Beowulf

Translation from Burton Raffel

Prologue

Hear me! We’ve heard of Danish heroes,
Ancient kings and the glory they cut
For themselves, swinging mighty swords!
       How Shild¹ made slaves of soldiers from every
Land, crowds of captives he’d beaten
Into terror; he’d traveled to Denmark alone,
An abandoned child, but changed his own fate,
Lived to be rich and much honored. He ruled
Lands on all sides: wherever the sea
Would take them his soldiers sailed, returned
With tribute and obedience. There was a brave
King! And he gave them more than his glory,
Conceived a son for the Danes, a new leader
Allowed them by the grace of God. They had lived,
Before his coming, kingless and miserable;
Now the Lord of all life, Ruler
Of glory, blessed them with a prince, Beo,²
Whose power and fame soon spread through the world.
Shild’s strong son was the glory of Denmark;
His father’s warriors were wound round his heart
With golden rings, bound to their prince
By his father’s treasure. So young men build
The future, wisely open-handed in peace,
Protected in war; so warriors earn
Their fame, and wealth is shaped with a sword.
       When his time was come the old king died,
Still strong but called to the Lord’s hands.
His comrades carried him down to the shore,
Bore him as their leader had asked, their lord
And companion, while words could move on his tongue.
Shild’s reign had been long; he’d ruled them well.
There in the harbor was a ring-prowed fighting
Ship, its timbers icy, waiting,
And there they brought the beloved body
Of their ring-giving lord, and laid him near
The mast. Next to that noble corpse

¹ Shild, a Danish king. He arrived in Denmark alone in a ship when he was a child. The ship was loaded with many treasures.
² Beo, grandfather of Hrothgar, a Danish king.
They heaped up treasures, jeweled helmets, hooked swords and coats of mail, armor
Carried from the ends of the earth: no ship
Had ever sailed so brightly fitted,
No king sent forth more deeply mourned.
Forced to set him adrift, floating
As far as the tide might run, they refused
To give him less from their hoards of gold
Than those who'd shipped him away, an orphan
And a beggar, to cross the waves alone.
High up over his head they flew
His shining banner, then sadly let
The water pull at the ship, watched it
Slowly sliding to where neither rulers
Nor heroes nor anyone can say whose hands
Opened to take that motionless cargo

Chapter 1: Grendel Attacks the Danes

Then Beo was king in that Danish castle,
Shild's son ruling as long as his father
And as loved, a famous lord of men.
And he in turn gave his people a son,
The great Healfdane, a fierce fighter
Who led the Danes to the end of his long
Life and left them four children,
Three princes to guide them in battle, Hergar
And Hrothgar and Halga the Good, and one daughter,
Yrs, who was given to Onela, king
Of the Swedes, and became his wife and their queen.
Then Hrothgar, taking the throne, led
The Danes to such glory that comrades and kinsmen
Swore by his sword, and young men swelled
His armies, and he thought of greatness and resolved
To build a hall that would hold his mighty
Band and reach higher toward Heaven than anything
That had ever been known to the sons of men.
And in that hall he'd divide the spoils
Of their victories, to old and young what they'd earned
In battle, but leaving the common pastures
Untouched, and taking no lives. The work
Was ordered, the timbers tied and shaped
By the hosts that Hrothgar ruled. It was quickly
Ready, that most beautiful of dwellings, built
As he'd wanted, and then he whose word was obeyed
All over the earth named it Herot.
His boast come true he commanded a banquet,
Opened out his treasure-full hands.
That towering place, gabled and huge,
Stood waiting for time to pass, for war
To begin, for flames to leap as high
As the feud that would light them, and for Herot to burn,
A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in that hall, the harp’s rejoicing
Call and the poet’s clear songs, sung
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
The Almighty making the earth, shaping
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
Then proudly setting the sun and moon
To glow across the land and light it;
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees
And leaves, made quick with life, with each
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:
So Hrothgar’s men lived happy in his hall
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,
Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain, murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel’s death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
Shut away from men; they split
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
A brood forever opposing the Lord’s
Will, and again and again defeated.

Chapter 2

Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster’s
Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:
He slipped through the door and there in the silence
Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
Unknowing in their beds, and ran out with their bodies,
The blood dripping behind him, back
To his lair, delighted with his night’s slaughter.
At daybreak, with the sun’s first light, they saw
How well he had worked, and in that gray morning
Broke their long feast with tears and laments
For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless
In Herot, a mighty prince mourning
The fate of his lost friends and companions,
Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn
His followers apart. He wept, fearing

104 spawned: born. Usually, spawned refers to the production of young by fish, amphibians, or other water-dwelling creatures.
106 Cain: According to the Bible (Genesis 4:8), Cain, the eldest son of Adam and Eve, murdered his brother Abel.
125 lair: den of a wild animal.
128 lament: (a.) expression of sorrow; song or literary composition that mourns a loss or death.
The beginning might not be the end. And that night
Grendel came again, so set
On murder that no crime could ever be enough,
No savage assault quench his lust
For evil. Then each warrior tried
To escape him, searched for rest in different
Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,
Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.
Distance was safety; the only survivors
Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.
So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,
One against many, and won; so Herot
Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,
Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king
Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door
By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped
The seas, was told and sung in all
Men's ears: how Grendel's hatred began,
How the monster relished his savage war
On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
Alive, seeking no peace, offering
No truce, accepting no settlement, no price
In gold or land, and paying the living
For one crime only with another. No one
Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:
That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,
Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old
And young, lying in waiting, hidden
In mist, invisibly following them from the edge
Of the marsh, always there, unseen.
So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,
Killing as often as he could, coming
Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived
In Herot, when the night hid him, he never
Dared to touch king Hrothgar's glorious
Throne, protected by God—God,
Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar's
Heart was bent. The best and most noble
Of his council debated remedies, sat
In secret sessions, talking of terror
And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.
And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,
Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell's
Support, the Devil's guidance in driving
Their affliction off. That was their way,
And the heathen's only hope, Hell
Always in their hearts, knowing neither God
Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord
Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear
His praise nor know His glory. Let them
Beware, those who are thrust into danger,
Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace
In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail

* forged: (adj.) formed or shaped, often with blows or pressure after heating
Chapter 3: The Coming of Beowulf

So the living sorrow of Healfdane’s son
Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
Or strength could break it: That agony hung
On king and people alike, harsh
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.
In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac’s
Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater
And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
Proclaiming that he’d go to that famous king,
Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
Now when help was needed. None
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
As he was loved by the Geats: The omens were good,
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
Chose the mightiest men he could find,
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
In all, and led them down to their boat;
He knew the sea, would point the prow
Straight to that distant Danish shore.
Then they sailed, set their ship
Out on the waves, under the cliffs.
Ready for what came they wound through the currents,
The seas beating at the sand, and were borne
In the lap of their shining ship, lined
With gleaming armor, going safely
In that oak-hard boat to where their hearts took them.
The wind hurried them over the waves,
The ship foamed through the sea like a bird
Until, in the time they had known it would take,
Standing in the round-curled prow they could see
Sparkling hills, high and green
Jutting up over the shore, and rejoicing
In those rock-steep cliffs they quietly ended
Their voyage. Jumping to the ground, the Geats
Pushed their boat to the sand and tied it
In place, mail shirts and armor rattling
As they swiftly moored their ship. And then
They gave thanks to God for their easy crossing.
High on a wall a Danish watcher
Patrolling along the cliffs saw
The travelers crossing to the shore, their shields
Raised and shining; he came riding down,
Hrothgar’s lieutenant, spurring his horse,
Needing to know why they’d landed, these men

9 Healfdane’s son: Hrothgar.
10 195-196 Higlac’s Follower: Hlac, king of the Geats, is Beowulf’s uncle. Higlacs’s follower, then, refers to Beowulf.
11 208 prow: the bow, or forwardmost part of the ship.
12 226 mail shirts: a type of flexible body armor usually made of linked metal loops.
In armor. Shaking his heavy spear
In their faces he spoke:

“Whose soldiers are you,
You who’ve been carried in your deep-keeled ship
Across the sea-road to this country of mine?
Listen! I’ve stood on these cliffs longer
Than you know, keeping our coast free
Of pirates, raiders sneaking ashore
From their ships, seeking our lives and our gold.
None have ever come more openly—
And yet you’ve offered no password, no sign
From my prince, no permission from my people for your landing
Here. Nor have I ever seen,
Out of all the men on earth, one greater
Than has come with you; no commoner carries
Such weapons, unless his appearance, and his beauty
Are both lies. You! Tell me your name,
And your father’s; no spies go further onto Danish soil
Than you’ve come already. Strangers,
From wherever it was you sailed, tell it,
And tell it quickly, the quicker the better,
I say, for us all. Speak, say
Exactly who you are, and from where, and why.”

Chapter 4

Their leader answered him, Beowulf unlocking Words from deep in his breast:

“We are Geats,
Men who follow Higlac. My father
Was a famous soldier, known far and wide
As a leader of men. His name was Edgetho.
His life lasted many winters;
Wise men all over the earth surely
Remember him still. And we have come seeking
Your prince, Healfdane’s son, protector
Of this people, only in friendship: instruct us,
Watchman, help us with your words! Our errand
Is a great one, our business with the glorious king
Of the Danes no secret; there’s nothing dark
Or hidden in our coming. You know (if we’ve heard
The truth, and been told honestly) that your country
Is cursed with some strange, vicious creature
That hunts only at night and that no one
Has seen. It’s said, watchman, that he has slaughtered
Your people, brought terror to the darkness. Perhaps
Hrothgar can hunt, here in my heart,
For some way to drive this devil out—
If anything will ever end the evils
Afflicting your wise and famous lord.
Here he can cool his burning sorrow.
Or else he may see his suffering go on

13 deep-keeled ship: a ship that possesses a deep bottom—the keel being the main piece of timber that runs the length of the bottom of a boat to support the ship’s home.
Forever, for as long as Herot towers
High on your hills.”

The mounted officer
Answered him bluntly, the brave watchman:
“A soldier should know the difference between words
And deeds, and keep that knowledge clear
In his brain. I believe your words, I trust in
Your friendship. Go forward, weapons and armor
And all, on into Denmark. I’ll guide you
Myself—and my men will guard your ship,
Keep it safe here on our shores,
Your fresh-tarred boat, watch it well,
Until that curving prow carries
Across the sea to Geatland a chosen
Warrior who bravely does battle with the creature
Haunting our people, who survives that horror
Unhurt, and goes home bearing our love.”

Then they moved on. Their boat lay moored,
Tied tight to its anchor. Glittering at the top
Of their golden helmets wild boar heads gleamed,
Shining decorations, swinging as they marched,
Erect like guards, like sentinels, as though ready
To fight. They marched, Beowulf and his men
And their guide, until they could see the gables
Of Herot, covered with hammered gold
And glowing in the sun—that most famous of all dwellings,
Towerng majestic, its glittering roofs
Visible far across the land.
Their guide reined in his horse, pointing
To that hall, built by Hrothgar for the best
And bravest of his men; the path was plain,
They could see their way.

Chapter 6: The Arrival of a Hero

Then Wulfgarwent to the door and addressed
The waiting seafarers with soldier’s words:
“My lord, the great king of the Danes, commands me
To tell you that he knows of your noble birth
And that having come to him from over the open
Sea you have come bravely and are welcome.
Now go to him as you are, in your armor and helmets,
But leave your battle-shields here, and your spears,
Let them lie waiting for the promises your words
May make.”

Beowulf arose, with his men
Around him, ordering a few to remain
With their weapons, leading the others quickly
Along under Herot’s steep roof into Hrothgar’s
Presence. Standing on that prince’s own hearth,
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt
Gleaming with a smith’s high art, he greeted

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14 Wulfar: the Watchman who guided Beowulf and his men from the coast to the mead-hall, Herot.
The Danes’ great lord:

“Hail, Hrothgar!
Higlac is my cousin and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel’s Name has echoed in our land: Sailors Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes’ Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies’ blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased
All of that race from the earth. I swim
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters Out of the ocean, and killing them one
By one; death was my errand and the fate
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called Together, and I’ve come. Grant me, then,
Lord and protector of this noble place,
A single request! I have come so far,
Oh shelterer of warriors and your people’s loved friend,
That this one favor you should not refuse me—
That I, alone and with the help of my men,
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
Too, that the monster’s scorn of men
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
Nor will I. My lord Higlac
Might think less of me if I let my sword
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid Behind some broad linden shield: My hands
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
Against the monster. God must decide
Who will be given to death’s cold grip.
Grendel’s plan, I think, will be
What it has been before, to invade this hall And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can, If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,
There’ll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones,
And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins. And if death does take me, send the hammered Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he From Wayland. Fate will unwind as it must!”
Chapter 7

Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:

"Beowulf, you've come to us in friendship, and because
Of the reception your father found at our court.
Edgetho had begun a bitter feud,
Killing Hathlaf, a Wulfing warrior.²⁰
Your father's countrymen were afraid of war,
If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.
Then he traveled across the curving waves
To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,
Then, a young man ruling this wide
Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,
My older brother, a far better man
Than I, had died and dying made me,
Second among Healfdane's sons, first
In this nation. I bought the end of Edgetho's
Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's
Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore
He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,
And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel
Has brought us, the damage he's done, here
In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller
Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost
To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty
Could stop his madness, smother his lust!
How many times have my men, glowing
With courage drawn from too many cups
Of ale, sworn to stay after dark
And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.
And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering
With new light would be drenched with blood, the
benches
Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's
Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer
Still, death taking more and more.
But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:
Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future."

Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats,
Yielded benches to the brave visitors,
And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead
Came carrying out the carved flasks,
And poured that bright sweetness. A poet
Sang, from time to time, in a clear
Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats
Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

²⁰ Wulfing warrior: the Wulfings were a Germanic tribe. Hrothgar's queen might have been a Wulfing.
Chapter 8: Unferth’s Challenge

Unferth spoke, Ecglaef’s son,
Who sat at Hrothgar’s feet, spoke harshly
And sharp (vexed by Beowulf’s adventure,
By their visitor’s courage, and angry that anyone
In Denmark or anywhere on earth had ever
Acquired glory and fame greater
Than his own):

“You’re Beowulf, are you—the same
Boastful fool who fought a swimming
Match with Brecca, both of you daring
And young and proud, exploring the deepest
Seas, risking your lives for no reason
But the danger? All older and wiser heads warned you
Not to, but no one could check such pride.
With Brecca at your side you swam along
The sea-paths, your swift-moving hands pulling you
Over the ocean’s face. Then winter
Churned through the water, the waves ran you
As they willed, and you struggled seven long nights
To survive. And at the end victory was his,
Not yours. The sea carried him close
To his home, to southern Norway, near
The land of the Brondings, where he ruled and was loved,
Where his treasure was piled and his strength protected
His towns and his people. He’d promised to outswim you:
Bonstan’s son made that boast ring true.
You’ve been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I think
Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel,
Staying a whole night through in this hall,
Waiting where that fiercest of demons can find you.”

Beowulf answered, Edgetho’s great son:

“Ah! Unferth, my friend, your face
Is hot with ale, and your tongue has tried
To tell us about Brecca’s doings. But the truth
Is simple: No man swims in the sea
As I can, no strength is a match for mine.
As boys, Brecca and I had boasted—
We were both too young to know better—that we’d risk
Our lives far out at sea, and so
We did. Each of us carried a naked
Sword, prepared for whales or the swift
Sharp teeth and beaks of needlefish.
He could never leave me behind, swim faster
Across the waves than I could, and I
Had chosen to remain close to his side.

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21 499 Unferth: A Danish warrior who is jealous of Beowulf is unwilling or unable to fight Grendel himself, thus proving himself inferior to Beowulf
22 524 Bonstan’s son: Brecca’s father was Bonstan.
I remained near him for five long nights,
Until a flood swept us apart;
The frozen sea surged around me,
It grew dark, the wind turned bitter, blowing
From the north, and the waves were savage. Creatures
Who sleep deep in the sea were stirred
Into life—and the iron hammered links
Of my mail shirt, these shining bits of metal
Woven across my breast, saved me
From death. A monster seized me, drew me
Swiftly toward the bottom, swimming with its claws
Tight in my flesh. But fate let me
Find its heart with my sword, hack myself
Free; I fought that beast’s last battle,
Left it floating lifeless in the sea.

Chapter 9

“Other monsters crowded around me,
Continually attacking. I treated them politely,
Offering the edge of my razor-sharp sword.
But the feast, I think, did not please them, filled
Their evil bellies with no banquet-rich food,
Thrashing there at the bottom of the sea;
By morning they’d decided to sleep on the shore,
Lying on their backs, their blood spilled out
On the sand. Afterwards, sailors could cross
That sea-road and feel no fear; nothing
Would stop their passing. Then God’s bright beacon
Appeared in the east, the water lay still,
And at last I could see the land, wind-swept
Cliff-walls at the edge of the coast. Fate saves
The living when they drive away death by themselves!
Lucky or not, nine was the number
Of sea-huge monsters I killed. What man,
Anywhere under Heaven’s high arch, has fought
In such darkness, endured more misery, or been harder
Pressed? Yet I survived the sea, smashed
The monsters’ hot jaws, swam home from my journey.
The swift-flowing waters swept me along
And I landed on Finnish soil. I’ve heard
No tales of you, Unferth, telling
Of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!
Brecca’s battles were never so bold;
Neither he nor you can match me—and I mean
No boast, have announced no more than I know
To be true. And there’s more: You murdered your
brothers,
Your own close kin. Words and bright wit
Won’t help your soul; you’ll suffer hell’s fires,
Unferth, forever tormented. Ecglafl’s
Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart
As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare
To raid your hall, ruin Herot
And oppress its prince, as Grendel has done.
But he’s learned that terror is his alone,
Discovered he can come for your people with no fear
Of reprisal; he’s found no fighting, here,
But only food, only delight.
He murders as he likes, with no mercy, gorges
And feasts on your flesh, and expects no trouble,
No quarrel from the quiet Danes. Now
The Geats will show him courage, soon
He can test his strength in battle. And when the sun
Comes up again, opening another
Bright day from the south, anyone in Denmark
May enter this hall: That evil will be gone!”
Hrothgar, gray-haired and brave, sat happily
Listening, the famous ring-giver sure,
At last, that Grendel could be killed; he believed
In Beowulf’s bold strength and the firmness of his
spirit.
There was the sound of laughter, and the cheerful clanking
Of cups, and pleasant words. Then Welthow,
Hrothgar’s gold-ringed queen, greeted
The warriors; a noble woman who knew
What was right, she raised a flowing cup
To Hrothgar first, holding it high
For the lord of the Danes to drink, wishing him
Joy in that feast. The famous king
Drank with pleasure and blessed their banquet.
Then Welthow went from warrior to warrior,
Pouring a portion from the jeweled cup
For each, till the bracelet-wearing queen
Had carried the mead-cup among them and it was
Beowulf’s
Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats’
Great prince, thanked God for answering her prayers,
For allowing her hands the happy duty
Of offering mead to a hero who would help
Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,
Edgetho’s brave son, then assured the Danish
Queen that his heart was firm and his hands
Ready:
 “When we crossed the sea, my comrades
And I, I already knew that all
My purpose was this: to win the good will
Of your people or die in battle, pressed
In Grendel’s fierce grip. Let me live in greatness
And courage, or here in this hall welcome
My death!”

Welthow was pleased with his words,
His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back
To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.
The feast went on, laughter and music
And the brave words of warriors celebrating
Their delight. Then Hrothgar rose, Healfdane’s
Son, heavy with sleep; as soon
As the sun had gone, he knew that Grendel
Would come to Herot, would visit that hall
When night had covered the earth with its net
And the shapes of darkness moved black and silent
Through the world. Hrothgar’s warriors rose with him. He went to Beowulf, embraced the Geats’ Brave prince, wished him well, and hoped That Herot would be his to command. And then He declared:

"No one strange to this land Has ever been granted what I’ve given you, No one in all the years of my rule. Make this best of all mead-halls yours, and then Keep it free of evil, fight With glory in your heart! Purge Herot And your ship will sail home with its treasure-holds full."

Chapter 10

The feast ends. Beowulf and his men take the place at Hrothgar’s followers and lie down to sleep in Herot. Beowulf, however, is wakeful, eager to meet his enemy. Beowulf removes his gear and armor, ordering his gear to be guarded till morning.

Chapter 11: The Battle with Grendel

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty Hills and bogs, bearing God’s hatred, Grendel came, hoping to kill Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot. He moved quickly through the cloudy night, Up from his swampland, sliding silently Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar’s Home before, knew the way— But never, before nor after that night, Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless, Straight to the door, then snapped it open, Tore its iron fasteners with a touch, And rushed angrily over the threshold. He strode quickly across the inlaid Floor, snarling and fierce: His eyes Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed With rows of young soldiers resting together. And his heart laughed, he relished the sight, Intended to tear the life from those bodies By morning; the monster’s mind was hot With the thought of food and the feasting his belly Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended Grendel to gnaw the broken bones Of his last human supper. Human Eyes were watching his evil steps, Waiting to see his swift hard claws. Grendel snatched at the first Geat
He came to, ripped him apart, cut
His body to bits with powerful jaws,
Drank the blood from his veins, and bolted
Him down, hands and feet; death
And Grendel’s great teeth came together,
Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
— And was instantly seized himself, claws
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
Knew at once that nowhere on earth
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
Could take his talons and himself from that tight
Hard grip. Grendel’s one thought was to run
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
But Higlac’s follower remembered his final
Boast and, standing erect, stopped
The monster’s flight, fastened those claws
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
Closer. The infamous killer fought
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!
The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
And Danes shook with terror. Down
The aisles the battle swept, angry
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
And out, artfully worked, the building
Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
Hrothgar’s wise men had fashioned Herot
To stand forever; only fire,
They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
The sounds changed, the Danes started
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
Screams of the Almighty’s enemy sang
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel’s
Taut throat, hell’s captive caught in the arms
Of him who of all the men on earth
Was the strongest.

24 talons: the sharp, hooked claws on birds of prey and some animals.
25 infamous: (adj.) having a bad reputation; notorious
26 writhing: (adj.) twisting, as in pain
Chapter 12

That mighty protector of men
Meant to hold the monster till its life
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf’s
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
Swords raised and ready, determined
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
Was great but all wasted: They could hack at Grendel
From every side, trying to open
A path for his evil soul, but their points
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon
Had bewitched all men’s weapons, laid spells
That blunted every mortal man’s blade.
And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near; down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.
Now he discovered—once the afflictor
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
Bound fast, Higlac’s brave follower tearing at
His hands. The monster’s hatred rose higher,
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
Snapped, muscle and bone split
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
Only to die, to wait for the end
Of all his days. And after that bloody
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
He who had come to them from across the sea,
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
Now, with that night’s fierce work; the Danes
Had been served as he’d boasted he’d serve them;
Beowulf,
A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
Forced on Hrothgar’s helpless people
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
The victory, for the proof, hanging high
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the
monster’s
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

Chapter 13

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
Herot, warriors coming to that hall
From faraway lands, princes and leaders
Of men hurrying to behold the monster’s Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,
Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
Where he’d dragged his corpouselike way, doomed
And already weary of his vanishing life.
The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
In horrible pounding waves, heat
Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling Surf had covered his death, hidden
Deep in murky darkness his miserable End, as hell opened to receive him.
Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved
Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
Beowulf’s bravery as they jogged along.
And over and over they swore that nowhere On earth or under the spreading sky Or between the seas, neither south nor north, Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.
(But no one meant Beowulf’s praise to belittle Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)

Chapter 14 - 18

Hrothgar stares at the arm of Grendel hanging from the rafters. Unferth grows quiet and decides to give up his quarrel with Beowulf. Hrothgar orders Herot to be cleansed and a huge celebration that takes place in Herot. Hrothgar and Welthow honor Beowulf with a huge treasure consisting of horses, weapons, and Denmark’s treasures which are considered noble gifts of mail shirts and golden arm bands and Welthow handed Beowulf one of the most beautiful necklaces ever known. Everyone retires for the evening, thinking that Denmark is now safe; however, a monster, goes to Herot to avenge her son’s death.

Chapter 19: A Mother’s Revenge

So she reached Herot,
Where the Danes slept as though already dead;
Her visit ended their good fortune, reversed
The bright vane of their luck. No female, no matter How fierce, could have come with a man’s strength, Fought with the power and courage men fight with,
Smashing their shining swords, their bloody, Hammer-forged blades onto boar-headed helmets,
Slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of point.
The soldiers raised their shields and drew Those gleaming swords, swung them above
The piled-up benches, leaving their mail shirts And their helmets where they’d lain when the terror took them hold of them.
To save her life she moved still faster,
Took a single victim and fled from the hall,
Running to the moors, discovered, her supper Assured sheltered in her dripping claws.
She’d taken Hrothgar’s closest friend,\textsuperscript{27} The man he most loved of all men on earth; She killed a glorious soldier, cut A noble life short. No Geat could have stopped her: Beowulf and his band has been given better Beds; sleep had come to them in a different Hall. Then all Herot burst into shouts: She had carried off Grendel’s claw. Sorrow Had returned to Denmark. They’d traded deaths, Danes and monsters, and no one had won, Both had lost!

\textit{Beowulf is awakened and called for again. Hrothgar is truly remorseful at losing his closest companion, Esher. He further relates to Beowulf that he had no idea of another monster other than what his people had told him. In one of the most famous versus in the epic, the old king describes where Grendel and his mother are said to live.}

\textbf{Chapter 20}

\begin{verbatim}
“I’ve heard that my people, peasants working 1345
In the fields, have seen a pair of such fiends Wandering in the moors and marshes, giant Monsters living in those desert lands.
And they’ve said to my wise men that, as well as they could see,
One of the devils was a female creature. 1350
The other, they say, walked through the wilderness Like a man—but mightier than any man.
They were frightened, and they fled, hoping to find help
In Herot. They named the huge one Grendel:
If he had a father no one knew him, 1355
Or whether there’d been others before these two,
Hidden evil before hidden evil.
They live in secret places, windy Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours
From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist
Steams like black clouds, and the groves of trees Growing out over their lake are all covered With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike Roots that reach as far as the water
And help keep it dark. At night that lake 1365
Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,
No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,
Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,
A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest
From faraway places, prefers to die 1370
On those shores, refuses to save its life In that water. It isn’t far, nor is it
A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs And storms, waves splash toward the sky,
As dark as the air, as black as the rain 1375
That the heavens weep. Our only help,
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{27} 1296 Hrothgar’s closest friend: Esher
Again, lies with you. Grendel’s mother
Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place
You’ve not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,
Once more, and again twisted gold,
Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you
For the battle you win!”

Chapter 21

Beowulf spoke:
“Let your sorrow end! It is better for us all
To avenge our friends, not mourn them forever.
Each of us will come to the end of this life
On earth; he who can earn it should fight
For the glory of his name; fame after death
Is the noblest of goals. Arise, guardian
Of this kingdom, let us go, as quickly as we can,
And have a look at this lady monster.
I promise you this: she’ll find no shelter,
No hole in the ground, no towering tree,
No deep bottom of a lake, where her sins can hide.
Be patient for one more day of misery;
I ask for no longer.”

The old king leaped
To his feet, gave thanks to God for such words.
Then Hrothgar’s horse was brought, saddled
And bridled. The Danes’ wise ruler rode,
Stately and splendid; shield-bearing soldiers
Marched at his side. The monster’s tracks
Led them through the forest; they followed her heavy
Feet, that had swept straight across
The shadowy waste land, her burden the lifeless
Body of the best of Hrothgar’s men.
The trail took them up towering, rocky
Hills, and over narrow, winding
Paths they had never seen, down steep
And slippery cliffs where creatures from deep
In the earth hid in their holes. Hrothgar
Rode in front, with a few of his most knowing
Men, to find their way. Then suddenly,
Where clumps of trees bent across
Cold gray stones, they came to a dismal
Wood; below them was the lake, its water
Bloody and bubbly. And the Danes shivered,
Miserable, might men tormented
By grief seeing, there on that cliff
Above the water, Esher’s bloody
Head. They looked down at the lake, felt
How its heat rose up, watched the waves’
Blood-stained swirling. Their battle horns sounded,
Then sounded again. Then they set down their weapons.
They could see the water crawling with snakes,
Fantastic serpents swimming in the boiling
Lake, and sea beasts lying on the rocks
--The kind that infest the ocean, in the early
Dawn, often ending some ship’s
Journey with their wild jaws. They rushed
Angrily out of sight, when the battle horns blew.
Beowulf aimed an arrow at one
Of the beasts, swimming sluggishly away,
And the point pierced its hide, stabbed
To its heart; its life leaked out, death
Swept it off. Quickly before
The dying monster could escape, they hooked
Its thrashing body with their curved boar-spears,
Fought it to land, drew it up on the bluff,
Then stood and stared at the incredible wave-roamer,
Covered with strange scales and horrible. Then Beowulf
Began to fasten on his armor.
Not afraid for his life but knowing the woven
Mail, with its hammered links, could save
That life when he lowered himself into the lake,
Keep slimy monsters’ claws from snatching at
His heart, preserve him for the battle he was sent
To fight. Hrothgar’s helmet would defend him;
That ancient, shining treasure, encircled
With hard-rolled metal, set there by some smith’s
Long dead hand, would block all battle
Swords, stop all blades from cutting at him
When he’d swum toward the bottom, gone down
in the surging
Water, deep toward the swirling sands.
And Unferth helped him, Hrothgar’s courtier
Lent him a famous weapon, a fine,
Hilted old sword named Hrunting; it had
An iron blade, etched and shining
And hardened in blood. No one who’d worn it
Into battle, swung it in dangerous places,
Daring and brave, had ever been deserted—
Nor was Beowulf’s journey the first time it was taken
To an enemy’s camp, or asked to support
Some hero’s courage and win him glory.
Unferth had tried to forget his greeting
To Beowulf, his drunken speech of welcome;
A might warrior, he lent his weapon
To a better one. Only Beowulf would risk
His life in that lake; Unferth was afraid,
Gave up that chance to work wonders, win glory
And a hero’s fame. But Beowulf and fear
Were strangers; he stood ready to dive into battle.

Beowulf tells Unferth, “Let my famous old sword stay in your hands: / I will shape glory with Hrunting, or death (1490) / will hurry me from this earth!”

Carrying the sword Hrunting, Beowulf goes to the lake where the monster’s mother has her underwater lair. Then, fully armed, he makes a heroic dive to the depths of this watery Hell.
Chapter 22: The Monster’s Mother

He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone’s Answer; the heaving water covered him Over. For hours he sank through the waves; At last he saw the mud of the bottom. And all at once the greedy she-wolf Who’d ruled those waters for half a hundred

Years discovered him, saw that a creature From above had come to explore the bottom Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws, Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him, Tried to work her fingers through the tight

Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor And sword and all, to her home; he struggled To free his weapon, and failed. The fight Brought other monsters swimming to see Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth

As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly, That she’d brought him into someone’s battle-hall, And there the water’s heat could not hurt him, Nor anything in the lake attack him through The building’s high-arching roof. A brilliant Light burned all around him, the lake Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw The mighty water witch, and swung his sword, His ring-marked blade, straight at her head; The iron sang its fierce song, Sang Beowulf’s strength. But her guest Discovered that no sword could slice her evil Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet, And that too failed him; for the first time in years Of being worn to war it would earn no glory; It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf Longed only for fame, leaped back Into battle. He tossed his sword aside, Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where He’d dropped it. If weapons were useless he’d use His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame Comes to the men who mean to win it And care about nothing else! He raised His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor. She fell, Grendel’s fierce mother, and the Geats’ Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose At once and repaid him with her clutching claws, Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled And in an instant she had him down, held helpless. Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew A dagger, brown with dried blood and prepared
To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.
The hammered links held; the point
Could not touch him. He’d have traveled to the bottom
of the earth,
Edgetho’s son, and died there, if that shining
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

Chapter 23

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,
And then, savage, now, angry
And desperate, lifted it high over his head
And struck with all the strength he had left,
Caught her in the neck and cut it through,
Broke bones and all. Her body fell
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.
The brilliant light shone, suddenly,
As though burning in that hall, and as bright as
Heaven’s
Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
At her home, then following along the wall
Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
For final revenge against Grendel’s vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar’s
Men slept, killing them in their beds,
Eating some on the spot, fifteen
Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
With another such sickening meal waiting
In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,
Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
Jerked for the last time, then lay still. . . .
The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,
Like him staring into the monsters’ lake,
Saw the waves surging and blood
Spurting through. They spoke about Beowulf,
All the graybeards, whispered together

28 scabbard: a case that protects a sword’s blade. hilt: the sword’s handle, which protrudes from the scabbard.
And said that hope was gone, that the hero
Had lost fame and his life at once, and would never
Return to the living, come back as triumphant
As he had left; almost all agreed that Grendel’s
Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.
The sun slid over past noon, went further
Down. The Danes gave up, left
The lake and went home, Hrothgar with them.
The Geats stayed, sat sadly, watching,
Imagining they saw their lord but not believing
They would ever see him again.

--Then the sword
Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down
Like water, disappearing like ice when the world’s
Eternal Lord loosens invisible
Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost
As only He can, He who rules
Time and seasons, He who is truly
God. The monsters’ hall was full of
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took
Was Grendel’s head and the hilt of the giants’
Jeweled sword; the rest of that ring-marked
Blade had dissolved in Grendel’s seaming
Blood, boiling even after his death.
And then the battle’s only survivor
Swam up and away from those silent corpses;
The water was calm and clean, the whole
Huge lake peaceful once the demons how’d lived in it
Were dead

Then that noble protector of all seamen\textsuperscript{29}
Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy
Burden he was bringing with him. He
And all his glorious band of Geats
Thanked God that their leader had come back unharmed;
They left the lake together. The Geats
Carried Beowulf’s helmet, and his mail shirt.
Behind them the water slowly thickened
As the monsters’ blood came seeping up.
They walked quickly, happily, across
Roads all of them remembered, left
The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men
Staggering under the weight of Grendel’s skull,
Too heavy for fewer than four of them to handle –
Two on each side of the spear jammed through it –
Yet proud of their ugly load and determined
That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.
Soon, fourteen Geats arrived
At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf,
Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall
Green. Then the Geats’ brave prince entered
Herot, covered with glory from the daring
Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar
To salute him and show Grendel’s head.

\footnotesize{29}\textsuperscript{1623} that noble protector of all sea-men: Beowulf. This line refers to a scene later in the epic in which Beowulf asks the Geats, as he lies dying, to build him a tower very much like a lighthouse at the water’s edge.
He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,
Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,
Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird
And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

Chapters 24 to 30

Beowulf hands the head of Grendel and the hilt of the magic word over to Hrothgar. Beowulf explains to Hrothgar “Hrunting, / Unferth’s noble weapon, could do nothing,” (lines 1668-1669). In amazement, Hrothgar stares at the face of what has been Denmark’s evil and the hilt of the magic sword. Hrothgar throws another huge celebration in Beowulf’s honor and once again shares his treasures with Beowulf and boasts of how Beowulf’s name will live on for all eternity. A glorious celebration ensues and Beowulf rests for the evening. Beowulf grew restless, longing to return to Geatland. With Hrothgar’s approval, Beowulf returns to Geatland but not before accepting Hrunting, the sword offered to him by Unferth. Beowulf graciously accepts Hrunting

Beowulf returns to his lord, Higlac, and delivers a dozen new gifts from Hrothgar to Higlac and Higd, Higlac’s noble queen and their son, Herdred. In return, Higlac gave Beowulf seven thousand hides of land, houses, ground, buildings and fields.

Chapter 31

Afterwards, in the time when Higlac was dead
And Herdred, his son, who’d ruled the Geats
After his father, had followed him into darkness-
Killed in battle with the Swedes, who smashed
His shield, cut through the soldiers surrounding
Their king—then, when Higd’s one son
Was gone, Beowulf ruled in Geatland,
Took the throne he’d refused, once,
And held it long and well. He was old
With years and wisdom, fifty winters
A king, when a dragon awoke from its darkness
And dreams and brought terror to his people. The beast
Had slept in a huge stone tower, with a hidden
Path beneath; a man stumbled on
The entrance, went in, discovered the ancient
Treasure, the pagan jewels and gold
The dragon had been guarding, and dazzled and greedy
Stole a gem studded cup, and fled.
But now the dragon hid nothing, neither
The theft nor itself; it swept through the darkness,
And all Geatland knew its anger.

Chapter 32

But the thief had not come to steal; he stole,
And roused the dragon, not from desire
But need. He was someone’s slave, had been beaten
By his masters, had run from all men’s sight,
But with no place to hide; then he found the hidden
Path, and used it. And once inside,
Seeing the sleeping beast, staring as it
Yawned and stretched, not wanting to wake it,
Terror-struck, he turned and ran for his life,
Taking the jeweled cup.
So mankind's enemy, the mighty beast,
Slept in those stone walls for hundreds
Of years; a runaway slave roused it,
Stole a jeweled cup and bought
His master's forgiveness, begged for mercy
And was pardoned when his delighted lord took the present
He bore, turned it in his hands and stared
At the ancient carvings. The cup brought peace
To a slave, pleased his master, but stirred
A dragon's anger. It turned, hunting
The thief's tracks, and found them, saw
Where its visitor had come and gone. He'd survived,
Had come close enough to touch its scaly
Head and yet lived, as it lifted its cavernous
Jaws, through the grace of almighty God
And a pair of quiet, quick moving feet.
The dragon followed his steps, anxious
To find the man who had robbed it of silver
And sleep; it circled around and around
The tower, determined to catch him, but could not,
He had run too fast, the wilderness was empty.
The beast went back to its treasure, planning
A bloody revenge, and found what was missing,
Saw what thieving hands had stolen.
Then it crouched on the stones, counting off
The hours till the Almighty's candle went out,
And evening came, and wild with anger
It could fly burning across the land, lulling
And destroying with its breath. Then the sun was gone
And its heart was glad: glowing with rage
It left the tower, impatient to repay
Its enemies. The people suffered, everyone
Lived in terror, but when Beowulf had learned
Of their trouble his fate was worse, and came quickly.

Chapter 33

Vomiting fire and smoke, the dragon
Burned down their homes. They watched in horror
As the flames rose up: the angry monster
Meant to leave nothing alive. And the signs
Of its anger flickered and glowed in the darkness,
Visible for miles, tokens of its hate
And its cruelty, spread like a warning to the Geats
Who had broken its rest. Then it hurried back
To its tower, to its hidden treasure, before dawn
Could come. It had wrapped its flames around
The Geats; now it trusted in stone
Walls, and its strength, to protect it. But they would not.

Then they came to Beowulf, their king, and announced
That his hall, his throne, the best of buildings,
Had melted away in the dragon's burning
Breath. Their words brought misery, Beowulf's
Sorrow beat at his heart: he accused
Himself of breaking God's law, of bringing
The Almighty's anger down on his people.
Reproach pounded in his breast, gloomy
And dark, and the world seemed a different place.
But the hall was gone, the dragon's molten
Breath had licked across it, burned it
To ashes, near the shore it had guarded. The Geats
Deserved revenge; Beowulf, their leader
And lord, began to plan it, ordered
A battle-shield shaped of iron, knowing that
Wood would be useless, that no linden shield
Could help him, protect him, in the flaming heat
Of the beast's breath. That noble prince
Would end his days on earth, soon,
Would leave this brief life, but would take the dragon
With him, tear it from the heaped-up treasure
It had guarded so long. And he'd go to it alone,
Scorning to lead soldiers against such
An enemy: he saw nothing to fear, thought nothing
Of the beast's claws, or wings, or flaming
Jaws—

Chapter 35

And Beowulf uttered his final boast:
"I've never known fear; as a youth I fought
In endless battles. I am old, now,
But I will fight again, seek fame still,
If the dragon hiding in his tower dares
To face me."

Then he said farewell to his followers,
Each in his turn, for the last time:
"I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast
Could be killed without it, crushed to death
Lie Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn
Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning
Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.
I feel no shame, with shield and sword
And armor, against this monster: when he comes to me
I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
Flames, stand till fate decides
Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
My hands calm: I need no hot
Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.
We shall see, soon, who will survive
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting
Is done. No one else could do
What I mean to, here, no man but me
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
Could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold
And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine
Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"

Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast,
Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under
The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked there!
And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate
Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields
Clashed, the best of kings, saw
Huge stone arches and felt the heat
Of the dragon’s breath, flooding down
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone.
To stand, a streaming current of fire
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats’
Lord and leader, angry, lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and dear that it reached through
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon’s
Ear. The beast rose, angry,
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
But war could have followed. Its breath came first,
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
Swung his shield into place, held it
In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
Into battle. Beowulf’s ancient sword
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them
Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats’
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared
Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying
To its fate. Flames beat at the iron
Shield, and for a time it held, protected
Beowulf as he’d planned; then it began to melt,
And for the first time in his life that famous prince
Fought with fate against him, with glory
Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
And struck at the dragon’s scaly hide.
The ancient blade broke, bit into
The monster’s skin, drew blood, but cracked
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him
Less than he needed. The dragon leaped
With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting
Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.
And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious
Victories in other wars: his weapon
Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho’s
Famous son stared at death,
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
Into darkness that all men must make, as death
Ends their few brief hours on earth.
Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
Flames—a king, before, but now
A beaten warrior. None of his comrades
Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble
Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
Deep in a wood. And only one of them
Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

Chapter 36: History on Wiglaf

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan’s son
And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see
How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering
Everything his lord and cousin had given him,
Armor and gold and the great estates
Wexstan’s family enjoyed, Wiglaf’s
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
Shield and drew his sword—an ancient
Weapon that had once belonged to Onela’s
Nephew, and that Wexstan had won, killing
The prince when he fled from Sweden, sought safety
With Herdred, and found death. And Wiglaf’s father
Had carried the dead man’s armor, and his sword,
To Onela, and the king had said nothing, only
Given him armor and sword and all,
Everything his rebel nephew had owned
And lost when he left this life. And Wexstan
Had kept those shining gifts, held them
For years, waiting for his son to use them,
Wear them as honorably and well as once
His father had done; then Wexstan died
And Wiglaf was his heir, inherited treasures
And weapons and land. He’d never worn
That armor, fought with that sword, until Beowulf
Called him to his side, led him into war.
But his soul did not melt, his sword was strong;
The dragon discovered his courage, and his weapon,
When the rush of battle brought them together.
And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered
The kind of words his comrades deserved:
"I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking
And boasting of how brave we’d be when Beowulf
Needed us, he who gave us these swords
And armor: all of us swore to repay him,
When the time came, kindness for kindness
—With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to join him,
Chose us from all his great army, thinking
Our boasting words had some weight, believing
Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us
For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill
This monster himself, our mighty king,
Fight this battle alone and unaided,
As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled
Men’s eyes. But those days are over and gone
And now our lord must lean on younger
Arms. And we must go to him, while angry
Flames burn at his flesh, help
Our glorious king! By almighty God,
I’d rather burn myself than see
Flames swirling around my lord.
And who are we to carry home
Our shields before we've slain his enemy
And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf
So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing
He ever did deserved an end
Like this, dying miserably and alone,
Butchered by this savage beast: we swore
That these swords and armor were each for us all!

Then he ran to his king, crying encouragement
As he dove through the dragon's deadly fumes:
"Beloved Beowulf, remember how you boasted,
Once, that nothing in the world would ever
Destroy your fame: fight to keep it,
Now, be strong and brave, my noble
King, protecting life and fame
Together. My sword will fight at your side!"

The dragon heard him, the man hating monster,
And was angry; shining with surging flames
It came for him, anxious to return his visit.
Waves of fire swept at his shield
And the edge began to burn. His mail shirt
Could not help him, but before his hands dropped
The blazing wood Wiglaf jumped
Behind Beowulf's shield; his own was burned
To ashes. Then the famous old hero, remembering
Days of glory, lifted what was left
Of Nagling, his ancient-sword, and swung it
With all his strength, smashed the gray
Blade into the beast's head. But then Nagling
Broke to pieces, as iron always
Had in Beowulf's hands. His arms
Were too strong, the hardest blade could not help him
The most wonderfully worked. He carried them to war
But fate had decreed that the Geats' great king
Would be no better for any weapon.

Then the monster charged again, vomiting
Fire, wild with pain, rushed out
Fierce and dreadful, its fear forgotten.
Watching for its chance it drove its tusks
Into Beowulf's neck; he staggered, the blood
Came flooding forth, fell like rain.

Chapter 37

And then when Beowulf needed him most
Wiglaf showed his courage, his strength
And skill, and the boldness he was born with ignoring
The dragon's head, he helped his lord
By striking lower down. The sword
Sank in; his hand was burned, but the shining
Blade had done its work, the dragon's
Belching flames began to flicker
And die away. And Beowulf drew
His battle-sharp dagger: the blood-stained old king
Still knew what he was doing. Quickly, he cut
The beast in half, slit it apart.
It fell, their courage had killed it, two noble
Cousins had joined in the dragon's death.
Yet what they did all men must do
When the time comes! But the triumph was the last
Beowulf would ever earn, the end
Of greatness and life together. The wound
In his neck began to swell and grow;
He could feel something stirring, burning
In his veins, a stinging venom, and knew
The beast's fangs had left it. He fumbled
Along the wall, found a slab
Of stone, and dropped down; above him he saw
Huge stone arches and heavy posts,
Holding up the roof of that giant hall.
Then Wiglaf's gentle hands bathed
The blood-stained prince, his glorious lord,
Weary of war, and loosened his helmet.

Beowulf spoke, in spite of the swollen,
Livid wound, knowing he'd unwound
His string of days on earth, seen
As much as God would grant him; all worldly
Pleasure was gone, as life would go,
Soon:

"I'd leave my armor to my son,
Now, if God had given me an heir,
A child born of my body, his life
Created from mine. I've worn this crown
For fifty winters: no neighboring people
Have tried to threaten the Geats, sent soldiers
Against us or talked of terror. My days
Have gone by as fate willed, waiting
For its word to be spoken, ruling as well
As I knew how, swearing no unholy oaths,
Seeking no lying wars. I can leave
This life happy; I can die, here,
Knowing the Lord of all life has never
Watched me wash my sword in blood
Born of my own family. Beloved
Wiglaf, go, quickly, find
The dragon's treasure: we've taken its life,
But its gold is ours, too. Hurry,
Bring me ancient silver, precious
Jewels, shining armor and gems,
Before I die. Death will be softer,
Leaving life and this people I've ruled
So long, if I look at this last of all prizes."

Chapter 38

Then Wexstan's son went in, as quickly
As he could, did as the dying Beowulf
Asked, entered the inner darkness
Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his sword.
Flushed with victory he groped his way,
A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw
Piles of gleaming gold, precious
Gems, scattered on the floor, cups
And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully
Made but rotting with no hands to rub
And polish them. They lay where the dragon left them;
It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting
Its final battle. (So gold can easily
Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,
No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,
Hanging high above, a golden
Banner, woven by the best of weavers
And beautiful. And over everything he saw
A strange light, shining everywhere,
On walls and floor- and treasure. Nothing
Moved, no other monsters appeared;
He took what he wanted, all the treasures
That pleased his eye, heavy plates
And golden cups and the glorious banner,
Loaded his arms with all they could hold.
Beowulf’s dagger, his iron blade,
Had finished the fire-spitting terror
That once protected tower and treasures
Alike; the gray bearded lord of the Geats
Had ended those flying, burning raids
Forever.

Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
Treasure they’d won together. He ran,
Hoping his wounded king, weak
And dying, had not left the world too soon.
Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found
His famous king bloody, gasping
For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water
Over his lord, until the words
Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:
"For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank
Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—
For all of this, that His grace has given me,
Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
Still came to my lips. I sold my life
For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take
What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,
Help them; my time is gone. Have
The brave Geats build me a tomb,
When the funeral flames have burned me, and build it
Here, at the water’s edge, high
On this spit of land, so sailors can see
This tower, and remember my name, and call it
Beowulf’s tower, and boats in the darkness
And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."

Then that brave king gave the golden
Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,
Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,
And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:
"You’re the last of all our far-flung family.
Fate has swept our race away,
Taken warriors in their strength and led them
To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them."
The old man's mouth was silent, spoke
No more, had said as much as it could;
He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
Left his flesh, flew to glory.

Chapter 39

And then Wiglaf was left, a young warrior
Sadly watching his beloved king,
Seeing him stretched on the ground, left guarding
A torn and bloody corpse. But Beowulf's
Killer was dead, too, the coiled
Dragon, cut in half, cold
And motionless: men, and their swords, had swept it
From the earth, left it lying in front of
Its tower, won its treasure when it fell
Crashing to the ground, cut it apart
With their hammered blades, driven them deep in
Its belly. It would never fly through the night,
Glowing in the dark sky, glorying
In its riches, burning and raiding: two warriors
Had shown it their strength, slain it with their swords.
Not many men, no matter how strong,
No matter how daring, how bold, had done
As well, rushing at its venomous fangs,
Or even quietly entering its tower,
Intending to steal but finding the treasure's
Guardian awake, watching and ready
To greet them. Beowulf had gotten its gold,
Bought it with blood; dragon and king
Had ended each other's days on earth.

And when the battle was over Beowulf's followers
Came out of the wood, cowards and traitors,
Knowing the dragon was dead. Afraid,
While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord's
Defense, to throw their javelins and spears,
They came like shamefaced jackals, their shields
In their hands, to the place where the prince lay dead,
And waited for Wiglaf to speak. He was sitting
Near Beowulf's body, wearily sprinkling
Water in the dead man's face, trying
To stir him. He could not. No one could have kept
Life in their lord's body, or turned
Aside the Lord's will: world
And men and all move as He orders,
And always have, and always will.
Then Wiglaf turned and angrily told them
What men without courage must hear.
Wexstan's brave son stared at the traitors,
His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:
"I say what anyone who speaks the truth
Must say. Your lord gave you gifts,
Swords and the armor you stand in now;
You sat on the mead-hall benches, prince
And followers, and he gave you, with open hands,  
Helmets and mail shirts, hunted across  
The world for the best of weapons. War  
Came and you ran like cowards, dropped  
Your swords as soon as the danger was real.  
Should Beowulf have boasted of your help, rejoiced  
In your loyal strength? With God's good grace  
He helped himself, swung his sword  
Alone, won his own revenge.  
The help I gave him was nothing, but all  
I was able to give; I went to him, knowing  
That nothing but Beowulf's strength could save us,  
And my sword was lucky, found some vital  
Place and bled the burning flames  
Away. Too few of his warriors remembered.  
To come, when our lord faced death, alone.  
And now the giving of swords, of golden  
Rings and rich estates, is over,  
Ended for you and everyone who shares  
Your blood: when the brave Geats hear  
How you bolted and ran none of your race  
Will have anything left but their lives. And death  
Would be better for them all, and for you, than  
The kind  
Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!"

Chapter 42       Beowulf’s Wishes Fulfilled

Hiding that treasure deep in its tower,  
As the dragon had done, broke God's law  
And brought it no good. Guarding its stolen  
Wealth it killed Wiglaf's king,  
But was punished with death. Who knows when princes  
And their soldiers, the bravest and strongest of men,  
Are destined to die, their time ended,  
Their homes, their halls empty and still?  
So Beowulf sought out the dragon, dared it  
Into battle, but who could ever know what God  
Had decreed, or that death would come to him, or why.  
So the spell was solemnly laid, by men  
Long dead; it was meant to last till the day  
Of judgment. Whoever stole their jewels,  
Their gold, would be cursed with the flames of hell,  
Heaped high with sin and guilt, if greed  
Was what brought him: God alone could break  
Their magic, open His grace to man.  
Then Wiglaf spoke, Wexstan's son:  "How often an entire country suffers  
On one man's account! That time has come to us:  
We tried to counsel our beloved king,  
Our shield and protection, show him danger,  
Urge him to leave the dragon in the dark  
Tower it had lain in so long, lived there  
Till the end of the world. Fate, and his will,  
Were too strong. Everyone knows the treasure  
His life bought: but Beowulf was worth  
More than this gold, and the gift is a harsh one.
I've seen it all, been in the tower
Where the jewels and armor were hidden, allowed
To behold them once war and its terror were done.
I gathered them up, gold and silver,
Filled my arms as full as I could
And quickly carried them back to my king.
He lay right here, still alive,
Still sure in mind and tongue. He spoke
Sadly, said I should greet you, asked
That after you'd burned his body you bring
His ashes here, make this the tallest
Of towers- and his tomb— as great and lasting
As his fame, when Beowulf himself walked
The earth and no man living could match him.
Come, let us enter the tower, see
The dragon's marvelous treasure one
Last time: I'll lead the way, take you
Close to that heap of curious jewels,
And rings, and gold. Let the pyre be ready
And high: as soon as we've seen the dragon's
Hoard we will carry our beloved king,
Our leader and lord, where he'll lie forever
In God's keeping."

Then Wiglaf commanded
The wealthiest Geats, brave warriors
And owners of land, leaders of his people,
To bring wood for Beowulf's funeral:
"Now the fire must feed on his body,
Flames grow heavy and black with him
Who endured arrows falling in iron
Showers, feathered shafts, barbed
And sharp; shot through linden shields,
Storms of eager arrowheads dropping."

And Wextan's wise son took seven
Of the noblest Geats, led them together
Down the tunnel, deep into the dragon's
Tower; the one in front had a torch,
Held it high in his hands. The best
Of Beowulf's followers-entered behind
That gleaming flame: seeing gold.
And silver rotting on the ground, with no one
To guard it, the Geats were not troubled with scruples
Or fears, but quickly gathered up
Treasure and carried it out of the tower.
And they rolled the dragon down to the cliff
And dropped it over, let the ocean take it,
The tide sweep it away. Then silver
And gold and precious jewels were put
On a wagon, with Beowulf's body, and brought
Down the jutting sand, where the pyre waited.

Chapter 43 Beowulf’s Funeral

A huge heap of wood was ready,
Hung around with helmets, and battle
Shields, and shining mail shirts, all
As Beowulf had asked. The bearers brought
Their beloved lord, their glorious king,
And weeping laid him high on the wood
Then the warriors began to kindle that greatest
Of funeral fires; smoke rose
Above the flames, black and thick,
And while the wind blew and the fire
Roared they wept, and Beowulf's body
Crumbled and was gone. The Geats stayed,
Moaning their sorrow, lamenting their lord-
A gnarled old woman, hairwound
Tight and gray on her head, groaned
A song of misery, of infinite sadness
And days of mourning, of fear and sorrow
To come, slaughter and terror and captivity.
And Heaven swallowed the billowing smoke.
Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf
Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors
Could find it from far and wide; working
For ten long days they made his monument,
Sealed his ashes in walls as straight
And high as wise and willing hands
Could raise them. And the riches he and Wiglaf
Had won from the dragon, rings, necklaces,
Ancient, hammered armor—all
The treasures they'd taken were left there, too,
Silver and jewels buried in the sandy
Ground, back in the earth, again
And forever hidden and useless to men.
And then twelve of the bravest Geats
Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,
Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
As noble as his name. So should all men
Raise up words for their lords, warm
With love, when their shield and protector leaves
His body behind, sends his soul
On high. And so Beowulf's followers
Rode, mourning their beloved leader,
Crying that no better king had ever
Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.

THE END