

But Beowulf's victory over Grendel does not free Heorot from danger. Grendel's mother, seeking revenge for the death of her monster-son, attacks Heorot and kills Hrothgar's dearest friend. Beowulf follows Grendel's mother to her lair and there slays her. Thus the young Beowulf triumphs over the forces of evil.

The second part of Beowulf tells of an exploit of the mature Beowulf. After the death of King Hygelac, Beowulf becomes King of the Jutes and rules

wisely for fifty years. In his old age he is once again called to battle—this time with a dragon which is threatening his kingdom. Beowulf slays the dragon, thus winning for his people the dragon's treasure-ward. But Beowulf is himself mortally wounded in the fight. After his death, his people prepare a funeral pyre for him; they lament the loss and praise the valor of their great King.]

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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, 2225  
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. 2230

That tower  
Was heaped high with hidden treasure, stored there  
Years before by the last survivor  
Of a noble race, ancient riches  
Left in the darkness as the end of a dynasty 2235  
Came. Death had taken them, one  
By one, and the warrior who watched over all  
That remained mourned their fate, expecting,  
Soon, the same for himself, knowing  
The gold and jewels he had guarded so long 2240  
Could not bring him pleasure much longer. He brought  
The precious cups, the armor and the ancient  
Swords, to a stone tower built  
Near the sea, below a cliff, a sealed  
Fortress with no windows, no doors, waves 2245  
In front of it, rocks behind. Then he spoke:  
"Take these treasures, earth, now that no one  
Living can enjoy them. They were yours, in the beginning;  
Allow them to return. War and terror  
Have swept away my people, shut 2250

Their eyes to delight and to living, closed  
The door to all gladness. No one is left  
To lift these swords, polish these jeweled  
Cups: no one leads, no one follows. These hammered  
Helmets, worked with gold, will tarnish 2255  
And crack; the hands that should clean and polish them  
Are still forever. And these mail shirts, worn  
In battle, once, while swords crashed  
And blades bit into shields and men,  
Will rust away like the warriors who owned them. 2260  
None of these treasures will travel to distant  
Lands, following their lords. The harp's  
Bright song, the hawk crossing through the hall  
On its swift wings, the stallion tramping  
In the courtyard—all gone, creatures of every 2265  
Kind, and their masters, hurled to the grave!"

And so he spoke, sadly, of those  
Long dead, and lived from day to day,  
Joyless, until, at last, death touched  
His heart and took him too. And a stalker 2270  
In the night, a flaming dragon, found  
The treasure unguarded; he whom men fear  
Came flying through the darkness, wrapped in fire,  
Seeking caves and stone-split ruins  
But finding gold. Then it stayed, buried 2275  
Itself with heathen silver and jewels  
It could neither use nor ever abandon.

So mankind's enemy, the mighty beast,  
Slept in those stone walls for hundreds  
Of years; a runaway slave roused it, 2280  
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 2285  
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 2290  
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 2295  
And sleep; it circled around and around  
The tower, determined to catch him, but could not,

Without fear of either monster, mother  
Or son."

Then he gave the golden sword hilt  
To Hermod, who held it in his wrinkled hands  
And said what giants he made, and monsters  
Owned; it was his, an ancient weapon  
Shaped by wonderful hands, now that Grendel  
And his evil moor had been driven from the earth,  
God's enemies slain and dead. That best  
Of swords belonged to the best of Denmark's  
Rulers, the best ring-giving Danish  
Warrior ever known. The old king  
Bent down to the handle of the ancient relic,  
And now written there the story of ancient wars  
Between good and evil, the opening of the waters,  
The Flood sweeping giants away, how they suffered  
And died that race who hated the Deity.  
Of us all he received judgment from His hands,  
Surging waves that found them wherever  
They fled. And on the golden letters  
Clearly carved in the shining hilt,  
Spelling its original owner's name,  
He for whom it was made with its twisted  
Handle and snake-like carving. Then he spoke,  
Healfdane's son, and everyone was silent.

"What I have speaking from a long memory  
And after time spent in seeking  
What is right for my people, is this: a prince  
Of the Geats, Beowulf, was born a better  
Man! Your fame is everywhere, my friend,  
Reaches to the ends of the earth, and you hold it in your heart  
wisely,  
Patient with your strength and our weakness. What I said I will do, I  
will do. In the name of the friendship we have sworn. Your strength must solace your  
people, and mine no longer.

He not  
As Hermod<sup>8</sup> once was to my people, too proud  
To care what their king was doing, bringing them  
Only destruction and slaughter. In his mad  
Rages he killed them himself, he grades  
And followed no one at his table to the end  
He was a fool, knew none of the joys of life

8. An archetypal but partly historical Danish king, of great military prowess combined with the lowest possible character.

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With other men, a famous ruler  
Granted greater strength than any  
Alive in the world but dark and thirsty  
In spirit. He showed out no more, showed  
His soldiers no more to riches and fame.  
And then that affliction of his people's face  
Suffered horribly from his sins. Be taught  
By his lesson, let me what I say must be:  
I tell his tale as I am,  
Only for you as I am,

"Our eternal Lord  
Grant some men wisdom, some weathers, makes others  
Great. The world is God's, He allows  
A man to grow famous, and his family rich  
Gives him land and towns to rule  
And delight in his kingdom realm  
As far as the world goes—and who  
In human unwisdom to the misuse of such power,  
Remembers that it all ends and too soon?  
Prosperity, prosperity, prosperity: nothing  
Troubles him, no sickness, no passing time,  
No sorrows, no sudden war bringing  
Out of nowhere, but all the world's wrongs  
When he spins, how can he know when he sins?

24  
"And then pride grows in his heart, planted  
Quietly but flourishing. And while the keeper of his soul  
Sleeps on, while conscience rests and the world  
Turns faster a murderer creeps closer, comes carrying  
A tight-strung bow with terrible arrows.  
And those sharp points strike home, are shot  
In his breast, under his helmet. He's helpless.  
And so the Devil's dark urgings wound him, for he can't  
Remember how he clung to the rotting wealth  
Of this world, how he clawed to keep it, how he earned  
No honor, no glory, in giving golden  
Rings, how he forgot the future glory  
God gave him at his birth, and forgetting did not care.  
And finally his body fails him, these bones  
And flesh quickened by God all  
And die—and some other soul inherits  
His place in Heaven, some open-handed  
Giver of old treasures, who takes no delight  
In mere gold. Guard against such wickedness,  
Beloved Beowulf, best of warriors,

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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, killing  
 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.

## 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—he had fought, before, against worse  
 Odds, had survived, been victorious, in harsher  
 Battles, beginning in Herot, Hrothgar's  
 Unlucky hall. He'd killed Grendel  
 And his mother, swept that murdering tribe  
 Away. And he'd fought in Higlac's war  
 With the Frisians, fought at his lord's side  
 Till a sword reached out and drank Higlac's  
 Blood, till a blade swung in the rush  
 Of battle killed the Geats' great king.  
 Then Beowulf escaped, broke through Frisian  
 Shields and swam to freedom, saving  
 Thirty sets of armor from the scavenging  
 Franks, river people who robbed  
 The dead as they floated by. Beowulf  
 Offered them only his sword, ended  
 So many jackal lives that the few  
 Who were able skulked silently home, glad  
 To leave him. So Beowulf swam sadly back  
 To Geatland, almost the only survivor  
 Of a foolish war. Higlac's widow  
 Brought him the crown, offered him the kingdom,  
 Not trusting Herdred, her son and Higlac's,  
 To beat off foreign invaders. But Beowulf  
 Refused to rule when his lord's own son  
 Was alive, and the leaderless Geats could choose  
 A rightful king. He gave Herdred  
 All his support, offering an open  
 Heart where Higlac's young son could see  
 Wisdom he still lacked himself: warmth  
 And good will were what Beowulf brought his new king.  
 But Swedish exiles came, seeking  
 Protection; they were rebels against Onela,  
 Healfdane's son-in-law and the best ring-giver  
 His people had ever known. And Onela  
 Came too, a mighty king, marched  
 On Geatland with a huge army; Herdred  
 Had given his word and now he gave  
 His life, shielding the Swedish strangers.  
 Onela wanted nothing more:

When Herdred had fallen that famous warrior  
Went back to Sweden, let Beowulf rule!<sup>2</sup>

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But Beowulf remembered how his king had been killed.  
As soon as he could he lent the last  
Of the Swedish rebels soldiers and gold,  
Helped him to a bitter battle across  
The wide sea, where victory, and revenge, and the Swedish  
Throne were won, and Onela was slain.

So Edgeth's son survived, no matter  
What dangers he met, what battles he fought,  
Brave and forever triumphant, till the day  
Fate sent him to the dragon and sent him death.  
A dozen warriors walked with their angry  
King, when he was brought to the beast; Beowulf  
Knew, by then, what had woken the monster,  
And enraged it. The cup had come to him, traveled  
From dragon to slave, to master, to king,  
And the slave was their guide, had begun the Geats'  
Affliction, and now, afraid of both beast  
And men, was forced to lead them to the monster's  
Hidden home. He showed them the huge  
Stones, set deep in the ground, with the sea  
Beating on the rocks close by. Beowulf  
Stared, listening to stories of the gold  
And riches heaped inside. Hidden,  
But wakeful, now, the dragon waited,  
Ready to greet him. Gold and hammered  
Armor have been buried in pleasanter places!

The battle-brave king rested on the shore,  
While his soldiers wished him well, urged him  
On. But Beowulf's heart was heavy:  
His soul sensed how close fate  
Had come, felt something, not fear but knowledge  
Of old age. His armor was strong, but his arm  
Hung like his heart. Body and soul  
Might part, here; his blood might be spilled,  
His spirit torn from his flesh. Then he spoke:  
"My early days were full of war,  
And I survived it all; I can remember everything.  
I was seven years old when Hrethel opened  
His home and his heart for me, when my king and lord

2. These are incidents of the intermittent strife between Danes and Swedes in the period before Beowulf was old enough to participate; the same is true of the passage (ll. 2472ff.) dealing with wars between Geats and Swedes.

Took me from my father and kept me, taught me  
Gave me gold and pleasure, glad that I sat  
At his knee. And he never loved me less  
Than any of his sons—Herbald, the oldest  
Of all, or Hathcyn, or Higlac, my lord.  
Herbald died a horrible death,  
Killed while hunting: Hathcyn, his brother,  
Stretched his horn-tipped bow, sent  
An arrow flying, but missed his mark  
And hit Herbald instead, found him  
With a bloody point and pierced him through.  
The crime was great, the guilt was plain,  
But nothing could be done, no vengeance, no death  
To repay that death, no punishment, nothing.  
"So with the graybeard whose son sins  
Against the king, and is hanged: he stands  
Watching his child swing on the gallows,  
Lamenting, helpless, while his flesh and blood  
Hangs for the raven to pluck. He can raise  
His voice in sorrow, but revenge is impossible.  
And every morning he remembers how his son  
Died, and despairs; no son to come  
Matters, no future heir, to a father  
Forced to live through such misery. The place  
Where his son once dwelled, before death compelled him  
To journey away, is a windy wasteland,  
Empty, cheerless; the childless father  
Shudders, seeing it. So riders and ridden  
Sleep in the ground; pleasure is gone,  
The harp is silent, and hope is forgotten.

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"And then, crying his sorrow, he crawls  
To his bed: the world, and his home, hurt him  
With their emptiness. And so it seemed to Hrethel,  
When Herbald was dead, and his heart swelled  
With grief. The murderer lived; he felt  
No love for him, now, but nothing could help,  
Word nor hand nor sharp-honed blade,  
War nor hate, battle or blood  
Or law. The pain could find no relief,  
He could only live with it, or leave grief and life  
Together. When he'd gone to his grave Hathcyn  
And Higlac, his sons, inherited everything.  
"And then there was war between Geats and Swedes,  
Bitter battles carried across

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The broad sea, when the mighty Hrethel slept  
 And Ongentho's sons thought Sweden could safely  
 Attack, saw no use to pretending friendship  
 But raided and burned, and near old Rennsburg  
 Slaughtered Geats with their thieving swords.  
 My people repaid them, death for death,  
 Battle for battle, though one of the brothers  
 Bought that revenge with his life—Hathcyn,  
 King of the Geats, killed by a Swedish  
 Sword. But when dawn came the slayer  
 Was slain, and Higlac's soldiers avenged  
 Everything with the edge of their blades. Efor  
 Caught the Swedish king, cracked  
 His helmet, split his skull, dropped him,  
 Pale and bleeding, to the ground, then put him  
 To death with a swift stroke, shouting  
 His joy.

"The gifts that Higlac gave me,  
 And the land, I earned with my sword, as fate  
 Allowed: he never needed Danes  
 Or Goths or Swedes, soldiers and allies  
 Bought with gold, bribed to his side.  
 My sword was better, and always his.  
 In every battle my place was in front;  
 Alone, and so it shall be forever,  
 As long as this sword lasts, serves me  
 In the future as it has served me before. So  
 I killed Dagref, the Frank, who brought death  
 To Higlac, and who looted his corpse: Higd's  
 Necklace, Welthow's treasure, never  
 Came to Dagref's king. The thief  
 Fell in battle, but not on my blade.  
 He was brave and strong, but I swept him in my arms,  
 Ground him against me till his bones broke,  
 Till his blood burst out.<sup>3</sup> And now I shall fight  
 For this treasure, fight with both hand and sword."  
 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

3. This occurred in Higlac's expedition against the Franks (ll. 1202-13).

Could be killed without it, crushed to death  
 Like 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 clear 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'

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That 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. Edgeth'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.

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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:

"Belovèd 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.

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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. Belovèd  
 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."

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.<sup>4</sup>

39

And then Wiglaf was left, a young warrior  
Sadly watching his beloved king,  
Seeing him stretched on the ground, left guarding  
A tom 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

4. The Old English text says, "[His] soul went to seek the judgment of the righteous," relevant in connection with the poem's Christian ethic.

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,<sup>6</sup>  
Storms of eager arrowheads dropping."

And Wexstan'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.

43

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,  
A weeping laid him high on the wood.  
Then the warriors began to kindle that greatest  
Of funeral fires; smoke rose

7. Shields made of linden wood.

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,  
Mourning their sorrow, lamenting their lord:  
A gnarled old woman, hair wound  
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 WANDERER

This anonymous poem of the eighth or ninth century A.D. offers us a vivid reflection not only of Old English but of Germanic life generally in its time and long before. The opening and the closing lines provide a framework of devout Christian faith for the soliloquy or dramatic monologue spoken by the "wanderer," a solitary