre was prepared, and precious things of gold
 Were fetched from the hoard. The finest fighter
 Of the battling Shieldings was readied on the bier.
 In that funeral fire it was easy to find* 1110
*The bloodstained mailshirt, the boar fashioned all of gold,
 A beast hard as iron, many a high-born man
 Wearied by wounds. Men of rank fell in that war!
 Then Hildeburh said that her own son
 Should be surrendered to the flames on Hnaef's pyre,* 1115
*His bones put to be burnt there on the bonfire
 At his uncle's side. The woman gave herself to wailing,
 Sang a song full of sadness. A warrior ascended the wooden pile.
 The flames devouring the dead drifted toward heaven,
 Roared before the mound. Heads melted,* 1120

*Wounds burst open, and blood welled from them,
From gruesome cuts on that flesh. Fire, the greediest of spirits,
Swallowed all those whom war had swept away
From both those tribes. Their glory had passed.*

*The warriors went away to visit their dwellings, 1125
With those they loved now dead, to see the land of Frisia,
The homes and great burgs. Yet Hengest
Stayed with Finn that winter stained by slaughter.
Denied a good fate, he found memories of his homeland
Held him, though he could not sail the ring-prowed ship 1130
Over the seas. The ocean welled with storms,
The wind drove the water. Winter locked the waves
In icy bonds, until another year arrived
In the dwellings—just as it now does still,
When the wondrously shining season always 1135
Blesses the hall. Winter had beaten a retreat.
Fair again was the earth's bosom. The exile, this stranger,
Was eager to leave the country. Yet Hengest's urge
To avenge his injury was deeper than his desire to cross the sea,
If only he could bring on a battle in his boldness 1140
And remember with his steel the sons of the Jutes.
And so he did not scorn the counsel of his companions
When Hunlafing put in his arms
The best of swords, a blade that shone in battle.¹⁵
Among the Jutes its edges were well known. 1145
And then horrible death dealt by the blade
Was the fate bold-spirited Finn suffered in his own home
After Guthlaf and Oslaf lamented the sorrow
That fell to their lot. A bitter attack had followed the sea journey.
They blamed him for their bitterness and sorrow. The restless spirit 1150
In Hengest's breast could not be stifled. Then the hall was stained red
With the life-blood of his foes. Finn was brought low as well,
A king amidst his company, and the queen carried off.
The Shielding warriors shuffled off to the ships,
Carrying the household goods of that country's king, 1155*

¹⁵ The placing of the sword is an implicit call for vengeance.

*Whatever jewels and fine things they could find
In Finn's home. On that journey over the sea,
They brought the right-minded woman back to the Danes,
Returned her to her own people.*

The lay was sung,
The verses of the court poet. Pleasant banter started up, 1160
Boldtalk from the benches sounded clearly; servants brought
Wine in marvelous cups. Then Wealhtheow went forth,
Wearing her golden crown, to where the two good warriors
Sat together, uncle and nephew. At that time, peace still held
Between them; they trusted each other. Unferth, the
spokesman, 1165
Sat at the feet of the Shielding lords. Every man had faith in his
spirit,
That he had great bravery, though in the battle he had
Not proved honorable to his kinsmen. Then the Shielding queen
Spoke these words: "Take this cup, my well-born lord,
Bestower of treasure! Be happy, cordial to our guests, 1170
Gold friend of men, and gracious in what you say
To the Geats, do your duty as any man should.
Show the Geats our good will, remember them with gifts,
For these you possess from near and far.
I have heard you wish to adopt this battle warrior 1175
As your heir. Heorot has been made clean,
The elegant gift hall. While you are able, enjoy
Your good fortune, and to your own kinfolk bequeath
The tribe and kingdom when you must travel hence
To find what fate has fashioned for you. 1180
Noble Hrothulf, I know, will honor the young men
If you, gracious lord of the Shieldings, go from
From this world before he passes away.
I think he will treat his kinsmen kindly
Should he recollect the honors he was handed, 1185
That we showered on him as a child.
We did what he wanted and what favored him."
She turned then by the bench where her boys,
Hrethric and Hrothmund, sat beside the sons of warriors,
The young men all together. There that able man sat also, 1190

Beowulf of the Geats, at the side of the two brothers.

The cup was fetched to him, and its friendly offer
Graciously spoken; glittering gold was
Bestowed upon him with honor, two arm bands,
A necklace and rings, the most magnificent torque 1195
Of those on earth I have heard tell of.
Under heaven, I have learned, there were no finer
Treasures from men's hoards since Hama¹⁶ bore off
To the shimmering burg the necklace of the Brosings,
The jewel and decorated adornment. He escaped the deadly
enmity 1200
Of Ermanaric, sought out an eternal reward.
Hygelac of the Geats, nephew of the Swertings,
Wore this neck adornment on his last adventure,
When under his banner he protected the booty he'd taken,
Defended his men who survived the battle. Destiny was his
undoing 1205
When in his reckless bravery he brought on a war,
A feud with the Frisians. He wore the necklace to that fight,
The valuable stones, across the vessel of the waves,
That courageous king. Under his shield he crumpled to the earth.
To the Frisians fell possession of the king's corpse, 1210
His battle gear, and the bright necklace as well.
Weaker warriors stripped the slaughtered
After the clash of spears. The band of Geats covered
The battlefield with their bodies. The hall burst with noise.
Wealththeow spoke, said this before the company: 1215
"Young man, beloved Beowulf,
Enjoy in good health this treasure and war gear,
These heirlooms of our people. And may you prosper,
Gain fame with your strength, and favor these boys
With what you advise! You will earn my thanks. 1220
You have brought it about that far and near

¹⁶ Ermanaric, king of the East Goths, committed suicide upon learning that the Huns had invaded his lands. In later legend, he is depicted as a fierce if treacherous warrior, in his greediness the antithesis of the generous ruler. Hama usually figures in these accounts as one of his companions.

People will praise you for all time,
 As far as the expanse of ocean surrounds
 The windy plain and cliffs. As long as you live,
 Well-born man, may you be blessed! I wish you 1225
 A rich reward. Do regale my sons
 With kindness—fate has favored you with consideration.
 Here all the fighting men are faithful to one another,
 Loyal to their liege, their hearts honored by graciousness.
 Our thanes think but one thought, a tribe undivided. 1230
 The warriors, drinking their drink, will do what I ask.”

She hurried to the high seat. It was the best feast they'd held;
 The warriors were drunk with wine. They knew nothing of doom,
 The dire destiny of men, as it was to descend upon
 Many a fighting man as soon as night fell 1235
 And Hrothgar hurried to his rooms. The ruler
 Of that tribe went to take his rest. A host of retainers
 Guarded the hall, as they had done before.
 Benchplanks were brought in. The building was fitted out
 With beds and pillows. One of those beer drinkers, 1240
 Doomed to suffer death, took his sleep in the hall.
 At their heads they hung their battle boards,
 The bright shields; there on the bench,
 Above a nobleman, it was easy to notice
 The helmet that towers in battle, the hauberk of iron rings, 1245
 The shaft mighty in war. It was the wont of these weapons
 To stand tall at all times ready for battle,
 Either in the host or at home, awaiting the time
 When they should serve their sovereign lord,
 As trouble came. This warrior tribe was capable. 1250

The men fell to sleep. One of them paid with pain
 For the bed rest he had that night, as often happened before
 While Grendel held sway in the golden hall,
 Wrapped himself in wrong, until that came to an end,
 And after committing those crimes he died. It became
 manifest, 1255
 Widely known to the warriors, that an avenger still

Lived on after the death of that dreadful devil,
And the murderous war he waged. The mother of Grendel,
A woman and she monster, mulled over her woes.
Fate had forced her to wallow in the fearful waters 1260
And the cold streams after it came about
That Cain slew with a sword his own brother,
Kinsman of his father. He fled the feud,
Marked with the murder, mocked the joys men feel,
Found a home in the fens. From him were born 1265
Misbegotten ghouls, of which one was Grendel,
A ferocious outcast who in Heorot found
A man wakeful and awaiting battle.
There the monster matched his might with him,
But Beowulf remembered the power in his body, 1270
The great gift that was his, bestowed by God,
And he relied on the mercy of the One Ruler,
His favor and kindness. Thus he overcame the fiend,
Brought down the damned devil. Despairing, that creature de-
parted,
Happiness wrenched from him, to reach his death house, 1275
Hostile to mankind. Yet still his mother,
Ravenous and racked with pain, thought to risk
A miserable venture to avenge her son's murder.

She rushed on to Heorot, where the Ring-Danes
Were sleeping throughout the hall. Suddenly destiny 1280
Shifted for men, at the instant Grendel's mother
Forced her way inside. She was less formidable in war
In the same way that the strength of a woman,
A female's fighting power, is less than that of an armed man,
When the sword, shaped by the hammer, stained with blood, 1285
Mighty in its edges, a hilted blade,
Hacks off the boar piece from an enemy helmet.
In the hall, then, over the beds, the hard-edged blades
Of many swords were drawn; hands hefted broad shields
On high. But there was no time for helmets 1290
Or loose-fitting mailshirts when that misery fell upon them.
She was in haste and keen to quit the hall

So as to save her life once they found her out.
 Quickly she took hold of one among that esteemed host,
 Gripped him hard in her hands, then hastened to the heath. 1295
 He was the man Hrothgar loved best of his retainer band,
 Of all his soldiers between the two seas.
 From his sleep she seized the powerful shield warrior,
 A fighter of no little fame. Beowulf was not there.
 The glorious champion of the Geats had been granted 1300
 Other rooms after the gold and gifts were given him.
 Heorot was in an uproar. From the gable the ghoul grabbed
 The paw known to all. Terror made another appearance,
 Flew through the dwellings. It was no fair exchange
 That both parties should pay the price 1305
 With the lives of loved ones. The wise leader,
 The white-haired warrior, was sunk into woe,
 When he learned his chief retainer no longer lived.
 The fighter he held dearest now lay dead.
 To the building Beowulf was quickly beckoned, 1310
 A fighter fated to triumph. As day dawned, that warrior,
 A noble man at arms, made his way
 With his retainers to where the wise man was waiting
 To observe if the Ruler of every realm would ever
 Deliver him, after despair, to another destiny. 1315
 Worthy to lead a fighting band, Beowulf walked the floor
 With his warrior troop—the wooden hall rung out with the tumult
 —So he might approach the prudent man who ruled the Danes,
 The kinsmen of Ing. He asked the king, as he started to speak,
 If he had passed the night in peace and with pleasure. 1320

Hrothgar spoke, helm of the Shieldings:
 “Say nothing of pleasantness! The Danish people have seen
 Their dread anguish renewed. Aeschere is dead,
 The older brother of Yrmenlaf,
 My private counselor whose advice I prized, 1325
 My shoulder companion when we two in combat
 Guarded our heads as the footsoldiers flung together
 And boar ornaments shocked each other. A man should be
 Of unequalled nobility—just what Aeschere was!

A ghoul, restless and seeking blood, slew him 1330
In Heorot with her own hands. I know not to what place

The creature, celebrating the slaughter, crept back,
Eager for the kill. She avenged the enmity,
For you undid Grendel the other night
With the gruesome grip of your grasp 1335
Because he had too long destroyed and decimated
My folk. In the fight that monster fell slain,
His life forfeit, and now another fiend has leapt forth,
A mighty, evil ravager intent on avenging her kinsman;
You have made the feud greater by far, 1340
Or so may deem many of the Danish men,
Whose hearts grieve for their treasure giver
And who bear the burden of much misery.
Death has halted the hand wishing to satisfy all your wants.

I am informed by those who inhabit the outlands 1345
And the hall counselors of my tribe, who recount
How they have sometimes caught sight of
Monsters moving over the moorlands,
Uncanny beasts who rule the border country. One of them,
As these warriors could in their wisdom best determine, 1350
Was shaped in the image of a woman. The other wretch
Followed the paths of exile in the form of a man,
But he was much bigger than all other men.
In days past, those who dwelt on this earth devised the name
Grendel for him. They knew of no father at all, 1355
Whether among those mysterious monsters any had been
Born before him. These two devils dwell in benighted places,
The cliffs where wolves lurk, wind-swept high ground,
The fearful byways of the fens where the mountain brook
Slips under the gloomy steaminess of steep rocks, 1360
Where the stream spills into the ground itself. Not far from here,
As miles measure the distance, is where this mere stands.
Ice-covered groves overgrow the pool;
Trees strong-rooted shut out the sun from the water.
Every night a gruesome marvel is there to be glimpsed: 1365

Flames sparkling on the flooding stream. Not one son of men
 Now living has the mind to measure its limits.
 Though the wanderer on the heath, the stag strong in its horns
 Who is hard pressed by hounds and put to flight from afar,
 Runs for these woods, the deer will render up breath 1370
 And life on the shore before he steps in that water
 To protect its head. It is no good place!
 From there waves in their welling turbulence rise
 Dark to the heavens whenever the wind roils up
 Glowering weather—and then the air grows gloomy 1375
 And the heavens despair. What to do now depends
 On you alone, though the place is unknown to you,
 The gruesome ground where you might meet
 That man marked by sin. Seek it if you dare.
 For this violent venture, I will reward you with rings, 1380
 With treasure ancient and dear, just as I have already done,
 With twisted gold—if you can go back home from the mere.”

Beowulf spoke, the son of Edgetheow:
 “You are wise; surrender not to sorrow. It is worthier
 That every man avenge his friend than endlessly mourn. 1385
 Each of us is destined to see the end
 Of the life he lives in this world. Let the man who may
 Win fame before death. For those who fight
 That profits most after life has found its limit.

Rise up, ruler of this realm, and let us go quickly 1390
 To scan the path that Grendel’s kin scampered along.
 This I promise you; the fiend shall find no place of safety,
 Not deep in the ground, not on some tree-grown mountain,
 Not on the ocean floor. Let her flee where she will!
 Patience with all your woe is what you should practice 1395
 This morning. Be the man I think you are.”
 The old man leapt to his feet, thanked the mighty Lord
 God, for the good words Beowulf had uttered.

Then a horse was fetched for Hrothgar,
 A mount with a twisted mane. The prudent leader, 1400

His appearance splendid, started out; a troop of men at arms
Trailing their shields, strode forward. The tracks
That marked the forest paths could be seen from far off,
The trail traced on the earth, how she had hurried away
Across the murky moors. The monster had made off with 1405
The lifeless corpse of the king's counselor,
The greatest of those who guarded Hrothgar's home.
Soldiers, the sons of warriors, went their way over
Steep cliffs of stone, keeping to a single path,
The trail wide enough for only one, an unknown track, 1410
Headlands that rose high, dens where demons hulked.
With not many of the wiser men, Hrothgar made his way
To the front of the troop, so they could find out the truth,
And then suddenly they stumbled on a spot
Where stunted trees stooped double over dark stone, 1415
A wood that withheld joy; the water that ran beneath
Roiling with blood. The Danish retainers in the band,
The kinfolk of the Shieldings, and many a fighting man
Happened on a sorrow that was hard to suffer,
As all the warriors became well aware, 1420
For on the sea cliff they caught sight of Aeschere's head.
The waves welled with blood and boiling gore
As those heroes, aghast, looked on. Again and again from the host
A horn sang out a stirring tune. The troop sank to the sand.
They stared at a huge host of serpents in the pool 1425
And spied strange sea dragons slipping through deep water,
Monsters sprawled on the mainland slopes.
Before daylight dawned, these devilish creatures drifted off
On sorrowful journeys over the sail-crossed sea.
But resenting the strangers, these serpents slinked off 1430
Maddened, the monsters heard the strident sound,
The notes blown on the warhorn. With his bow,
The Geatish leader took the life from a loathsome being,
Ended his wrangling in the waves as the hard war shaft
Went deep in its guts. His going through the water 1435
Grew slower as death strengthened its grip on him.
The warriors harried that serpent, there in the waves,
Quite hard, hooking it with barbed boar spears,

Harshly subduing and hauling up on the stony shore
 That wondrous wave roamer. Warriors there 1440
 Stared hard and long at the strange beast.
 Beowulf strapped on
 His fighting gear; he felt no fear at all for his life
 The battle hauberk, linked by hand, loose fitting,
 And finely worked, was fated to try the watery deep.
 The mail shirt proved able to protect his body, 1445
 For the grasping fiends did not harm his flesh,
 And no wrathful creature's grip could wrench life from him.
 But it was the polished helmet that protected his head,
 And, worthily adorned, worked with fine wire,
 That headgear was destined to disturb the waters 1450
 Of the lake's depths and try the fierce flood. Long ago
 The weapon smith had shaped and wondrously appointed it,
 Adorned it with boar images and after that
 No sword or battle blade might bite into it.
 Yet by no means the weakest weapon that served him 1455
 Was the hafted sword named Hrunting,
 Which Hrothgar's spokesman lent him in his need.
 And it was the most esteemed of ancient heirlooms.
 The blade was iron, blazoned with poison bands,
 Hardened with battle-shed blood. In the fight it had never
 failed 1460
 Any hero who held it hard in his hands
 As he dared enter dreadful encounters
 Where the tribes fought fiercely; nor was this the first time
 That the weapon's duty was to do works of daring.
 Surely the son of Edgelaf, proud of his strength, 1465
 Did not remember what the other had recounted
 Drunk with wine, when he made the loan of the weapon
 To an abler sword warrior. Unferth dared not
 Risk his life in the loathsome welling waters
 Or bear up bravely. And so he gained less glory 1470
 And the fame that daring earns. The other did not endure
 The same fate once he fitted himself for the fight.

Beowulf spoke, the son of Edgetheow:

“Famed son of HalfDane, prudent prince of fighting men,
Gold-friend of warriors, I am eager now to attempt 1475
This task. Remember the talk we had earlier
If, assisting you in your agony, I should
Lose my life, you would act as a father
And do what must be done with me dead.
Let yours be hands that hold safe my young retainers, 1480
My close companions should this battle bring me death.
Beloved Hrothgar, you should also hurry on
To Hygelac the treasures you have bestowed upon me.
The Geatish lord, son of Hrethel, will quickly learn,
When he gazes on the gold and looks at that treasure, 1485
That I found a generous giver of rings, a man of much goodness.
While mine was the power, I took pleasure in those possessions.
And Unferth, whose fame runs far, should have back
The heirloom, his fabulous blade, finely engraved,
Its edges unyielding. With Hrunting I will either 1490
Find fame—or death will drag me off.”

After these words, the leader of the Geatish war band
Made such haste as he could—he would stay for
No response. The waters roiling with waves received
The battle warrior. A whole day came and went 1495
Before he might see the bottom of that deep.
But soon a sea beast, which had ruled that watery realm
For fifty years, a fiend greedy for gore and grimly fierce,
Was made aware that some man or other from above
Was searching through this realm of strange monsters. 1500
She lunged to latch onto his body, seized the battle warrior
In her monstrous paws. But she could not manage to pierce
His unharmed flesh. The iron rings he wore warded her off,
And those claws could not cleave through the steel cloth.
Her hateful fingers were held out by the hauberk. 1505
The sea wolf made her way to the bottom, bearing off
The ring-giver to the den where she dwelled,
But, for all the power and courage he possessed,
He could not wield his weapons. A band of weird beasts
Made war on him in the water, many a sea-going serpent 1510

Broke through the mail shirt with its battle tusks,
 Fighting against its foe. The man of arms quickly found
 That he was inside the enemies' dwelling
 Where the water could do him no worse harm,
 Nor could the fearsome assault of that flooding ocean 1515
 For the den had a roof. He caught sight of firelight,
 A brilliant gleaming that glowed with brightness.

Then the good man spied the flood monster,
 A mighty sea woman. He made a sharp attack
 With the blade battle-sharp; he did not hold back the stroke. 1520
 The blade, finely blazoned, beat out on her head
 A stirring song of war. Yet the stranger saw how
 The sword, shining in that light, would not slice into
 Or wrest the life from the fiend. The weapon failed the leader
 In his need. In earlier times it had passed through many 1525
 Hand to hand fights, often hewing through the helmets
 And the mailshirts of men doomed to die. This was the first time
 That the fine relic forfeited its glory.

He remained resolute; the daring of the man intent on deeds
 That win glory, the kinsman of Hygelac, did not weaken. 1530
 The wrathful warrior threw down the wavy patterned sword,
 Its hilt a marvel, and it remained there on the ground,
 Strong in its edges of steel. He trusted instead to the strength
 His hands held in their grip. This is what a hero should do
 When he makes war so as to win for himself 1535
 A renown that never ends, with no regrets about his life.
 The prince of the War-Geats took hold of Grendel's mother
 By the arm. Hardened by war, he was unconcerned about
 The enmity he felt. He filled with anger as he flung off
 The evil fiend so that she fell to the floor. 1540
 But the monster had her revenge in a moment,
 Bringing him close in her horrid embrace.
 The man, the most fearsome of fighters on foot,
 Ready for war, felt his spirit falter as he tripped and fell.
 The monster mounted her hall guest and drew her dagger, 1545
 Broad with its burnished edges. She thought to avenge her boy,

The baby born to her. Across Beowulf's shoulders lay
A mail shirt fashioned of steel rings that shielded his life
As it withstood the stabbing point and slashing edge.
The son of Edgetheow, soldier of the Geats, 1550
Should have seen life flow out of him on the vast ocean floor
Had not the hauberk forged for the fight afforded help,
That war-hardened garment—and had not holy God
Granted victory in that war to him. The Lord in His wisdom,
Who rules over the heavens, had regard for the right. 1555
The man regained his feet right away.

Among her spoils of war, he spied a sword, an ancient blade
Victory-blessed, fashioned by giants, its edges unyielding,
A weapon worthy of warriors. It was the finest sharpened edge,
Save that it was too much for any man but him 1560
To bear and heft in the havoc of battle.
Deadly and splendid, it had been crafted in the giants' smithy.
The Shielding warrior, fierce and grim-faced in this fight,
Seized the shapely hilt, unsheathed the blazoned blade.
Despairing of his life, he lunged to deliver 1565
A devastating blow on the neck with the weapon,
Cracking the shaft of her spine; the blade readily sliced through
The doomed flesh. The demon dropped to the floor, and the sword
Ran heavy with blood. The hero was emboldened by his handiwork.

Light suddenly shot forth in a gleaming shaft from within, 1570
As if the candle of the sky sharply shimmered
In the heavens. The man hunted through that monster hall;
The retainer of Hygelac ranged haltingly along its walls,
Ready with the sword he held firmly by the hilt;
He was fierce and resolute in the fight, an old hand at war, 1575
And the blade had not failed him. He was bold and moved fast
To repay Grendel for the many raids, much like a war,
He had directed against the Danish host,
Again and again, not just that one time alone
When he slew as they slept the hearth thanes 1580
Of Hrothgar, choked down fifteen in all
Of those Danish soldiers as they slumped in sleep,

Then slinked away with the same number of corpses,
 A rueful booty. Beowulf felt the rage of battle
 And exacted a righteous revenge as he glimpsed Grendel 1585
 Reclining on his bed of rest, wearied by war,
 Life flowed from him, for the fight in Heorot had led
 To his death. The corpse divided in two
 When Grendel, cold as the grave, suffered the sword stroke,
 A blow fit for battle, as Beowulf cut free his head. 1590

At once, Hrothgar, and the Danish hall counselors
 Who'd ridden with him, saw, staring down at the water,
 That the turbulent currents had grown more troubled
 And the water gushed red with blood. White-haired
 Men of some age offered advice to the prudent ruler, 1595
 Held out no hope that the noble hero might return,
 Or that, covered with glory, he would emerge to meet
 The ruler of great renown. It was the thought of many there
 That the sea wolf had wrenched the life from Beowulf.
 Then came the ninth hour of the day. The daring Shieldings 1600
 Broke camp in the headlands; the king who
 Gives gold to men rode off. The strangers from over the sea
 Got sick at heart as they gazed on the mere.
 Hope had not left them, but they did not think they'd see
 Their benevolent lord again. Then that blade useful in war 1605
 Began to melt in icicles that battle had shaped
 And the blood shed in war; it seemed such a wonder
 That the sword dissolved, just as ice does
 When the Father unfastens the frost that binds the land,
 Unties the ropes that freeze the water, for He rules firmly 1610
 Over time and season both. God is the true Measurer of all things!
 Now the Geatish retainer did not remove from the den
 Any other marvelous things, though he caught sight of many,
 Except for the head, and the sword hilt as well,
 Embedded with jewels. The sword, with its engraved blade, 1615
 Had all melted. The blood of the poisonous monster,
 Its life snuffed out, steamed too hot in its strangeness.
 The man who in war had withstood many enemies
 Then angrily dove into the deep. He went through the water

Toward the shore, for the surging flood had been swept clean 1620
Of misbegotten monsters, at the moment when the strange spirit
Lost his life, breathing his last in this brittle creation.

The chief of the sea travelers, his spirit courageous,
Swam toward the beach. He gloried in the booty he'd claimed
From that deep, in the weighty burden he brought with him. 1625
The resolute retainer band moved as one toward their leader,
Giving thanks to God and rejoicing in his return,
For they were allowed to look on him alive again.
The helmet and hauberk of linked iron were quickly unhasped
From that man. The mere grew still and stagnant, 1630
The water drifted beneath the sky, driven with blood from the dead.
The fellowship of men went forth, following the steps
Of the demon doomed to die, passing over the path,
A familiar byway. Fighters with the boldness of kings
Bore along the head from that high country, 1635
And this undertaking was arduous, no matter that
Great courage filled them. Four had been commanded
To carry, as they hustled forward to the gold hall,
The head of Grendel affixed on a fighting spear.
The time went forth and the fourteen Geats, warriors 1640
Proven brave and bold in battle, went their way
And drew near to the hall. The daring lord of men
Crossed the meadow near the meadhall with his company.
Then the prince of that band, his bravery proven by deeds,
His worthiness bringing renown, entered the building, 1645
A man who had fought fiercely, so he might greet Hrothgar.
Grendel's head was hauled by the hair
Into the hall, where men drank their beer,
And the company of kinsmen, like their queen,
Were afraid of the uncouth sight. Warriors eyed it open-
mouthed. 1650

Beowulf spoke, the son of Edgetheow:
“Hear me, son of HalfDane and Shielding prince,
We take satisfaction in bringing you this sea booty
That betokens glory, all that you gaze on here.

It proved no delight to dare this adventure, 1655
 Battling beneath the waves. Only with difficulty
 Was the task seen to its finish. The fight
 Would have ended unfortunately at the outset had God
 Not guarded me. In that duel I could do no good at all
 With Hrunting, though that sword is strong; 1660
 The Ruler of humankind blessed me with His help.
 For on the wall I saw hanging, shimmering and shining,
 A sword old and sturdy—He often stands by
 Those who need assistance. So I unsheathed that sword.
 As we struggled and the chance came, I struck down 1665
 The guardians of that building. Afterward the good blade,
 The ornamented sword, burned up when their blood,
 Hotter than battle gore, dripped down it. I brought back the hilt
 I'd taken from those enemies. Their outrages were avenged,
 The fearsome slaughter of Danes, and this was fitting. 1670
 You may henceforth, risking no horror,
 Take your rest in Heorot with your retainer band,
 As may all the champions from your clan,
 Boys and men alike, for you've no need to beware,
 Shielding lord, that demon, deadly in his destruction, 1675
 That he'll come to feast on men. Fear not as you once did."

Then the golden hilt, a thing giants had fashioned,
 Was passed to the hands of the old prince,
 A battle leader of some age. After the devils met their death,
 The Danish king came to have and hold 1680
 This uncanny object that smiths had crafted.
 After the hard-hearted enemy of God, guilty of the evils
 He wrought, gave up this world, as did his mother as well,
 The hilt passed into the possession of the noblest prince
 In those northlands between the twin seas, 1685
 The best bestower of treasure in Swedish parts.

Hrothgar gave voice to his thoughts, gazing at the hilt,
 An heirloom from ages past, on which was etched the start
 Of that foul struggle, when the flood struck down,
 An ocean welling up with waves, the race of giants; 1690

The war went worse for them; their host was hard
In its enmity to eternal God. The Ruler determined upon
Their final reward in the flood that engulfed them.
On the hilt of shining gold was all this story
Fittingly etched in runic form, set down and inscribed 1695
With those magic words. This work was wrought for the man
Who first commanded the choice iron forged; he had smiths shape
The twisted hilt, with its serpent design. Then the prudent prince,
HalfDane's son, said this—all fell silent:
“Hear! He among the tribes who furthers truth and fairness 1700
May rightly proclaim, a man mindful of what has passed,
The aged owner of this land, that this man of arms is
Among the better born. My friend Beowulf,
Your fame has flashed round the wide ways of earth
To every tribe. Your patience will preserve it, for you temper 1705
Your power with a prudent spirit. I shall hold true
To the promise I proclaimed before. You are fated
To serve your clan with kindness many a year, always sending
The warriors a helping hand.

Heremod did not become such a hero

For the Shieldings, the honorable kin of Ecgwela. He grew
not 1710
As they wished, but turned murderer and wallowed
In slaughter, slew in his deadliness the Danish people.
Anger swelled his heart and Heremod hewed down his household
men,
His close companions; in the end he passed down a lonely path.
The famed ruler turned away from the pleasures men possess, 1715
No matter that mighty God had furthered, endowed him
With the mightiness that profits. Beyond all other men,
God marked him for rank—but no matter. In his heart, right in
His soul, grew a thirst for gore. Not at all did he give
Heirlooms to the Danes as honor demands. He lived on, 1720
Deprived of joy as this hatred harmed him, and the hurt
He caused among our kinfolk. Learn a lesson from this!
Understand what an open hand is! A man old in winters,
I tell this tale for your sake. It is indeed a marvel
To meditate how mighty God shares out wisdom 1725

To mankind in the liberality of His spirit,
 Bestowing lands and worthiness. He boasts of power over all.
 At times He allows the inner thoughts of a man
 From a renowned tribe to turn toward what he loves.
 He endows him in his homeland with earthly joy 1730
 To have and hold, a town where men find safe haven.
 He gives him the right to rule over such regions of this world,
 A realm that reaches far, and then in his lack of wisdom
 He cannot imagine it all might end.
 He lives on in happiness. Not at all does illness or old age 1735
 Hang heavy on him. The misery that malice gives rise to
 Does not sully his spirit. No feud anywhere faces him,
 No hatred settled by the sword. Instead, everything
 In his world goes as he wishes. He cannot think that worse
 Might occur until arrogance enters deep inside, 1740
 Grows and gathers strength. Then the guardian sleeps,
 The shepherd of his soul. This sleep will be too sound,
 For cares disturb it. The slayer will creep close
 And shoot a shaft in his disloyalty that lodges
 In his heart, hits him under the helmet he wears, 1745
 For he can't shield himself from a shaft this sharp,
 That is, the awful, uncanny bidding of an accursed spirit.
 What he long held dear—he now deems too little indeed.
 Greed makes him a miser, so he gives to no man's honor
 Any fancy ornaments. And then he fails to mind 1750
 What life will bring, and all that God, the glorious ruler,
 Had showered upon him, his share of honors.
 And in the end this is what occurs:
 His body, which does not endure, falls broken,
 Undergoing what destiny determines. Another takes the
 throne, 1755
 And he generously gives out treasures, the ancient heirlooms
 Of heroes. He does not heed the horror that might come.
 Avoid that deadly attack, beloved Beowulf,
 Best of men, and choose what is the better course,
 Advice of eternal worth. Do not let arrogance overwhelm you, 1760
 Famous champion! The glory of your might
 Will not last long. Soon enough it will come to pass

That sickness or sword will sap your strength,
Or a burning blaze, the streams that surge through the vast sea,
The bite of a greedy blade, or the spear that slips through the
air, 1765
Even bitter old age. It might be that the brightness in your eyes
Darkens or dies. Soon enough it will come to pass
That death defeats even you, who rule over your retainer band.

Thus it was that I ruled the Ring Danes for fifty years
Beneath the heavens, held them safe when battle came 1770
From many tribes throughout this middle earth
With my spear and sword. And so it was that I saw
No enemies under the expanse of the heavens.
And yet even for me in my own home destiny altered.
Sorrow followed celebration after it befell that Grendel 1775
Was moved to attack me, that enemy of an ancient line.
The feud I suffered never finished, nor did the great grief
That maimed my heart. Thanks be to the Measurer,
The eternal Lord, that I have lived long enough
To lay eyes on that enemy's head, now loathsome 1780
With blood, after the battle that endured so endlessly.
Go now to your seat and celebrate with us in the hall,
Which you have honored by the fight you fought.
We shall share many treasures when morning shines its light.”

The Geat found his spirit brightened, and he bustled 1785
To find his seat, just as the wise man had sought.
As had been their wont, once again a feast was fetched
For those on the hall benches who had been brave in battle,
So their deeds might be honored. The night grew dark, covering all.
Gloom wrapped up the warrior troop. The band of retainers
arose. 1790

The white-haired man wished to seek out his bed,
The Shielding grown old. The Geat, a stalwart
Shield warrior, very much wanted to sleep.
A hall servant hurried straightaway to help
This warrior from afar, now wearied by his feat. 1795
With heart-felt respect, the servant saw to

All the retainer required, things that in that day of this life
Warriors who sailed over the sea were wont to need.

The greathearted man took his rest. The hall towered,
Enormous, gold-adorned; the stranger did not end his sleep 1800
Until the black raven, his spirit buoyed with bliss, heralded
The bursting forth of heaven's joy. Then the brilliant light hurried
on,
Glimmering as it glided over the gloom. The men hastened.
These well-born warriors wished to sail back
To their clan. The man who had come out of courage 1805
Desired to close the distance to his craft.

The hero hardened by battle ordered Hrunting handed to
The son of Edgelaf. Beowulf begged him to keep the blade,
A much-loved sword. He thanked the man for its loan,
Said he much prized this battle friend, pronouncing it 1810
Bold in battle. He did not belittle the sword blade
With the words he spoke. Beowulf was a man of great bravery.
And then the warriors wanted to go their way;
Their fighting gear ready. Much favored by the Danish folk,
The prince of the Geats went to Hrothgar, and the warrior 1815
Of great strength, battle-proven, greeted him.

Beowulf spoke, the son of Edgetheow:
"We sailed here from afar, many miles, not a few,
But now we are moved to tell you it is time for us
To seek out Hygelac. Here you made happen what 1820
We desired. You did for us all we deemed good.
If there is any way in this world that I might earn
More of the love you hold in your heart,
Prince of men, than I've already done with the deeds
I accomplished in battle, I am eager at once to do so. 1825
Should word wend its way to me over the ocean deep
That tribes on your border threaten you with terror,
As your enemies have often done before,
I will arrive with an army of a thousand
To serve you. I am certain of my Hygelac, 1830

The lord who rules the Geats, though that guardian
Of the people is yet young. With words and works both
He will give me the might to do you honor,
And my blade will do battle beside your own.
If in war you need warriors, my strength will be yours. 1835
If Hrethric, that king's son, is ever moved to set sail for
The homeland of the Geats, he will find there
Fighting men friendly to him. Lands that lie far distant
Are more profitably sought by the man who is himself proven.”

Hrothgar spoke these words to him in response: 1840
“God in His providence inspired your spirit
With those words you spoke. Never have I heard any warrior
Young in years more wisely utter his thoughts.
Your might impresses us, and the quickness of your mind;
Well chosen are the words you speak! This is my view: 1845
It might happen that the shafted spear or battle in
Its bloody grimness seizes the life from Hrethel's son,
That sickness or sharp iron proves the undoing of your prince,
The shepherd of his tribe. And if you then still live,
The Geats, who make their home by the sea, would have 1850
No champion better to choose as a chief who will
Guard well the warriors' hoard of wealth—should you wish
To reign over the realm of your kinsmen. Beloved Beowulf,
I too feel much love for the man you've shown yourself to be.
You have furthered much, forging a bond between 1855
Our two peoples, Geats and Danes who bear the spear,
And so peace will reign, while hatred lies at rest,
The murderous enmity that once moved war's waging,
As long as I rule this realm in its vast reach.
We will share treasure in common. Men from both clans 1860
Will sail over the ocean, where seagulls bathe, to sell their goods.
The ring-prowed ship shall haul booty and what bestows honor
After crossing that ocean. Experience instructs that the Geats
Stand strong by the side of friends, strong too against foes,
Enduring insults of no kind, in the way custom approves.” 1865

Moreover, that protector of heroes, kinsman of HalfDane,

Gave Beowulf presents, twelve of them from the hall,
 Bade him safely travel to his tribe bearing this booty.
 Yet he should quickly come back to the Danes.
 The noble king who ruled the Shieldings then enfolded 1870
 With his arms and kissed that highborn man, his ablest retainer,
 Embraced Beowulf's neck. Tears streamed from the eyes
 Of the white-haired man. Two thoughts weighed on him,
 In his age and wisdom, one more heavily, that never again
 Should they lay eyes on one another, never again would 1875
 These mighty men sit in council. Hrothgar held that man too dear,
 And so he could not keep back what coursed through his breast.
 Instead, deep within, held fast by heart strings,
 Was a secret longing that burned in his blood
 For the man he held so dear. And this is what Beowulf did. 1880
 This battle warrior, glorying in his gold, trod the grassy earth,
 Celebrating with his treasure. The sea-traveler waited,
 Riding there on its anchor, for its proper lord.
 On their going over the sea the gifts of Hrothgar
 Were often praised. The Dane was a king among kings, 1885
 Who never found blame till old age bereft him
 Of the happiness strength brings, though he'd humbled many
 others.

Then they came to the border of the sea, that band of warriors,
 Men at arms in their youth. They carried their mailshirts,
 Battle wear of woven iron. The coastguard caught sight of 1890
 The men of battle on their return, as he had before;
 In no way did he threaten the foreigners with a fight
 As they climbed the cliff's nose, but rode up to them,
 Told the Geatish clan they were welcome,
 Warriors wearing shiny armor, to take to ship. 1895
 On the shore, then, the curved sea vessel,
 The ring-prowed ship was stowed with armor,
 With horses and heirlooms; the mast towered
 Over the ornaments that Hrothgar once held in his hoard.
 Beowulf bestowed on the ship's guardian a blade 1900
 Gleaming with gold, and after that on the ale bench
 The weapon made the man worthier in others' eyes;

The ancient sword was much prized. Then the ship shoved off,
Drove over the deep water, departed the land of the Danes.
A sail fit for the sea voyage was hauled up the mast, 1905
A sheet made fast with ropes. The wooden ship creaked.
In no way did the wind that blew over the water keep
The wave-floater from its way ahead. The sea skimmer moved
swiftly,
The foamy-necked boat forced its way over the waves,
Its decorated prow plowing the streaming deep 1910
Until they caught sight of Geatland's cliffs,
Their homeland heights. The keel cut through the water,
Strengthened by the wind, until it slipped to shore.
The coastguard moved quickly over the sand,
The scout who, at the ocean's edge, had scoured 1915
The horizon for some sight of the sought-for men.
He secured at the beach the wide-bottomed ship,
Riding its anchor, and then the roiling of the waves might
Do less harm to the wooden boat, beautiful to look upon.
He ordered taken up the treasures those noblemen brought, 1920
The precious things and plated gold. The path was not long
They had to pass over to their treasure giver,
Hygelac, son of Hrethel, where he held forth in his home,
There with his household, hard by the shore land.

The building was finely built; the king famed for bravery 1925
Was seated high in the hall; Hygd was quite young
And prudent too, self-possessed though she had passed
But few years yet there in the fortress,
That daughter of Hareth; in no way did she desist;
She was never less than liberal in giving gifts to the Geats, 1930
Heirlooms from the hoard. Modthryth, the clan's great queen
Was the author of many outrages, and they were awful;
No man ever dared draw near her, even her own
Retainers (except for the king who ruled her heart),
And no man on any day would meet her eyes. 1935
For she'd damn him to be bitterly bound,
Tightly tied; after hands took hold of him,
The sword was soon to settle the dispute,

And the ornamented edge would announce
 His bloody death, deeming the right. This is no dainty 1940
 Course for a queen to follow, no matter how fair.
 No peace-weaver, lying about some wrong,
 Should wrest the life from some well-loved warrior.
 Hemming's son¹⁷ put a stop to such stunts.
 Men, taking their ale, then told another tale, 1945
 How henceforth the queen killed fewer of that clan.
 She was less driven to deadly enmity after, adorned with gold,
 She was bestowed as a bride upon the young warrior,
 To the brave boy, when, obedient to the oaths
 Her father spoke, she sought out the fortress of Offa, 1950
 Going across the gray waters. There, while life lasted,
 On the throne she found benefit in what fate brought,
 And the fame of her goodness grew and grew,
 For she showed much love to the lord of men
 Since he was of those then alive, as I've been informed, 1955
 The most powerful among the peoples that make their home
 Between the two oceans. Indeed Offa, proven brave
 By his weapons, was held honorable far and wide
 For his gifts and greatness in war, ruled with wisdom
 The lands of his home—Eómer was born from his line, 1960
 Who held fast to his clan; he was kin to Hemming,
 The nephew of Garmund, a man mighty in battle.

The resolute warrior hurried off with his retainer band,
 Crossed over the meadows close by the shore,
 The wide pathways. The world's candle let loose its light; 1965
 The sun hastened from the south. The soldiers hurried,
 Shuffled fast to the hall where the shield of heroes
 Had learned that the young war leader,
 Ongentheow's slayer, was spending his time sharing out rings
 Within his stronghold. The news that Beowulf was nearby 1970
 After crossing the sea came quickly to Hygelac,
 That the protector of men who bear shields to battle
 Had landed—and alive—at the limits of the sea,

¹⁷ Hemming's son is Offa, the young husband of Modthryth mentioned below who "tamed" her wicked anger.

- Unharm'd after battle's uproar and was on his way to court.
Inside the hall, the king, whose words held sway, ordered 1975
Room to be made for the fighters moving on foot.
Then the soldier who'd survived the combat sat by the king,
Kinsman next to kinsman, after Beowulf with kind words
Gave a greeting to his liege lord, his speech full of love.
The daughter of Hareth stepped swiftly to serve them 1980
Through the hall, holding mugs of mead,
Showed respect for the band, bore bowls of strong drink
To warriors who waited there. In the high hall,
Hygelac was burning to hear it all; he began
With cordial words to ask his companion 1985
How the Geats had fared after sailing the sea:
"What became of your venture, beloved Beowulf,
After you decided—it was sudden—to set out far
Over the salt water and seek out war,
A battle in Heorot? Did you better in any way 1990
The strife that famous lord Hrothgar suffers,
Which is known far and wide? My heart welled with worry
And sorrow; it seemed that disaster would sweep away
The man I love so much. A long time I pleaded with you
Not to bring battle to that misbegotten murderer, 1995
But allow the Danes themselves to assault Grendel
When he attacked. Thanks to the Almighty that once again
I can lay eyes on you, hale and hearty."
- Beowulf, son of Edgetheow, said this:
"Nothing that happened should be hidden, Lord Hygelac. 2000
Many men now know of this meeting in battle,
What kind of fight was fought there by Grendel and me
In that hall where, wishing to do wrong, he waged war,
Made the Shieldings suffer such sorrow,
A shame that never saw its end. I avenged all that, 2005
And so no kinsman of Grendel across the earth
Will have cause to boast about the battle that morning,
Whatever creature that lives longest of this clan of killers,
Wrapped in wrongdoing. At first I made my way
To the ring-hall, hailed Hrothgar there. 2010

A warrior wearing his war-gear. It happened that Grendel
 Murdered the young man with a mortal bite,
 Bolted down the body of the one beloved by many. 2080
 Not for that reason did the bloody-toothed beast,
 A killer who, not sated, was still keen for slaughter,
 Hasten from the hall that was hung with gold.
 Instead, arrogant in his strength, he stole close to me,
 His greedy hands gripping me. A glove hung down, 2085
 Huge and horrific, cunningly fastened.
 The skin of some dragon was its source, sewn
 With consummate skill, showing a devil's craftiness
 This savage spirit bent on sin thought to stick
 Me in that glove, one more guiltless man 2090
 Among many others. But this was not to be
 When from my bed I arose angrily against him.
 Too long to tell is the tale of how I took vengeance on
 This enemy of that clan for every crime he committed.
 My prince, in that place I honored our people 2095
 With what I did. He hurried away from the hall.
 For but a short time he still enjoyed what life he had,
 And yet his right arm guarded his going hence,
 Remained in Heorot. Humbled, he fled in haste,
 Sorrow searing his heart, and sank to the mere bottom. 2100
 The Shielding ruler bestowed a reward on me
 Plenty of plated gold, for that work done in war,
 Many precious things, after morning made an appearance
 And we were asked to sit down to the feast that was served.
 Song and celebration held sway in the hall. The old Shielding 2105
 Recalls much, and he remembered many things from long ago.
 At times a warrior eager to entertain plucked his harp,
 A wooden thing that provides pleasure, singing songs
 As painful as they were true. At times, when appropriate,
 The good-hearted ruler related a strange story. 2110
 At times, now a prisoner of age, the old man at arms
 Was inspired to speak about the times of his youth,
 Of the strength he once showed in war. His spirit surged with feelings,
 Welled with the memories of the many winters he had lived.
 This was the way we passed the time in pleasure 2115

All that day until darkness shut us up in shadows
Once more, as it does to men. Soon after dusk descended,
Grendel's mother moved fast to find vengeance for herself.
She set out on a sorrowful journey. Death had stolen her son,
And the hatred the Geats showed in war. This horrible woman 2120
Avenged the child she had borne, brought low a battle warrior
With much haste. As he rested in the hall, Aeschere,
Who counseled wisdom, was quickly killed.
When dawn broke, and the light came, in no way could
The Danish people burn on a pyre that dear man, 2125
Whom death had now weakened and wearied,
Or feed his flesh to the flames. She bore off the body
Beneath the high ground stream, holding it in her horrible hand.
For Hrothgar this was the worst sorrow to suffer
Of those that, for so long, belabored the people's leader. 2130
Then that lord implored me on your life,
Grief grabbing his heart, that I demonstrate my daring
In that water, welling with waves, risk my life,
Do deeds of courage. He promised what would profit me.
Then I—it is widely known—came upon, in that water, 2135
A guardian of the depths, a devil grim and terrible.
For some time we struggled hand to hand.
The deep was driven with blood, and I cut off the head
Of Grendel's mother in that monstrous hall with a mighty blade,
As battle raged between us. From there below I swam up 2140
With difficulty to save my life. Not yet was I doomed to death.
Instead the guardian of warriors once more gave me
Many treasures to possess, that son of HalfDane.

The king of the clan conducted himself with virtue.
I had not failed to earn the reward, some recompense 2145
For the deed wrought by strength. Instead, he bestowed on me
Precious heirlooms, HalfDane's son, all I would have.
It is my wish, warrior king, that you get these gifts,
And I give them to express my gratitude. What grace is mine
To have comes from you. There are few in the clan, 2150
Few kinsmen close to me except you, Hygelac.”

He ordered carried in the banner crowned by a boar's head,
 The helmet that towers high in battle, the mail shirt made of grey
 iron,

The remarkable blade ready for battle. And this is the tale he told:
 "Hrothgar, the leader in his wisdom, had this war gear 2155
 Given to me. But the good will he bears you
 Is what I was to first explain to you.

He said Heorogar the king had once held it as his,
 Who was for many years the king of the Shieldings
 In no way would Heorogar give this gear, these adornments, 2160
 To his own son, the glorious Heorowearð,
 Despite the youth's loyalty. Enjoy the use of these things."

I heard that four horses followed quickly
 The path the treasure took—they were swift-footed and well-paired,
 Bay in color. Beowulf handed over to him this loving gift 2165
 Of horses and heirlooms. So should a kinsman conduct himself.

In no way should he scheme someone's bitter betrayal,
 His cunning kept secret, or plot to steal the lives
 Of companions he ought hold close. His nephew showed
 Loyalty to Hygelac, whom battle had hardened, 2170
 And each man was eager to do the other's good.

He offered the neck adornment to Hygd, so I heard,
 The marvelous and finely made treasure Wealhtheow gave him
 (The lady is a leader's daughter) along with three horses,
 Graceful and gleaming in their harness. Hygd's breast 2175
 Was gorgeously adorned after this gift.

And so the son of Edgetheow took satisfaction in
 What he'd done. He was a man famed for the war he made.
 Renown is what he sought. In no way did he, drunk, slay
 His close companions. Brutality did not blind his heart. 2180

Instead this man brave in battle ruled his might,
 The greatest any man enjoyed, the generous gift
 God had given him. A long time he'd suffered scorn,
 For the men of their band thought him backward,
 Nor would the ruler of that realm 2185

Hold him with much honor on the mead bench.
 Instead, they believed Beowulf of little strength,

A prince who lacked courage. Men fated for fame
Find that all their miseries turn back on themselves.

The protector of warriors, the king brave in battle, 2190
Then ordered brought into the hall Hrethel's heirloom,
A blade blazoned with gold. There was then no better
Treasure among that tribe, no sword prized more.
Hygelac gave Beowulf the weapon to wield as his own,
And granted him seven thousand hides of land, 2195
A hall and the high seat of a prince. Land among that people
Belonged to both uncle and nephew together,
The right to property in their tribe, but more
To the other man, who then held higher rank.

In the days to come, battle raged forth, 2200
And it happened that Hygelac was struck down;
And after that battle swords were what slew
Heardred as he stood his ground in the shield wall,
When the warlike Shilfings, warriors struggle-hardened,
Sought him among that tribe who had known triumph, 2205
Hating his people, harrying Hrethric's nephew.
And so it was that the realm in its vast reach passed
Into Beowulf's hands. And then for fifty winters
He held sway, and by then he was an aged leader,
An old guardian of his homeland, until a solitary serpent 2210
Started, once darkness descended, to exult in his strength,
A worm who watched a hoard high on the heath,
A barrow built tall of stone. A trail led beneath
That was not known to men. Into the mound went
Some thief and he crept close enough 2215
To this heathen hoard to snatch with his hand a great cup
Decorated with treasure. The dragon did not keep this secret,
Even though, sleeping, he'd been betrayed by the stealth
Of a robber. The neighboring clan clearly realized
That the dragon's anger had been aroused 2220

The thief who stole that treasure, troubling
The dragon, was not driven by desire or wish.

Instead, shoved hard, the servant of some
 Warrior fled wrath and the lash,
 And, no place to hide, stumbled into the hoard, 2225
 This man, pursued for the crime he committed.....²⁰

 ----- 2230
 There were many such
 Ancient heirlooms in that house dug deep in the earth,
 And these, in days gone by, some man or other,
 His mind losing its way, had laid up within.
 It was the noteworthy legacy of some noble clan, 2235
 The treasures they held dear. Death destroyed them all
 In times now long ago, and yet there was one man
 In that household who lived the longest.
 This guardian grieved for his friends, awaited the same fate:
 Only for a short time might he too enjoy 2240
 These ancient treasures. A barrow stood ready built,
 There on the plain, hard by the welling of the waves,
 Newly fashioned on that cliff, fast on its foundation.
 Into the barrow the guardian of those rings bore
 This wealth fit for warriors, worthy of hoarding, 2245
 Treasures of twisted gold. What he said was short indeed:
 "Earth, you hold these possessions earls once owned;
 Warriors can do so no more. In days gone by, good men
 Found all these in you. Death in the fight has finished them.
 An awful slaughter has been the end of every man 2250
 From my tribe, who have witnessed the last of this world;
 The happiness they had in the hall is no more. I have no one to heft
 This blade or burnish the gilded cup,
 A vessel of great value. The princes have ventured down another
 path.
 The helmet, hard in battle, is fated to lose the hammered gold 2255
 That decorates it. The polishers sleep the sleep of death,
 Those who were bidden to burnish the battle helm.

²⁰ This part of the unique manuscript of the poem was damaged by fire.

The mail shirt must suffer much the same, which endured in war
The slashing of sharp steel as shields shattered;
It rots with the warrior who wore it. Nor can this iron-ringed
 hauberk 2260
Follow long the path of the fighting man who leads in battle
At the side of men at arms. The harp holds no more mirth,
The wood does not sing with cheer; nor does the noble hawk
Swoop round the hall. No swift horse beats his hooves
In the stronghold. Death in the fight has dispatched 2265
Many mortal men as they made their way from this place!
His heart sank into sadness as he lamented his sorrows,
One man abandoned by them all. Unhappily he endured
His days and nights until death, surging within, wrapped
Around his heart. The ancient creature who attacks by night 2270
Happened upon the open hoard that holds pleasure for him.
This serpent fond of fire seeks out funeral mounds,
A hairless and horrible dragon, who soars high in the night,
Fire flaming from him. Dwellers in the fens
Mightily fear him. It is his fashion to find 2275
A hoard hidden in the earth, whose heathen gold
The ancient ghoul will guard, and yet get no profit from it!

And so for three hundred winters the deadly worm
Kept guard over this hoard dug deep in the ground.
And he grew in power until that one man grieved 2280
Its heart deeply. To his lord he hurried off
With the plated cup, pleaded for a peaceful
Settlement. By then the hoard had been sacked,
The trove of treasure diminished; the demand was granted
To the ill destined man. His master examined 2285
For the first time this ancient treasure made by men.
It was then that the worm awoke. His wrath renewed
As he sniffed around the stonework. Resolute, he sought
The footprints of his foe. That thief crept forth
Close to the creature's head with crafty stealth. 2290
Just so, a man not yet fated, who bears the favor
Of the Ruler, may readily endure
Bad times or banishment! The barrow's guardian

Covered the ground, eager to come upon the thief
 Who had done him such damage while he slept. 2295
 Fiery, his heart ablaze with anger, he circled the barrow,
 Stalking the outside. He stumbled on no man
 In that empty place—even so he exulted in his war craft,
 In his battle deeds. Sometimes he went back to the barrow,
 Seeking the precious cup. And soon he saw well 2300
 That some man or other had handled his hoard,
 His valuable trove. The guardian of the treasure attended
 Only with difficulty until darkness descended.
 Then the barrow's watchman swelled with wrath.
 The hateful monster meant his heat to avenge 2305
 The loss of that valuable vessel. Day had by then vanished.
 The dragon's wish was fulfilled. At the wall
 He'd linger no longer, but rather sallied forth, fire surging,
 His body all ablaze. As he began, this strange being
 Brought fear to this folk that would soon finish 2310
 With terrible pain for their treasure giver.

Then the serpent started to spew forth flames
 And burn down fine buildings. The light bright with flame
 Announced its ire to men. The evil monster,
 Flying through the air, would leave nothing alive. 2315
 The war the dragon waged was seen far and wide.
 All saw the hatred that foe felt in his heart,
 How the deadly destroyer harried and humiliated
 The people of the Geats. He then hurried back to the hoard,
 To his princely hiding place, before day might dawn. 2320
 He had covered with fire the folk in that country,
 With flames and burning. He had faith in his barrow,
 In his fighting strength and walls. This hope failed him.

Beowulf quickly learned of this loathsome scourge.
 The truth was quickly told him about his own home: 2325
 Fiery flame had turned to ash their finest dwelling.
 There the Geats had their throne. This made the good man's
 Heart suffer agony, afflicted his spirit with bitter sorrow.
 In his wisdom the king worried he'd sinned against

The Almighty, the eternal Lord, had offended 2330
Some ancient law. Within his breast welled up
Unwelcome thoughts, and that was not his wont.
With his flames the fiery dragon had destroyed
The stronghold of his folk, its protecting fortress,
All the shore lands by the sea. The soldierly king, 2335
Ruler of the Geats, was soon ready for revenge.
He who shielded warriors and served as the lord of men
Ordered made for him a most unusual shield,
All wrought of iron. He readily recognized
That any wooden shield, shaped from linden, 2340
Would not protect him from flames. The prince, who had lived
In virtue so long, was fated to see his transitory life finish,
The time he'd spend in this world, and so should the serpent,
Though he had held sway over the hoard for so long.
In his pride, the prince who gives rings scorned seeking out 2345
With some great host of warriors the worm who flies
Far and wide. Beowulf felt no fear for this fight.
He scorned the serpent's skill in battle,
His drive and his daring too because in days gone by
He sought danger and survived many times of strife, 2350
Bloody battles, after the time this man blessed
With glory had cleansed Hrothgar's hall
And in open combat grappled with Grendel's kin,
A tribe of trolls much hated by all.
By no means the least of these
Hard struggles took place where Hygelac was struck down, 2355
After the Geats' king, noble leader of that clan,
Hrethel's son, died from drinks the sword swallowed.
There in the land of Frisia, in the rush of that fight,
Weapons keen in their sharpness slew him. Beowulf went his way
From that field by his own strength, swam over the sea. 2360
There on his arm he held tight to thirty
Hauberks as he waded into the water.
The Hetware²¹ had no reason to rejoice in that battle,
In that fight on foot, warriors went forth toward Beowulf

²¹ The Hetware are a Frankish tribe, allies of the Frisians.

And so Beowulf survived the strife of battle,
Struggles that threatened danger, this son of Edgetheow,
Deeds that wanted daring, until that one day
When it was his fate to fight against the dragon. 2400
The lord of the Geats, one of twelve,
Driven by anger, departed then to seek that serpent.
He'd learned how this distress had descended on the land,
This murderous misery for men. Into his keeping had come the
infamous
Vessel, a valued treasure, from robber's own hand. 2405
In that host, the thirteenth man was the thief,
Who had caused the calamity to come upon them.
The prisoner, his spirit sad, was pressed to be their guide
To the mound. Against his will he made his way
To where he alone knew the den deep in the ground, 2410
The barrow buried deep and close by the surging sea,
Where the waves waged war. The hoard was piled high
With ornaments and gems. The awful guardian,
An eager and ancient battler, watched over that barrow
In the earth. No easy bargain would he agree to 2415
That might settle the matter with any man at all.
The king, hardened by combat, sat down on the cliff,
Offered his farewells to his close companions,
This gracious lord of the Geats. His spirit was sad,
Restless, and ready for death to come. Destiny had drawn 2420
To his side and was soon to attack the aged man,
Seek where his soul held its secrets, separate
His living body from life. Not for long
Was the king's soul to be clothed in flesh.

Beowulf spoke, Edgetheow's son: 2425
"In my youth I survived many struggles,
Times when war threatened. I remember all these things.
Seven winters had I lived when the ruler who gave rings,
Generous lord of the tribes, took me from my father.
Hrethel the sovereign sustained and supported me, 2430
Gave me treasure and times of feast, considered our kinship.
While he lived, he by no means loved me less (I was

Still a boy in the stronghold) than his own sons,
 Herebald and Hathcyn and my own Hygelac.
 For the eldest a bed of murder was made ready, 2435
 But undeserved, by his own brother.
 For Hathcyn killed him, his own kinsman,
 His friend and lord, with an arrow he launched.
 He missed his mark and killed his close kin,
 His own brother—blood streamed down the shaft. 2440
 The guilt of that killing could not be bought with gold,
 Though a misdeed that labored mind and soul. No matter.
 The lord laid down his life—and unavenged.

So too is it a sorrow for a man of some age
 To suffer, when his son, still in his youth, 2445
 Hangs on the gallows. The father has cause to grieve
 And sing a song of wretchedness when his son swings
 To entertain the raven. His strength robbed by age,
 He finds himself unable to aid the youth.
 Every morning what comes to his mind 2450
 Is the journey that bereft his boy of life. He believes
 No other son will be born to him in the stronghold,
 No other heir, now that this child has come
 To the end of his deeds. Death holds him fast.
 Shattered by sorrow, he sees his son's dwelling, 2455
 The sweet hall now empty, a house swept by the wind,
 Cheerfulness stolen from it. The riders sleep in death,
 Soldiers in their graves. The harp sounds no happy noise,
 The yards know no celebration, not as they once did.

So he takes to his bed, sings a song of sorrow, 2460
 One man alone, now that all are gone. Everything seems too much,
 The fields and the dwellings.

In this way the lord of the Geats
 Endured the woe that welled up in his heart
 For Herebald. There was no way that he
 Could make good this murder on the killer. 2465
 He could find within no hatred at all for that warrior

Because of his violent deed. But he felt no love for the man
On account of his sorrow, the sad destiny that made him suffer.
He surrendered the joys men pursue, chose the light of God instead.
As does a man blessed with wealth, he bequeathed to his
 children 2470
The land and its fortresses when he fled from this life.

There was feud and fighting between Swedes and Geats,
A strife that stalked both lands across the wide water,
Bitter struggles in battle after Hrethel lay dead,
And the sons of Ongentheow showed themselves to be 2475
Brave and bold in battle, would not keep
The truce across the ocean. Instead, time and again
The Swedes waged war, attacked against Ravenhill.
My beloved kinsmen (this is well known)
Took vengeance for this feuding and fierce fighting, 2480
Though one of them lost his life.
It was a poor bargain. Battle proved the end
For the lord of the Geats, for Hathcyn.
Then, I have heard, in the cold morning one kinsman
Avenge the other, used his sharp sword on the killer 2485
Where Ongentheow happened upon Eofor.
His war helmet hewed through, the old Shilfing
Fell, his face paled by war. Fierce memories, plenty of them,
Guided the slayer's hand—it did not withhold the deadly stroke.

The goods he gave me—for all these I offered 2490
Repayment with my flashing blade where battle raged.
This was granted to me. Hygelac gave me land,
A bequest that brought me bliss. Never did he have need,
Never was he compelled to call upon the Gifthas
Or the courageous Danes, or even in Swedish country 2495
For warriors less bold in battle he had to buy with treasure.
In the host on foot I always stood by him in the front,
Among the first arranged for war. And I will always,
Do the work war requires, as long as this sword lasts.
In days gone by and after, it has often done what it ought, 2500
From the time when, as both hosts saw, I slew

Daegraven with my hands, the champion of the Franks.
 In no way could he bear off the breast ornament,
 That comely jewel, to the Frisian king.
 Instead he fell dead on the field, this guardian of the flag, 2505
 This leader who showed courage. No keen edge stole his life;
 Rather a crushing grip broke his bones,
 Stilled the surgings of his heart. Now the sword's edge is appointed,
 The blade held firm in my hand, to do battle over the hoard."

Beowulf spoke, uttered words of boasting 2510
 For the final time: "As a young man, I fought
 Many encounters and lived. Even now, king of this clan,
 Many winters old, my wish is to face the fight,
 Do what needs courage, if the criminal slayer
 Quits his hideout in the ground to greet me." 2515
 Then the stout-hearted man, shouldered his shield
 And offered these fond words of farewell to
 His close companions: "I would swing no sword,
 No weapon against the worm, if I knew how
 I otherwise might fulfill my oath and choke out 2520
 The dragon's life, as I did Grendel's long years ago.
 Instead, I will find fire hot and hostile,
 Breath heavy with venom. And so I have my shield
 And mailshirt to shelter me. Not one measure
 Will I move from the mound's guardian. Instead, we'll 2525
 Settle matters at the wall, whatever Providence permits,
 The Measurer of every man. In my mind I'm confident
 I can defeat the warlike flier—as I have warranted.
 Bide your time by the barrow, protected by your byrnies,
 The mailshirts you men wear, and there witness 2530
 Which of us will survive his wounds
 After battling to the death. This deadly deed does not suit you,
 No man—save me alone—should match
 His might against the monstrous creature,
 In his daring fight against that foe. With bravery I'll fetch 2535
 The trove of treasure. If not, then battle, a terrible and
 Fatal evil, shall end the days of your lord."

The courageous champion then caught hold of his shield,
Strapped on his harness, helmet and hauberk,
Under the stony cliffs, trusted to the strength 2540
Of one man alone. This will be no coward's adventure!
The able warrior looked at the wall, well known
For his virtue, who had survived so many violent encounters,
Times of war when troops of warriors clashed;
There he saw stone arches, a stream whose waters 2545
Burst out of the barrow. Fire blazed from below the earth,
Hot flames that did harm. So he could not, hale
And hearty, stalk close to the hoard;
The dragon's flames kept him far away.
Beowulf spoke words that sprang from his spirit, 2550
The good king of the Geats, as his anger grew deep,
The stouthearted man shouted. The sound sunk deep,
Beneath the gray stone, a challenge that strongly echoed.
The worm's wrath was aroused; the gold's guardian sensed
The sound of a man. To sue for peace and seek terms, 2555
This was not the moment. At once the monster's breath
Blew hard and blazing out of the barrow,
A scalding, violent vapor; the stone shook.
Below the barrow. The Geats' ring giver
Swung his battle shield against the fearful stranger. 2560
The ringed serpent felt his spirit strengthen.
As he sought out battle. At once the king, keen for war,
Unsheathed his sword, an ancient treasure,
Its edges mighty. Each of them was intent
To inspire dread in the other and prove his undoing. 2565
Unbowed by fear, Beowulf stood behind his tall shield,
Friendly prince of his people, as the serpent
Drew itself tight. Dressed in iron, the man waited.
Welling with fire, the worm slithered on, uncircling its coils,
Ever forward to its fate. The iron shield sheltered 2570
The body and life of the famous lord
For much less time than he then would have liked,
And this was the first day that dawned when he was forced
To wage war and destiny did not determine
Him as victor in the fight—the first time. The king 2575

Of the Geats raised his arm, struck the fearsome foe

With the precious heirloom, and the bright blade
 Failed to cut the bone, clove into the beast with less force
 Than its owner, king of that clan, hard-pressed,
 Had need. He struck the creature with all his strength, 2580
 The beast that guarded that barrow felt anger,
 Spewed out fatal flames. The battle fire
 Was all around him. The generous lord of the Geats
 Did not boast of victory in that battle. His warrior's blade,
 Sheer steel, failed in the struggle, but should not have, 2585
 This matchless thing of metal. The mission was not easy;
 The son of Edgetheow, well known through the world,
 Would soon depart the places of this earth, the fair plains.
 He was fated (it was not what he wished) to find
 His dwelling elsewhere. Like every man, he was doomed, 2590
 To forfeit the fleeting days of this life he had lived.

It was not much longer
 Until the fierce foes again fought close to one another.
 The hoard guardian had taken heart; his breath heavy
 With poison yet again. He passed through great peril,
 As the fire found him, the man who ruled that folk. 2595
 In no way did his company of companions
 Stand by this son of princes shoulder to shoulder,
 Fulfilling the warrior's code. Instead, they fled to the woods,
 Saving their lives. The spirit of one among them
 Welled up with woe. The man who would 2600
 Do what is right will never reject kinship.

Wiglaf is what he was called, the son of Weohstan,
 A shield warrior much praised, a prince of the Shilfings,²³
 Kinsman of Alfhere. He caught sight of his liege lord,
 His helmet laced on, suffering heat. Wiglaf was mindful 2605

²³ Wiglaf is here said to be a member of the Swedish royal house and, in line 2607, to be a member of the Waegmundings, which is a clan of the Geats to which Beowulf belongs. Such divided loyalty makes perhaps bodes ill for Wiglaf's stewardship of the Geatish kingdom after Beowulf's death.

Of the blessings that man had bestowed upon him,
The wealthy strongholds of the Waegmundings,
All of the rights that had rested in his father.
He could not restrain himself; his hand seized the shield,
A board of pale wood. He unsheathed the ancient blade. 2610
It was known to men as the heirloom of Eanmund,
The son of Ohtere. In the fight, Weohstan, an friendless
Exile, was the one who undid that man.
He used the blade's edge, and he bore off to his own kin
The burnished helmet, the hauberk of iron rings, 2615
The old blade, forged by giants. Onela had bestowed
These things on him, the battle gear of his nephew,
Ready equipment for the fight. In no way did Onela recall²⁴
The feud, though Weohstan had felled his brother's son.
For many years Weohstan guarded these goods, 2620
The sword and the mailshirt, until his son proved strong enough
To do what needed bravery, just as his father had before him.
He gave him this gear when he was with the Geats,
Many things of this kind, when he left behind this life,
An old man on the journey forth. This was the first time 2625
That the young warrior was to wage
War at the side of his princely protector.
The heart within him did not freeze with fear, nor did
His kinsman's heirloom fail in the fight. The dragon discovered this
When these two moved against each other. 2630

Wiglaf offered this counsel to his companions.
He said words that shamed them (his spirit was sad):
"I have in mind the times when we drank mead
And made promises to our protector
In the beer hall, who bestowed rings on us 2635
That we would reward him for this war gear,
The helmets and hard swords, if some time of need
Like this one came upon him. This is why he called upon us
(And it was his urging) as an armed band for this undertaking,

²⁴ Onela's silence is predictable since he wished his nephew dead and rewarded the man's killer, naturally forgoing the moral duty to exact vengeance.

Thought us worthy of praise, why he presented me 2640
 With such wealth, counted us worthy spear warriors,
 Brave enough to bear helmets—even though the lord,
 Protector of the people, thought to perform
 This deed that needs daring alone for us.
 And it was because he had accomplished, more than all others, 2645
 What counts as glory. Now the day has come
 When our gracious master needs our might
 And men who can fight. Let us move forward
 To help our leader in battle while that heat endures,
 A flame grim and deadly. God knows that as for me 2650
 I think it much better that this blaze burn up
 My body beside my bestower of treasure.
 And it does not seem suitable that we should slink back
 With our shields to the stronghold unless we first
 Fight fiercely and fell the foe, save the life 2655
 Of the guardian of the Geats. All he performed in the past,
 I am well aware, does not make it right that he alone
 Of the Geatish army should endure such affliction
 And fall in the fight. We two shall stand together
 With blade and helmet, with hauberk and battle gear.” 2660
 He wended his way through the venomous vapors, went
 In his helmet to help his lord, let out these few words:
 “Beloved Beowulf, endure this all to its end,
 Just as you were eager to avow in your youth,
 That you would never, as long as life was in you, 2665
 Forfeit the praise of men. Now, steadfast prince,
 Your daring shown in deeds, you must defend
 Your life with all your strength. I will stand by you.”

After these words, the worm advanced full of wrath,
 The awful and cunning creature, once again, 2670
 Its violence shown in flame, to venture out against its foes,
 The fighting men it hated. The blazing flames burned up
 The wood of his shield; the mailshirt could offer
 The man at arms no assistance at all.
 Instead the youth speedily sheltered 2675
 Under his kinsman’s shield after his own was scorched

To cinders. Then the war king still was keen on
Prowess; with all his power he struck hard
With his battle blade, and it stuck in the serpent's head,
Driven home by hatred. Naegling shattered; 2680
Beowulf's blade failed in the fight,
An ancient edge, gray-streaked. It was granted to him
That no iron edge might afford him an advantage
In the struggle. The strength of his grip was too great,
And so his stroke was too powerful, it has been said, 2685
For any blade when he bore it to battle,
Any edge, forcefully forged. It could not further him.

Then for the third time the destroyer of tribes,
A terrifying fire dragon, determined on destruction,
Dashed against the daring man, when it saw its chance, 2690
Fiery and ferocious in the fight, fastened on his neck
With its fierce fangs. Blood flowed over him,
Gore from deep within welled out in waves.

Then in this desperate time the champion at the side
Of that clan's king made known his courage, so I have heard, 2695
His boldness and bravery (these things were in his blood).
He paid no mind to the head, but the hand of the brave man
Was burned as he came to bolster his kinsman.
This man in armor struck the enemy intent on evil
Somewhat lower down, and so the shiny sword, 2700
Gold-plated, plunged in far, and then the fire grew
Less. The leader himself was then
Still clear-minded; he drew his deadly short sword,
A weapon cruel and battle-sharp he wore on his mailshirt.
The master of the Geats struck the serpent in his middle. 2705
They brought down their enemy (their daring drove out its life),
And the two of them thus destroyed the dragon,
Those close kinsmen. A warrior should be this kind of man,
Such a retainer when the risk runs great. For the ruler
This was the final time victory would be his feat alone, 2710
What he himself wrought in this world.

Then the wound

That the earth serpent had given him started
 To burn and swell. He soon discovered
 That in his breast something wicked was welling up,
 A venom within him. Then the valiant man, his mind full 2715
 Of wise thoughts, walked over to sit by the wall
 On a block of stone. He stared at what giants had built,
 How the stone chamber was indeed sheltered within
 The ancient earth-house, hardened with columns.
 Then with his hands the retainer, a man of great goodness, 2720
 Fetched water for his famous lord, his friendly leader,
 Now war-wearied and dripping with blood
 From the battle. He unlaced Beowulf's helmet.

Beowulf held forth, spoke despite his hurt,
 The mortal wound he had. His mind was clear: 2725
 He had lived the last of his appointed days,
 Seen the end of earthly joy. All the time measured
 Out to him had now gone. Death was at hand:
 "I would now give my war gear
 To my son, had it been my destiny 2730
 That any heir, a boy born of my flesh,
 Should survive. I held sway over the people
 For fifty winters. Of that folk
 Who dwell near us not a one dared
 Wage war against me with his warriors, 2735
 Threaten me with terror. On this earth I have endured
 The end of my allotted days, kept my own well.
 Never did I betray others and battle against them,
 Or swear any unseemly oaths. Sick with an awful wound,
 I can take delight in all that I have done. 2740
 Indeed the Ruler of men will have no need to reproach me
 With the loathsome killing of kinsmen when life leaves
 This body behind. Go quickly now, my beloved Wiglaf,
 To have a look at the treasure hoard
 Under the gray stone, for the serpent lies still, 2745
 Rests with his woeful wound, bereft of his riches.
 Hurry now so I can see this ancient hoard,

Gaze readily at this golden treasure,
These gleaming jewels, cunningly crafted. More gladly, then,
Peering at these precious things, can I depart from 2750
This life—and the realm I ruled over for so long.”

Then, I've been told, the son of Weohstan soon
Did the bidding of his leader, battle-battered,
Wearied by wounds, after he said these words. He went, wearing
His hauberk, the iron-ringed byrnie, under the barrow's roof. 2755
Proud of his prowess, this brave young retainer,
Saw much shining treasure, stepping across the stone floor.
He saw gold that gleamed clearly, lying close to the ground,
Wondrous things on the wall, and the den of the dragon,
The old creature who flew at dawn. Cups stood there, 2760
Vessels used by long-dead peoples. But now they lacked their
polishers;

Their finery had fallen away. There was many a helmet,
Old and eaten with rust, a tangle of treasures,
Cunningly crafted of twisted gold. Precious things can easily,
Gold that lies in the ground, prove more powerful 2765
Than any warrior. Let him hide it who will!

Likewise he saw a standard sewn all of gold thread
Hanging high over the hoard, finely fashioned by hand,
Made with great skill. This gleamed so much
That he could see clearly the bottom of the barrow 2770

And stare at the marvels strewn around. There was no sign
At all of the serpent, for indeed the sword had been its undoing.
Then, I have heard, one man hauled away the hoard
In the barrow—built by giants in ancient times.
He loaded his arms with dishes and cups, 2775

As much as he wished. He also stole that standard;
No banner shone more brightly. Before this, the sword
(Its edges were iron) had cut into its old lord,
Who had held sway over these hoarded things
For a long time. The serpent showed his terror 2780
In hot and ferocious flames before his hoard
In the middle of the night, until, undone, he met his end.
The messenger hurried, eager to leave the hoard,

Hastened by the gold. He hungered to learn
 Whether he would find the brave warrior still alive 2785
 In that field, the lord of the Geats, a man fatally
 Wounded, where he had earlier abandoned him.
 Carrying the precious things, he came upon
 The leader of great fame, his own lord,
 Whose life had found its finish. Wiglaf started to splash 2790
 Water on him until the spear point of his words
 Pierced the hoarding place in his heart.

The prince, a hero now old
 And full of sorrow, gazed at the gold and said:
 “For this treasure, all thanks be to the Lord,
 The Sovereign of wonder (these are the words I speak), 2795
 Eternal Lord, for what I here look upon.
 For I was able to acquire in this way
 Such precious things for my people before the day of my death.
 Now that I have bought this barrow full of treasures
 With the life of an old man, you must be the one 2800
 To serve our clan. I can stay here no longer.
 Command those famed in the fight to build a barrow,
 A fair sight after the funeral fire on the bluffs by the sea.
 At Whale Point it will prompt our people
 To remember, for it will reach toward the sky 2805
 And henceforth those who sail the sea will call it
 Beowulf’s barrow, those who drive their boats
 From far off over the dark and flooding waters.”
 From his neck he unclasped the collar all of gold,
 That king, keen in his courage, the gilded helmet too, 2810
 His ring and hauberk. He gave all this gear
 To the young warrior, told him to wear it well:
 “You are the final survivor of our family,
 The Waegmundings. Destiny has destroyed
 All my folk, just as fate measured their time, 2815
 Those fighting men in their power. I must follow their path.”
 These were the last words that left the old warrior,
 The thoughts in his bosom, before his body fell on the bier,
 On the bitter surgings of flame. From his breast the soul

Set off to seek out what sentence awaits the just. 2820

It went worse then with the warrior not yet old and white
When he glimpsed, lying there on the ground,
The man he loved the most, his life now at an end,
His desperate suffering. His slayer too lay dead,
The loathsome earth serpent, life stolen from him, 2825
Stilled by the killer's hand. The serpent in his coils
Might rule over his hoard of rings no longer.

Instead, edged iron had undone him,
What the hammers left, hard and lethal in battle.
And so the worm that flew far and wide fell to the earth, 2830
Quieted by its hurt, close to its hoard in the ground.

No longer did he spin in sport through the air
In the dark night, taking pride in the precious things,
Showing himself to the folk. Instead he fell to the earth
After the work done by the hands of the war leader. 2835

Certainly few of the fighters among that folk,
So I have heard, not many of the mightiest men,
Though they were daring in every other kind of deed,
Ventured safely the venomous breath of the beast,
Or managed, with robbing hands, to disturb his den full of
rings 2840

If they found a warden there still awake
Burrowed within the barrow. Beowulf was paid
For his death with a share of those splendid treasures.
Both of them had arrived at the end
Of this brittle life. 2845

Not much longer after that
Those who had fled the fight walked out of the woods,
Ten weaklings, forsworn, forced to band together,
Those who earlier had been loathe to launch their lances
When their generous master was in the most gruesome straits.
Instead, brimming with shame, they bore their shields, 2850
Wore their war gear, to where the old man lay dead.
They stared at Wiglaf. He sat there wearied,
A warrior who had fought on foot beside his lord,

Dowsing Beowulf with water. It did him no benefit.
 Though this is what he wished, he could not make 2855
 The soul of the war leader stay in this world.
 What the Almighty had ordained could not be turned aside.
 The strength of God's sentence then governed
 The deeds of every one, as it still does.
 An unpleasant answer was uttered at once 2860
 By one man to the others, who had forfeited their fame.
 Wiglaf spoke, the son of Weohstan,
 His spirit full of sorrow. He stared at them, felt no love:
 "Those who speak the truth can surely say
 That the generous lord, who gave you this gear, 2865
 This equipment for war you wear here now,
 When on the ale bench he often bestowed presents
 Of helmets and hauberks to those in the hall,
 A ruler to his retainers, the richest gear
 He could find for you far or near 2870
 —Those who speak truth would say Beowulf had wasted
 These battle things altogether when war befell him.
 In no way did the king of this clan have cause
 To glorify the men of his household. Yet God, who grants
 Victories, allowed him to avenge himself unaided, 2875
 With the sharp sword when he had to do what took daring.
 There was little I could do to save his life
 In the struggle, but what was beyond my strength
 I attempted in order to aid my kinsman.
 The worm waxed ever weaker after I struck 2880
 This deadly destroyer with my sword. Its fire was less fierce
 As it welled up from its head. Too few warriors hurried
 To their chief's side when distress descended on him.
 Now the giving of gold and the bestowing of blades
 Must finish, as will the joy your folk find in their homeland, 2885
 Whatever rejoicing they might do. The rights that every man
 From this people possesses in this land will come
 To nothing after the kings in countries
 Far from us hear the story of your flight,
 Learn that you forfeited your fame. For those who fight 2890
 Death is better than a life lived in disgrace!"

He commanded that what had come to pass be proclaimed
To the burg beyond the sea bluffs, where a band of warriors
Had sat, their spirits sorrowing, all that morning-long day,
Their hands holding shields, and thinking two things: 2895
That Beowulf should lose his life or make his way back,
That man they cared for. After coming over the cliff,
He hardly left unsaid what he had learned.
Instead, the messenger told the truth to them all:
“Now the generous treasure giver of the Geatish people, 2900
The king of this clan, lies still on his bed of death.
He stays now where the slain do—this is what the serpent did.
At his side slumps his deadly enemy, sick with
Cuts made by the blade. Beowulf’s sword could
Deal this horrible creature no hurt 2905
Of any kind. Wiglaf is sitting at his head,
The son of Weohstan beside Beowulf,
One warrior by another who lives no longer.
Wiglaf, his heart full of distress, stands watch over
One he loves—and another he hates. 2910

I expect now that a time
Of battle will soon befall this folk once the news is broadcast
Clearly to the Franks and Frisians, that our king
Has fallen. A feud took fierce shape
With the Franks after Hygelac hurried forth,
Leading his soldiers by sea, into the land of Frisia, 2915
Where the Hetware closed with him in battle.
They moved quickly with a greater company of warriors
And killed their king, a man wearing war gear;
He fell among those fighting on foot. Hygelac allotted
No rings to his retainers. Ever since that time 2920
The Merovingians have shown us no mercy.

And I have no faith in the friendship or good graces
Of the Swedes, for many sons of men know
That Ongentheow struck down
Hathcyn, son of Hrethel, in the Ravens wood, 2925

When the warlike Shilfings, in their wrathfulness,
 First brought the fight to the Geatish people.
 All at once the aged father of Ohthere,
 Young no longer but fearsome, rushed to the fight,
 Slew the king from across the sea, saved his wife, 2930
 The mother of Onela and Ohthere,
 An old woman, her treasures taken from her.
 Then he pursued those who would deprive him of life
 Until they escaped, but by no means with ease,
 Into the Ravens wood, having lost their lord. 2935
 With his huge host he surrounded those whom the sword
 Had spared, wearied by wounds. Again and again he threatened
 Woe to the wretched survivors all that night long.
 Ongentheow said he would slay some with the sharp blade
 When day dawned, hang others on the gallows tree 2940
 To give the birds some sport. Day broke and salvation
 Came to that company of men, sick in spirit,
 When they heard Hygelac's horn and trumpet,
 And these blared out a battle tune as the bold man came on,
 Following the path that his people had made. 2945
 The trail marked by the murder of Swedes and Geats,
 The bloody battle the warriors waged, was easy to see,
 How they had furthered the feud between them.
 And so that able man, old and angry, went away
 With his band of warriors to seek out his stronghold. 2950
 Lord Ongentheow held to the road that led home
 He had heard tell of Hygelac's boldness in battle,
 Of that fierce man's skill in the fight. He had no faith
 He could withstand them, win the war against those seamen,
 Soldiers who had sailed the ocean, and keep safe his treasure, 2955
 His wife and children. Thus the white-haired man withdrew,
 Rushed behind his earthworks. The men were bidden to run down
 The Swedish host. Hygelac's standards
 Were carried straight across the stronghold
 After Hrethel's host hustled into the fortress. 2960
 There Ongetheow was brought to bay,

Sharp-edged swords made him stand his ground,

And so the king of that clan had to suffer
What Eofor sentenced him. Wulf, son of Wonred,
Struck at him angrily with his sword, 2965
And the blow made the blood spurt out from the veins
Under his hair. And yet Ongentheow was still unafraid,
The aged Shilfing, and immediately avenged
That bitter blow with an even bolder stroke
As the prince of that people spun around. 2970
Nor could that quick son of Wonred
Deal the aged battler a blow in return,
For the Swede had sliced through his helmet.
And so, his blood flowing, he was forced to move back,
Fall to the earth. Yet his fate was not yet upon him. 2975
He found his feet afterward, though the wound pained him.
But, his brother brought low, the resolute retainer
Of Hygelac swung his broad blade, giant-forged,
On his huge helmet, hewed into it
Over his protecting shield. Then the prince fell, 2980
The shepherd of his people, fatally pierced.
There were many who bound up his kinsman,
Hurried to help him up when they had a chance.
The Geats gained possession of the battlefield.
Then one warrior stripped the other of his gear, 2985
Took from Ongentheow his iron mailshirt,
The sword strong and hilted, and his helmet as well.
To Hygelac he carried off the white-haired man's goods.
Hygelac accepted the precious things and promised to give him
A fitting reward among that folk, and this he did. 2990
The ruler of the Geats, son of Hrethel, recompensed
His bravery in war when he went back to his home;
To Eofor and Wulf he presented precious treasures,
Land and linked rings to the value
Of a hundred thousand sceats—no man over middle earth had
need 2995
To belittle the reward, for they had done what brought renown.
Hygelac then bestowed upon Eofor his own daughter;
He honored the man's home and showed the friendship he bore him.

This is the feud and the hatred of foes,
 The murder of men, that will come to pass, 3000
 I expect, when the Swedish army seeks us out
 After they come to know that our king
 Has lost his life, the prince who protected the hoard
 And the realm, and the resolute retainers of our tribe,
 From those who hated us—after the fall of heroes 3005
 He did what profited out people and, even more, did
 What bestows worthiness. Now it is best for us
 To hasten and look upon the king of our clan,
 And afterward bring the man who bestowed jewels on us
 To the funeral fire. And it shall not be that only one 3010
 Treasure burns with the brave man, for there is a hoard
 Of precious things, much gold purchased at a grim price.
 Now at the last, and at the cost of his own life,
 He bought us treasure. The fire shall feed on these things;
 Flames shall find them. Not at all will a warrior wear 3015
 These rings in remembrance, nor will any fair maiden
 Hang on her neck an ornament that will honor her.
 Instead, her spirit filled with sadness, the treasure taken from her,
 She must make her way among strangers—not once, but often
 —For the leader of the host has laid aside laughter, 3020
 His delight and his pleasure. And so it is destined:
 That many a spear, morning-cold, will be snatched in the fist
 And hefted in the warrior's hand. It will not be the harp's song
 That rouses men in the host. Rather the dark raven, hungry
 For the corpses of the doomed, will discuss many things, 3025
 Inform the eagle what success he found in feasting
 When, sharing with the wolf, he despoiled the slaughtered.”

In this way the brave man brought to mind many things
 Loathsome to bear. Not much did he lie about what had
 Happened in what he said. All those in the host stood up. 3030
 They went—and unjoyfully—to Eagles Ness,
 Weeping from their eyes, to gaze at the wonder.
 There on the sand they found the man, the soul fled from him,
 Fast on his deathbed, who in days now fled
 Had furnished them rings. Then the final day of the ruler's 3035

Life had come to its limit, and so the king who had made war,
Lord of the Geats, died a death that was indeed gruesome.
Yet first their eyes fell upon that marvelous monster,
A serpent slumped on the grass on the other side of
His foe. The dragon that fought with fire, 3040
Its skin of many faded colors, had been consumed by its flames,
There, lying on its deathbed, in its length
Fifty measures. For a time it made merry as it flew
At night, then ventured off to visit its den
Dug deep. But now death held it still; 3045
Fled was the bliss it would find in its barrow.
Throughout the mound were many cups and vessels,
Dishes lying in the dust, and swords once held dear,
Rotted through with rust, as though they had reposed
There in the bosom of the earth a thousand winters. 3050
At that time this legacy lay under a spell,
The gold of men from ages past, of wondrous worth,
So that no man might lay hands on anything in
That hall of golden rings, unless God Himself,
The True Prince of victories, permitted him his desire 3055
(He is the protector of men!) so he could open the mound.
It should only be such a one as He thought appropriate!

This was then plain to see that he'd not profited
From his adventure who, against the right, had hidden
Gold behind that wall. The guardian had brought down 3060
One man among the others. Afterward the outrage was avenged
With wrath. It is a wonder everywhere when
A fighting man, bold in his bravery, comes to the finish
Of the life destined for him, when, no longer,
Can a man live with those of his clan in the mead hall. 3065
So it was with Beowulf when he brought battle to the barrow's
Guardian and his deadly gruesomeness. He himself did not know
What should lead to his leaving this world behind.
The glorious kings who had cached the gold there
Had uttered an awful spell on it: 3070
That any fighting man should be found guilty,
Imprisoned in the dens of devils, hung with hellish chains,

Wrathfully punished, if he made his way into that place.
 Not at all had Beowulf examined closely
 The gold-bestowing wealthiness of its guardian.²⁵ 3075

Wiglaf spoke, the son of Weohstan:
 “Often it happens that many a soldier must suffer
 Distress because of one’s desire—such is our destiny.
 We could not persuade our well-loved protector,
 The ruler of this realm, in any way 3080
 That he not bring battle to the guardian of the gold,
 But let the worm lie where it has long been,
 Dwell in its den until the destruction of the world.
 Beowulf followed what fate shaped. The hoard stands revealed,
 A thing desperately won. Destiny was too strong 3085
 As it prompted the king of the people to seek out that place.
 I went within and gazed at all the gear in the hall,
 Eyed everything there, as soon as it was empty enough.
 I found it difficult to descend into the dragon’s den,
 To enter the earth-covered barrow. At once I grabbed 3090
 With my two hands a huge load
 Of treasures from the hoard, hauled them out
 To my beloved king. At that time he was still breathing,
 A wise man with all his wits. In his agony,
 The old man said many things, ordered me 3095
 To bring you greetings, asked that you build, because of what
 That generous man did, a high barrow, great and glorious,
 In the place where the pyre is laid, for among men
 He has been the worthiest of warriors around this wide earth,
 While he could find happiness in the hall. 3100
 Let us now hasten to see for a second time,
 As we seek it out, this heap of precious heirlooms,
 A wondrous thing beneath the wall. I will guide you
 So you can gaze at the gems up close,
 The great expanse of gold too. Let the pyre be prepared, 3105
 Crafted quickly, by the time we come out,
 And then let us carry our king,

²⁵ These two lines are notoriously difficult. Their translation is by no means certain.

The warrior well loved, to where he must
For a long time await the sentence of the Sovereign.”

The son of Weohstan, unbloodied, brave in battle, 3110
Then commanded it proclaimed to many men,
Those who owned dwellings, that they bring wood
To the pyre from far off to that place, for the people’s
Great ruler: “Now the fire (dark flames grown fierce)
Has been charged with consuming the king of warriors, 3115
Who has often survived the shower of iron,
When a storm of arrows, strengthened by the string,
Sped over the wall of shields. The shaft did what it should,
Hurried on by feathers that furthered its flight.”

Indeed the wise son of Weohstan 3120
Chose from the company of the king’s retainers
Seven men altogether, the most select among them.
The warriors, eight of them in all, went under
The roof of their enemy. One of them held in his hand
A torch that blazed with fire—he went in front. 3125
After this no lots were needed to choose who should
Go his way to that place, its guardian gone,
Once men saw any part of the heirlooms lying unused,
There for anyone to take. They lamented but little
As they hurried to hustle away 3130
The precious treasures. And then they pushed
The worm over the wall of cliffs. They let the waves have it,
Let the flooding sea flow over the guardian of the treasure.
Into a wagon, twisted gold beyond measure
Was then loaded—and the warrior who’d often waged war 3135
His hair gone white, was borne to Whale Point

For him the tribe of the Geats constructed
A funeral fire on the ground that was hardly small;
Hung with helmets it was, and the boards used in battle,
With gleaming mailshirts as well, as the man had asked. 3140
In its middle the warriors, as they lamented, laid down
The famous lord, the leader whom they loved well.

The fighting men then set alight a huge funeral fire
 Atop the barrow. Smoke from the wood arose
 Dark over the flames, a fire whose blazing 3145
 Was mixed with mourning (the wild wind died down).
 At the last, the bones inside the body were broken by the heat
 That reached to his very center. Their spirits full of sadness,
 The folk lamented; they felt at the laying low of their lord
 A sadness that grieved them. A Geatish woman sang a song 3150
 That proclaimed her pain. Sorrow for Beowulf was in
 Her heart as she uttered again and again
 How she sorely dreaded days destined for destruction,
 Many fateful slaughters, the frightfulness of fighting men,
 Humiliation and slavery. Heaven swallowed up the smoke. 3155

The kinfolk of the Geats then constructed
 A barrow on the hillside. High it was and broad,
 Seen easily by those sailing across the waves.
 In ten days, from timbers they made this monument
 For the man brave in battle. With what the blaze 3160
 Left, they lifted up a wall around it, in the worthiest way
 That the most cunning among them might conceive.
 To the barrow they brought the jewels and banners,
 All the other precious things as well, those that men
 Fit for the fight had earlier hauled from the hoard, 3165
 They let the earth keep the treasures of warriors,
 Put the gold into the ground, where to this day
 It lies as useless to men as it had been before.
 Around that barrow, men brave in battle then rode
 Their horses—sons of princes they were, twelve in all. 3170
 They wished to speak their sorrow, mourn for their sovereign,
 Sing a song of how he had lived his life.
 They praised his prowess in war and the deeds that showed his
 daring,
 Glorified his manhood—in just the way that men should
 Speak words that laud their friendly lord, 3175
 Show the love their souls bear him when, separated
 From the body that has been his, he must leave the world behind.
 This is how the kinfolk of the Geats, the companions

Of his household, lamented the fall of their lord.

This is what they said: that he was of sovereigns in this world, 3180

And of men as well, the most generous and most gracious,

The kindest too—and the one most eager for praise.