from Beowulf
Part Two, translated by Seamus Heaney

Beowulf carries Grendel’s head to King Hrothgar and then returns gift-laden to the land of the Geats, where he succeeds to the throne. After fifty winters pass, Beowulf, now an old man, faces his final task: He must fight a dragon who, angry because a thief has stolen a jeweled cup from the dragon’s hoard of gold, is laying waste to the Geats’ land. Beowulf and eleven warriors are guided to the dragon’s lair by the thief who stole the cup. For Beowulf the price of this last victory will be great.

The Final Battle

273 Then he addressed each dear companion one final time, those fighters in their helmets, resolute and high-born: “I would rather not use a weapon if I knew another way to grapple with the dragon and make good my boast as I did against Grendel in days gone by.

But I shall be meeting molten venom in the fire he breathes, so I go forth in mail-shirt and shield. I won’t shift a foot when I meet the cave-guard: what occurs on the wall between the two of us will turn out as fate, overseer of men, decides. I am resolved. I scorn further words against this sky-borne foe.

“Men at arms, remain here on the barrow, safe in your armour, to see which one of us is better in the end at bearing wounds in a deadly fray. This fight is not yours, nor is it up to any man except me.

Vocabulary

resolute (res’ət) adj: determined.

273–287: Throughout Beowulf, there are many references to the pagan notion of fate (see line 285) as an impersonal force that predetermines the outcome of events in a person’s life. This concept, known as wyrd, was central to Anglo-Saxon beliefs.

288. barrow n.: a hill.

288–296. How does Beowulf’s acceptance of fate show his deep sense of responsibility to his people?

301. hale adj: healthy, energetic.

315. parleying vb: used in discussing.

Vocabulary

vehemently (vē’mənt-lē) adv: violently.

Beowulf
The image contains a page from the book "Beowulf," which is an epic poem from Old English literature. The page includes text about the character Beowulf and his battle with the dragon. The text is split into two columns, with the left column containing the main text and the right column containing annotations and questions. The page also includes a vocabulary section at the bottom. The text is rich in historical and cultural references, reflecting the Anglo-Saxon period.
After those words, a wildness rose
in the dragon again and drove it to attack,
heaving up fire, hunting for enemies,
the humans it loathed. Flames lapped the shield,
charred it to the boss, and the body armour
on the young warrior was useless to him.
But Wiglaf did well under the wide rim
Beowulf shared with him once his own had shattered
in sparks and ashes.

Inspired again
by the thought of glory, the war-king threw
his whole strength behind a sword-stroke
and connected with the skull. And Naegling snapped.
Beowulf’s ancient iron-grey sword
let him down in the fight. It was never his fortune
to be helped in combat by the cutting edge
of weapons made of iron. When he wielded a sword,
no matter how blooded and hard-edged the blade
his hand was too strong, the stroke he dealt
(I have heard) would ruin it. He could reap no advantage.

Then the bane of that people, the fire-breathing dragon,
was mad to attack for a third time.
When a chance came, he caught the hero
in a rush of flame and clamped sharp fangs
into his neck. Beowulf’s body
ran wet with his life-blood: it came welling out.

Next thing, they say, the noble son of Weohstan
saw the king in danger at his side
and displayed his inborn bravery and strength.

He left the head alone, but his fighting hand
was burned when he came to his kinsman’s aid.
He lunged at the enemy lower down
so that his decorated sword sank into its belly
and the flames grew weaker.

Once again the king
gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife
he carried on his belt, sharpened for battle.
He stuck it deep into the dragon’s flank.
Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound.
They had killed the enemy, courage quelled his life;
that pair of kinsmen, partners in nobility,
had destroyed the foe. So every man should act,
be at hand when needed; but now, for the king,
this would be the last of his many labours
and triumphs in the world.

Then the wound
dealt by the ground-burner earlier began
to scald and swell; Beowulf discovered
deadly poison suppurating inside him,
surges of nausea, and so, in his wisdom,
the prince realized his state and struggled
towards a seat on the rampart. He steadied his gaze
on those gigantic stones, saw how the earthwork
was braced with arches built over columns.
And now that thane unequalled for goodness
with his own hands washed his lord’s wounds,
swabbed the weary prince with water,
bathed him clean, unbuckled his helmet.

Beowulf spoke: in spite of his wounds,
mortal wounds, he still spoke
for he well knew his days in the world
had been lived out to the end: his allotted time was drawing to a close, death was very near.

“Now is the time when I would have wanted to bestow this armour on my own son, had it been my fortune to have fathered an heir and live on in his flesh. For fifty years I ruled this nation. No king of any neighbouring clan would dare face me with troops, none had the power to intimidate me. I took what came, cared for and stood by things in my keeping, never fomented quarrels, never swore to a lie. All this consoles me, doomed as I am and sickening for death; because of my right ways, the Ruler of mankind need never blame me when the breath leaves my body for murder of kinsmen. Go now quickly, dearest Wiglaf, under the grey stone where the dragon is laid out, lost to his treasure; hurry to feast your eyes on the hoard. Away you go: I want to examine that ancient gold, gaze my fill on those garnered jewels; my going will be easier for having seen the treasure, a less troubled letting-go of the life and lordship I have long maintained.”

Together Beowulf and the young Wiglaf kill the dragon, but the old king is fatally wounded. Beowulf, thinking of his people, asks to see the monster’s treasure. Wiglaf enters the dragon’s cave and finds a priceless hoard of jewels and gold.

400 . . . Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back, excited by the treasure; anxiety weighed on his brave heart, he was hoping he would find the leader of the Geats alive where he had left him helpless, earlier, on the open ground.

405 So he came to the place, carrying the treasure, and found his lord bleeding profusely, his life at an end; again he began to swallow his body. The beginnings of an utterance broke out from the king’s breast-cage.

410 The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.

411-418. The ultimate purpose of the epic hero is to leave something of lasting value to his culture.

419-425. What are Beowulf’s final wishes?

Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped the collar of gold from his neck and gave it to the young thane, telling him to use it and the warshirt and the gilded helmet well.

430 “You are the last of us, the only one left of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,
sent my whole brave high-born clan
to their final doom. Now I must follow them.”
That was the warrior’s last word.

He had no more to confide. The furious heat
of the pyre would assail him. His soul fled from his breast
to its destined place among the steadfast ones.

Wglaf berates the faithless warriors who did not go to the aid
of their king. With sorrow the Geats cremate the corpse of their
greatest king. They place his ashes, along with all of the dragon’s
treasures, in a huge burial tower by the sea, where it can be seen
by voyagers.

Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
chieftains’ sons, champions in battle,
all of them distraught, chanting in dirges,
mourning his loss as a man and a king.
They extolled his heroic nature and exploits
and gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,
for a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
and cherish his memory when that moment comes
when he has to be conveyed from his bodily home.
So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
sorrows for the lord who had been laid low.
They said that of all the kings upon the earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

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<th>Vocabulary</th>
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<td>assail (n.3s) v. attack.</td>
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<td>extolled (ok. stolt) v. praised.</td>
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A Celtic shield, found in Battersea, near the Thames River, perhaps thrown in the river as an offering to the river god.

Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.