

xxiii Introduction

My practice has, however, varied somewhat, and particularly in the matter of alliteration. *Beowulf* is a poem of 3,182 lines; techniques adequate to a group of shorter works will not necessarily serve it equally well. I have felt it advisable, even obligatory, to alliterate much more freely, occasionally as the Old English alliterates, more usually in irregular patterns developed *ad hoc*. These patterns include everything from alliteration on the first and fourth stresses to alliteration that runs through and across several lines. I have also used part-alliteration; I have sometimes used paired alliteration—two words in a line alliterating according to one sound, and the other two alliterating according to a wholly different sound; I have even, though infrequently and, I hope, most discreetly, used a bit of internal rhyme. I should perhaps add that I have tried to let the weight and motion of each line determine where the stresses (four to a line) fall. The same word, therefore, need not be an alliterating word (i.e., a stressed word) each time it occurs.

Finally, I want to thank Professor Angel Flores, who commissioned a section of this translation and so got me started on a task the size of which had always frightened me away; Professor Robert P. Creed, who gave me most welcome encouragement, and who not only cheerfully but actually eagerly read through the entire manuscript, making many helpful suggestions en route; Professor J. B. Bessinger, of whom—though it seems almost incredible that a translator should have *two* such selfless readers—the same must be said; and my two oldest sons, Brian and Blake, who bore with my preoccupation, who looked bright-eyed and interested when I retold the story for them, blow by blow, and who (age nine and age eight) promised to sit and read proof with me—and (age ten and age nine) did.

Burton Raffel

B E O W U L F

Prologue

Hear me! We've heard of Danish heroes,
Ancient kings and the glory they cut
For themselves, swinging mighty swords!

How Shield 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,
Whose power and fame soon spread through the
world.

Shield'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.

Shield'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
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.

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1

Then Beo was king in that Danish castle,
Shield'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 kins-
men

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 any-
thing

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,

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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.

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
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 Hroth-
 gar'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
 To those who will rise to God, drop off
 Their dead bodies and seek our Father's peace!

3

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 cur-
 rents,
 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-curved 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
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."

4

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

260

"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.

265

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

270

Is a great one, our business with the glorious king
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 slaugh-

275

tered

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

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,

Towering 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. And then he spoke:

“Now I must leave you: may the Lord our God

Protect your coming and going! The sea

Is my job, keeping these coasts free

Of invaders, bands of pirates: I must go back.”

5

The path he'd shown them was paved, cobbled

Like a Roman road. They arrived with their mail shirts

Glittering, silver-shining links

Clanking an iron song as they came.

Sea-weary still, they set their broad,

Battle-hardened shields in rows

Along the wall, then stretched themselves

On Herot's benches. Their armor rang;

Their ash-tipped spears stood in a line,

Gray-tipped and straight: the Geats' war-gear

Were honored weapons.

A Danish warrior

Asked who they were, their names and their fathers':

“Where have you carried these gold-carved

shields from,

These silvery shirts and helmets, and those spears

Set out in long lines? I am Hrothgar's

Herald and captain. Strangers have come here

Before, but never so freely, so bold.

And you come too proudly to be exiles: not poverty

But your hearts' high courage has brought you to Hrothgar."

He was answered by a famous soldier, the Geats' Proud prince: 340

"We follow Higlac, break bread
At his side. I am Beowulf. My errand
Is for Healfdane's great son to hear, your glorious
Lord; if he chooses to receive us we will greet him,
Salute the chief of the Danes and speak out
Our message."

Wulfgar replied—a prince
Born to the Swedes, famous for both strength
And wisdom: 345

"Our warmhearted lord will be told
Of your coming; I shall tell our king, our giver
Of bright rings, and hurry back with his word,
And speak it here, however he answers
Your request."

He went quickly to where Hrothgar

sat,
Gray and old, in the middle of his men,
And knowing the custom of that court walked
straight

To the king's great chair, stood waiting to be heard,
Then spoke: 355

"There are Geats who have come sail-
ing the open
Ocean to our land, come far over
The high waves, led by a warrior
Called Beowulf. They wait on your word, bring
messages 360

For your ears alone. My lord, grant them
A gracious answer, see them and hear
What they've come for! Their weapons and armor
are nobly 365

Worked—these men are no beggars. And Beowulf
Their prince, who showed them the way to our
shores,

Is a mighty warrior, powerful and wise." 370

6

The Danes' high prince and protector answered:
"I knew Beowulf as a boy. His father
Was Edgetho, who was given Hrethel's one daugh-
ter

—Hrethel, Higlac's father. Now Edgetho's
Brave son is here, come visiting a friendly
King. And I've heard that when seamen came,
Bringing their gifts and presents to the Geats,
They wrestled and ran together, and Higlac's
Young prince showed them a mighty battle-grip,

Hands that moved with thirty men's strength,
And courage to match. Our Holy Father
Has sent him as a sign of His grace, a mark
Of His favor, to help us defeat Grendel

And end that terror. I shall greet him with treasures,
Gifts to reward his courage in coming to us.
Quickly, order them all to come to me
Together, Beowulf and his band of Geats.
And tell them, too, how welcome we will make
them!" 385

Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed
The waiting seafarers with soldier's words: 390
"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 hel-
mets, 395

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 400

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
 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 them-
 selves,

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 swam
 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!"

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:
 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.

8

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 pro-
 tected
 His towns and his people. He'd promised to out-
 swim 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, Edgeth'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.
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. Crea-

tures
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
Fight 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.

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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 them-

selves!

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. Ecglaef's

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590

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

595

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

600

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.

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There was the sound of laughter, and the cheer-
 ful clanking

610

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

615

620

Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats'
 Great prince, thanked God for answering her
 prayers,

625

For allowing her hands the happy duty
 Of offering mead to a hero who would help
 Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,
 Egetho's brave son, then assured the Danish
 Queen that his heart was firm and his hands
 Ready:

630

"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!"

635

Welthow was pleased with his words,
 His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back
 To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.

640

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

645

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.

650

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.

655

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."

660

Then Hrothgar left that hall, the Danes'
Great protector, followed by his court; the queen
Had preceded him and he went to lie at her side,
Seek sleep near his wife. It was said that God
Himself had set a sentinel in Herot,
Brought Beowulf as a guard against Grendel and a
shield

Behind whom the king could safely rest.
And Beowulf was ready, firm with our Lord's
High favor and his own bold courage and strength.
He stripped off his mail shirt, his helmet, his
sword

Hammered from the hardest iron, and handed
All his weapons and armor to a servant,
Ordered his war-gear guarded till morning.
And then, standing beside his bed,
He exclaimed:

675 "Grendel is no braver, no stronger
Than I am! I could kill him with my sword; I shall
not,

680 Easy as it would be. This fiend is a bold
And famous fighter, but his claws and teeth
Scratching at my shield, his clumsy fists
Beating at my sword blade, would be helpless. I
will meet him

With my hands empty—unless his heart
Fails him, seeing a soldier waiting
Weaponless, unafraid. Let God in His wisdom
Extend His hand where He wills, reward
Whom He chooses!"

685 Then the Geats' great chief
dropped
His head to his pillow, and around him, as ready,
As they could be, lay the soldiers who had crossed
the sea

690 At his side, each of them sure that he was lost

To the home he loved, to the high-walled towns
And the friends he had left behind where both he
And they had been raised. Each thought of the
Danes

695 Murdered by Grendel in a hall where Geats
And not Danes now slept. But God's dread loom
Was woven with defeat for the monster, good for-
tune

For the Geats; help against Grendel was with them,
And through the might of a single man
They would win. Who doubts that God in His wis-
dom

700 And strength holds the earth forever
In His hands? Out in the darkness the monster
Began to walk. The warriors slept
In that gabled hall where they hoped that He
Would keep them safe from evil, guard them
705 From death till the end of their days was deter-
mined

And the thread should be broken. But Beowulf lay
wakeful,
Watching, waiting, eager to meet
His enemy, and angry at the thought of his coming.

11

710 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,
715 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, covering 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.

790

12

That mighty protector of men
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 Gren-
del

795

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

800

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.

805

Now he discovered—once the afflictor
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel

810

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

815

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

820

Of all his days. And after that bloody
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.

825

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;

830

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

835

the monster's
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

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

840

Where he'd dragged his corpseslike 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!)
 And sometimes, when the path ran straight and
 clear,

They would let their horses race, red
 And brown and pale yellow backs streaming
 Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier
 Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes
 And could sing them all through, story after story,
 Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's
 Victory, tying the knot of his verses
 Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's
 Quick skill, singing his new song aloud
 While he shaped it, and the old songs as well—
 Siegmund's

Adventures, familiar battles fought
 By that glorious son of Vels. And struggles,
 Too, against evil and treachery that no one
 Had ever heard of, that no one knew
 Except Filda, who had fought at his uncle's side,
 A brave young comrade carefully listening

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When Siegmund's tongue unwound the wonders
 He had worked, confiding in his closest friend.
 There were tales of giants wiped from the earth
 By Siegmund's might—and forever remembered,
 Fame that would last him beyond life and death,
 His daring battle with a treasure-rich dragon.

Heaving a hoary gray rock aside
 Siegmund had gone down to the dragon alone,
 Entered the hole where it hid and swung
 His sword so savagely that it slit the creature
 Through, pierced its flesh and pinned it
 To a wall, hung it where his bright blade rested.
 His courage and strength had earned him a king-
 like

Treasure, brought gold and rich rings to his glori-
 ous

Hands. He loaded that precious hoard
 On his ship and sailed off with a shining cargo.
 And the dragon dissolved in its own fierce blood.

No prince, no protector of his warriors, knew
 power
 And fame and glory like Siegmund's; his name
 And his treasures grew great. Hermod could have
 hoped

For at least as much; he was once the mightiest
 Of men. But pride and defeat and betrayal
 Sent him into exile with the Jutes, and he ended
 His life on their swords. That life had been misery
 After misery, and he spread sorrow as long
 As he lived it, heaped troubles on his unhappy
 people's

Heads, ignored all wise men's warnings,
 Ruled only with courage. A king
 Born, entrusted with ancient treasures
 And cities full of stronghearted soldiers,
 His vanity swelled him so vile and rank
 That he could hear no voices but his own. He de-
 served

To suffer and die. But Beowulf was a prince

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910

Well-loved, followed in friendship, not fear;
Hermod's heart had been hollowed by sin.

The horses ran, when they could, on the gravel
Path. Morning slid past and was gone.

The whole brave company came riding to Herot,
Anxious to celebrate Beowulf's success

And stare at that arm. And Hrothgar rose

From beside his wife and came with his courtiers
Crowded around him. And Welthow rose

And joined him, his wife and queen with her
women,

All of them walking to that wonderful hall.

915

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14

Hrothgar stood at the top of the stairway
And stared at Grendel's great claw, swinging
High from that gold-shining roof. Then he cried:

"Let God be thanked! Grendel's terrible
Anger hung over our heads too long,

Dropping down misery; but the Almighty makes
miracles

When He pleases, wonder after wonder, and this
world

Rests in His hands. I had given up hope,
Exhausted prayer, expected nothing

But misfortune forever. Herot was empty,
Bloody; the wisest and best of our people

Despaired as deeply, found hope no easier,
Knew nothing, no way to end this unequal

War of men and devils, warriors

And monstrous fiends. One man found it,
Came to Denmark and with the Lord's help

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Did what none of the Danes could do,
Our wisdom, our strength, worthless without him.

The woman who bore him, whoever, wherever,
Alive now, or dead, knew the grace of the God

Of our fathers, was granted a son for her glory
And His. Beowulf, best of soldiers,

Let me take you to my heart, make you my son too,
And love you: preserve this passionate peace

Between us. And take, in return, whatever

You may want from whatever I own. Warriors
Deserving far less have been granted as much,

Given gifts and honored, though they fought

No enemy like yours. Glory is now yours

Forever and ever, your courage has earned it,

And your strength. May God be as good to you
forever

As He has been to you here!"

Then Beowulf an-

swered:

"What we did was what our hearts helped
Our hands to perform; we came to fight

With Grendel, our strength against his. I wish

I could show you, here in Herot, his corpse

Stretched on this floor! I twisted my fingers

Around his claw, tipped and tore at it

As hard as I could: I meant to kill him

Right here, hold him so tightly that his heart

Would stop, would break, his life spill

On this floor. But God's will was against me,

As hard as I held him he still pulled free

And ran, escaped from this hall with the strength

Fear had given him. But he offered me his arm

And his claw, saved his life yet left me

That prize. And paying even so willingly

For his freedom he still fled with nothing

But the end of his evil days, ran

With death pressing at his back, pain

Splitting his panicked heart, pulling him

Step by step into hell. Let him burn

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