

500

From where he crouched at the king's feet,
 Unferth, a son of Ecglaf's, spoke
 contrary words. Beowulf's coming,
 his sea-braving, made him sick with envy:
 he could not brook or abide the fact
 that anyone else alive under heaven
 might enjoy greater regard than he did:
 "Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca
 in a swimming match on the open sea,
 risking the water just to prove that you could win?
 It was sheer vanity made you venture out
 on the main deep. And no matter who tried,
 friend or foe, to deflect the pair of you,
 neither would back down: the sea-test obsessed you
 You waded in, embracing water,
 taking its measure, mastering currents,
 riding on the swell. The ocean swayed,
 winter went wild in the waves, but you vied
 for seven nights; and then he outswam you,
 came ashore the stronger contender.
 He was cast up safe and sound one morning

B E O W

520

among the Heathoreams, then made his way
 to where he belonged in Bronding country,
 home again, sure of his ground
 in strongroom and bawn. So Breca made good
 his boast upon you and was proved right.
 No matter, therefore, how you may have fared
 in every bout and battle until now,
 this time you'll be worsted; no one has ever
 outlasted an entire night against Grendel."

530

Beowulf, Ecgtheow's son, replied:
 "Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say
 about Breca and me. But it was mostly beer
 that was doing the talking. The truth is this:
 when the going was heavy in those high waves,
 I was the strongest swimmer of all.
 We'd been children together and we grew up
 daring ourselves to outdo each other,
 boasting and urging each other to risk
 our lives on the sea. And so it turned out.
 Each of us swam holding a sword,
 a naked, hard-proofed blade for protection
 against the whale-beasts. But Breca could never
 move out farther or faster from me
 than I could manage to move from him.

540

Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on
 for five nights, until the long flow
 and pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,
 night falling and winds from the north
 drove us apart. The deep boiled up
 and its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild.
 My armour helped me to hold out;
 my hard-ringed chain-mail, hand-forged and linked,

550

Beowulf corrects
 Unferth

a fine, close-fitting filigree of gold,
kept me safe when some ocean creature
pulled me to the bottom. Pinioned fast
and swathed in its grip, I was granted one
final chance: my sword plunged
and the ordeal was over. Through my own hands,
the fury of battle had finished off the sea-beast.

560 "Time and again, foul things attacked me,
lurking and stalking, but I lashed out,
gave as good as I got with my sword.
My flesh was not for feasting on,
there would be no monsters gnawing and gloating
over their banquet at the bottom of the sea.
Instead, in the morning, mangled and sleeping
the sleep of the sword, they slopped and floated
like the ocean's leavings. From now on
sailors would be safe, the deep-sea raids
were over for good. Light came from the east,
bright guarantee of God, and the waves
went quiet; I could see headlands
and buffeted cliffs. Often, for undaunted courage,
fate spares the man it has not already marked.
However it occurred, my sword had killed
nine sea-monsters. Such night-dangers
and hard ordeals I have never heard of
nor of a man more desolate in surging waves.
But worn out as I was, I survived,
came through with my life. The ocean lifted
and laid me ashore, I landed safe
on the coast of Finland.

Now I cannot recall
any fight you entered, Unferth,

*Beowulf tells of his
ordeal in the sea*

590 that bears comparison. I don't boast when I say
that neither you nor Breca were ever much
celebrated for swordsmanship
or for facing danger on the field of battle.
You killed your own kith and kin,
so for all your cleverness and quick tongue,
you will suffer damnation in the depths of hell.
The fact is, Unferth, if you were truly
as keen or courageous as you claim to be
Grendel would never have got away with
such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king,
havoc in Heorot and horrors everywhere.
But he knows he need never be in dread
of your blade making a mizzle of his blood
or of vengeance arriving ever from this quarter—
from the Victory-Shieldings, the shoulderers of the spear.
He knows he can trample down you Danes
600 to his heart's content, humiliate and murder
without fear of reprisal. But he will find me different.
I will show him how Geats shape to kill
in the heat of battle. Then whoever wants to
may go bravely to mead, when morning light,
scarfed in sun-dazzle, shines forth from the south
and brings another daybreak to the world."

610 Then the grey-haired treasure-giver was glad;
far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes
and keeper of his people counted on Beowulf,
on the warrior's steadfastness and his word.
So the laughter started, the din got louder
and the crowd was happy. Wealhtheow came in,
Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies.
Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted

*Unferth rebuked.
Beowulf reaffirms his
determination to
defeat Grendel*

*Wealhtheow,
Hrothgar's queen
graces the banquet*