

The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar.
Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,
young followers, a force that grew
to be a mighty army. So his mind turned
to hall-building: he handed down orders
for men to work on a great mead-hall
meant to be a wonder of the world forever;
it would be his throne-room and there he would dispense
his God-given goods to young and old—
but not the common land or people's lives.
Far and wide through the world, I have heard,
orders for work to adorn that wallstead
were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there,
finished and ready, in full view,
the hall of halls. Heorot was the name
he had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
Nor did he renege, but doled out rings
and torques at the table. The hall towered,
its gables wide and high and awaiting
a barbarous burning. That doom abided,
but in time it would come: the killer instinct
unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.

B E O W U L F

Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
to hear the din of the loud banquet
every day in the hall, the harp being struck
and the clear song of a skilled poet
telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
how the Almighty had made the earth
a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
in His splendour He set the sun and the moon
to be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
and filled the broad lap of the world
with branches and leaves; and quickened life
in every other thing that moved.

So times were pleasant for the people there
until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
began to work his evil in the world.
Grendel was the name of this grim demon
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
in misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
Cain got no good from committing that murder
because the Almighty made him anathema
and out of the curse of his exile there sprang
ogres and elves and evil phantoms
and the giants too who strove with God
time and again until He gave them their reward.

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes

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were settling into it after their drink,
and there he came upon them, a company of the best
asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
and human sorrow. Suddenly then
120 the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
blundering back with the butchered corpses.

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
their wassail was over, they wept to heaven
and mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
130 the storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,
humiliated by the loss of his guard,
bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
at the demon's trail, in deep distress.
He was numb with grief, but got no respite
for one night later merciless Grendel
struck again with more gruesome murders.
Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.
It was easy then to meet with a man
shifting himself to a safer distance
140 to bed in the bothies, for who could be blind
to the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
of that hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
one against all, until the greatest house
in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead.
For twelve winters, seasons of woe,

*King Hroth
distress and
helplessness*

180 their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge
of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
who in time of trouble has to thrust his soul
in the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
who after death can approach the Lord
and find friendship in the Father's embrace.

190 So that troubled time continued, woe
that never stopped, steady affliction
for Halfdane's son, too hard an ordeal.
There was panic after dark, people endured
raids in the night, riven by the terror.

When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac's thane
was on home ground, over in Geatland.
There was no one else like him alive.
In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
high-born and powerful. He ordered a boat
that would ply the waves. He announced his plan:
200 to sail the swan's road and search out that king,
the famous prince who needed defenders.
Nobody tried to keep him from going,
no elder denied him, dear as he was to them.
Instead, they inspected omens and spurred
his ambition to go, whilst he moved about
like the leader he was, enlisting men,
the best he could find; with fourteen others
the warrior boarded the boat as captain,
a canny pilot along coast and currents.

*At the court of King
Hygelac, a Geat
warrior prepares to
help Hrothgar*

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Time went by, the boat was on water,
 in close under the cliffs.
 Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,
 sand churned in surf, warriors loaded
 a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear
 in the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
 away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.
 Over the waves, with the wind behind her
 and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird
 until her curved prow had covered the distance
 and on the following day, at the due hour,
 those seafarers sighted land,
 sunlit cliffs, sheer crags
 and looming headlands, the landfall they sought.
 It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted
 over the side, out on to the sand,
 and moored their ship. There was a clash of mail
 and a thresh of gear. They thanked God
 for that easy crossing on a calm sea.

*The hero and his
 troop sail from the
 land of the Geats*

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When the watchman on the wall, the Shieldings' lookout
 whose job it was to guard the sea-cliffs,
 saw shields glittering on the gangplank
 and battle-equipment being unloaded
 he had to find out who and what
 the arrivals were. So he rode to the shore,
 this horseman of Hrothgar's, and challenged them
 in formal terms, flourishing his spear:

*The Danish coast-
 guard challenges the
 outsiders*

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"What kind of men are you who arrive
 rigged out for combat in coats of mail,
 sailing here over the sea-lanes
 in your steep-hulled boat? I have been stationed

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as lookout on this coast for a long time.
 My job is to watch the waves for raiders,
 any danger to the Danish shore.
 Never before has a force under arms
 disembarked so openly—not bothering to ask
 if the sentries allowed them safe passage
 or the clan had consented. Nor have I seen
 a mightier man-at-arms on this earth
 than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken,
 he is truly noble. This is no mere
 hanger-on in a hero's armour.
 So now, before you fare inland
 as interlopers, I have to be informed
 about who you are and where you hail from.
 Outsiders from across the water,
 I say it again: the sooner you tell
 where you come from and why, the better."

The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard;
 the distinguished one delivered this answer:
 "We belong by birth to the Geat people
 and owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.
 In his day, my father was a famous man,
 a noble warrior-lord named Ecgtheow.
 He outlasted many a long winter
 and went on his way. All over the world
 men wise in counsel continue to remember him.
 We come in good faith to find your lord
 and nation's shield, the son of Halfdane.
 Give us the right advice and direction.
 We have arrived here on a great errand
 to the lord of the Danes, and I believe therefore
 there should be nothing hidden or withheld between us.

*The Geat here
 announces his
 and explains his
 mission*

So tell us if what we have heard is true
about this threat, whatever it is,
this danger abroad in the dark nights,
this corpse-maker mongering death
in the Shieldings' country. I come to proffer
my wholehearted help and counsel.

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I can show the wise Hrothgar a way
to defeat his enemy and find respite—
if any respite is to reach him, ever.
I can calm the turmoil and terror in his mind.
Otherwise, he must endure woes
and live with grief for as long as his hall
stands at the horizon, on its high ground."

Undaunted, sitting astride his horse,
the coast-guard answered, "Anyone with gumption
and a sharp mind will take the measure
of two things: what's said and what's done.

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I believe what you have told me: that you are a troop
loyal to our king. So come ahead
with your arms and your gear, and I will guide you.
What's more, I'll order my own comrades
on their word of honour to watch your boat
down there on the strand—keep her safe
in her fresh tar, until the time comes
for her curved prow to preen on the waves
and bear this hero back to Geatland.
May one so valiant and venturesome
come unharmed through the clash of battle."

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So they went on their way. The ship rode the water,
broad-beamed, bound by its hawser
and anchored fast. Boar-shapes flashed

*The coast-guard
allows the Geats
pass*