

Epic. In its standard sense, the term epic or heroic poem is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long narrative poem on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or (in the instance of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*) the human race.

There is a standard distinction between traditional and literary epics. The "traditional epics" were written versions of what had originally been oral

poems about a tribal or national hero that developed in a warlike age. (See *oral formulaic poetry*.) Among these traditional epics are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that the Greeks ascribed to Homer, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, and the twelfth-century French epic the *Chanson de Roland*. "Literary epics" were composed by individual poetic craftsmen in deliberate imitation of the traditional form. Of this kind is Virgil's Latin poem the *Aeneid*, which later served as the chief model for Milton's literary epic *Paradise Lost* (1667); *Paradise Lost* in turn became, in the Romantic Period, a model for John Keats' fragmentary epic *Hyperion*, as well as for William Blake's several epics, or "prophetic books" (*The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, *Jerusalem*), which translated into Blake's own mythic terms the biblical narrative which had served as Milton's subject matter.

The epic was ranked by the Greek theorist Aristotle as second only to tragedy, and by many Renaissance critics as the highest of all *genres*. The literary epic is certainly the most ambitious of poetic enterprises, making immense demands on a poet's knowledge, invention, and skill to sustain the scope, grandeur, and variety of a poem that tends to encompass the world of its day and a large portion of its learning. Despite numerous attempts in many languages over nearly three thousand years, we possess no more than a half-dozen epic poems of indubitable greatness. Literary epics are highly conventional poems which usually share the following features, derived by way of the *Aeneid* from the traditional epics of Homer:

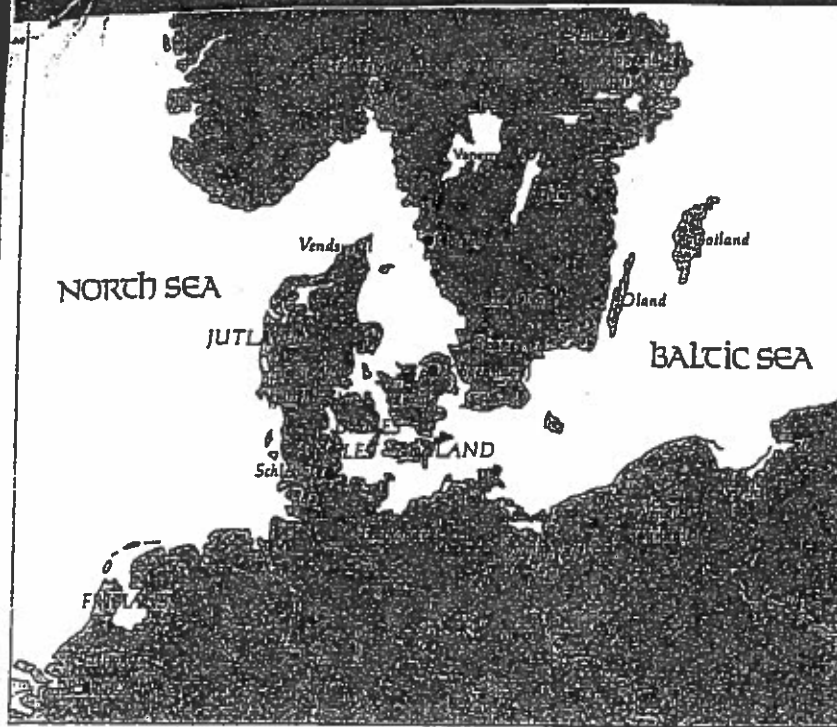
1) The hero is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance. In the *Iliad* he is the Greek warrior Achilles, who is the son of the sea-nymph Thetis; and Virgil's Aeneas is the son of the goddess Aphrodite. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are the progenitors of the entire human race, or if we regard Christ as the protagonist, He is both God and man. Blake's primal figure is "the Universal Man" Albion, who incorporates, before his fall, humanity and God and the cosmos as well.

2) The setting of the poem is ample in scale, and may be worldwide, or even larger. Odysseus wanders over the Mediterranean basin (the whole of the world known at the time), and in Book XI he descends into the underworld (as does Virgil's Aeneas). The scope of *Paradise Lost* is the entire universe, for it takes place in heaven, on earth, in hell, and in the cosmic space between. (See *Ptolemaic universe*.)

3) The action involves superhuman deeds in battle, such as Achilles' feats in the Trojan War, or a long, arduous, and dangerous journey intrepidly accomplished, such as the wanderings of Odysseus on his way back to his homeland, despite the opposition of some of the gods. *Paradise Lost* includes the revolt in heaven by the rebel angels against God, the journey of Satan through chaos to discover the newly created world, and his desperately audacious attempt to outwit God by corrupting mankind, in which his success is ultimately frustrated by the sacrificial action of Christ.

4) In these great actions the gods and other supernatural beings take an interest or an active part—the Olympian gods in Homer, and Jehovah, Christ, and the angels in *Paradise Lost*. These supernatural agents were in the *Neoclassic Age* called the machinery, in the sense that they were part of the literary contrivances of the epic.

5) An epic poem is a ceremonial performance, and is narrated in a ceremonial style which is deliberately distanced from ordinary speech and proportioned to the grandeur and formality of the heroic subject and epic architecture. Hence Milton's grand style—his diction and elaborate and stylized syntax, which are often modeled on Latin poetry, his sonorous lists of names and wide-ranging allusions, and his imitation of Homer's *epic similes* and *epithets*.



The geography of *Beowulf*.
Redrawn after F. Klaeber.
Beowulf

from **Beowulf** *Translated by Burton Raffel*

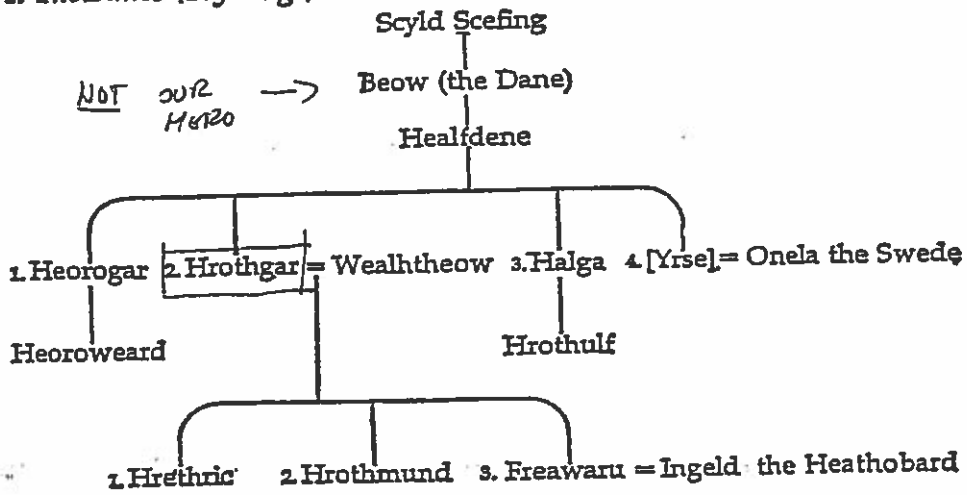
English literature begins with *Beowulf*. It is England's heroic epic, a proper beginning for a national literature, but it belongs to everyone because it is profoundly human. The poem shapes and interprets materials connected with the tribes from northern Europe, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, who invaded England after the Romans left in the fifth century. Their tribal history is in the poem. It is remote, even monstrous, and yet familiar: "keeping the bloody feud/Alive . . . and paying the living / For one crime only with another" (lines 68-72). It is a history of festering pride, loud talk, and drunken violence, of spies, bloody borders, and raids. But against this dark background the poem presents another kind of history. It is a history in which a stranger comes openly to help rather than covertly to kill and loot, in which eating and drinking and speaking and gift-giving are natural ceremonies uniting young and old, in which heroic strength is wise and generous. It is a history of ideal possibilities.

The only surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* dates from around 1000, but the work itself was probably composed sometime during the eighth century. The poem, which recounts the exploits of third- or fourth-century Geats and Danes (see map above), is doubtless based on earlier unwritten stories that had been passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. The Anglo-Saxons of Britain shared a common group of heroes with other Germanic peoples, and the hero *Beowulf* certainly has his origins in an earlier, pagan era. The author of the written version that has come down to us seems to have been a Christian. The language of this version is Old English. The translation you will read in Modern English is by the poet Burton Raffel.

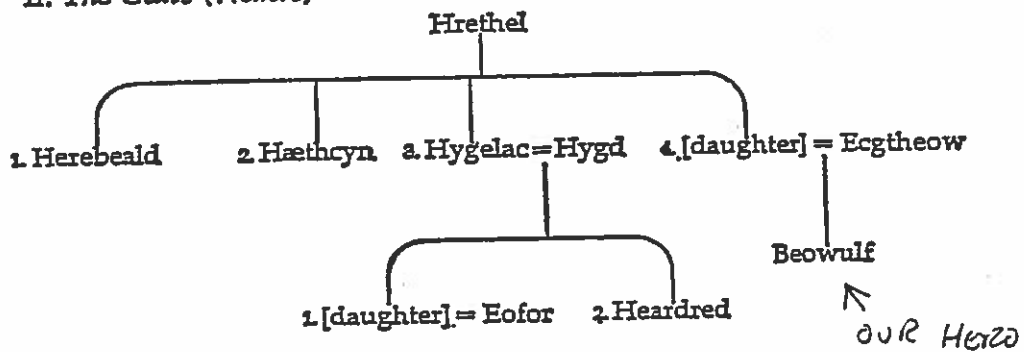
Beowulf, like all epic poems, is about a hero who is leader of his people. The action is extraordinary, the hero larger than life. The diction is stately and many of its scenes—the banquet, the battle, the boast, the voyage, and the funeral—are traditional. The general tone of the poem is somber, owing to a vision of evil in the world, a belief in the power of Fate (*Wyrd* is the Old English word for it) to rule human destiny, and resignation to the certainty of death.

ROYAL GENEALOGIES

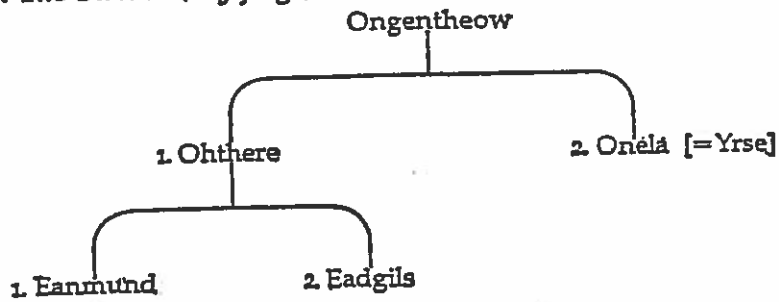
I. The Danes (Scylðings)



II. The Geats (Weders)



III. The Swedes (Scylfings)



Beowulf¹

Prologue

Hear me! We've heard of Danish heroes,
 Ancient kings and the glory they cut
 For themselves, swinging mighty swords!
 How Shild² 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.
 Shild'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.
 Shild's reign had been long; he'd ruled them well.
 There in the harbor was a ring-prowed fighting
 Ship,³ 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,

1. Translated by Burton Raffel. 2. A mythological Danish king, Beo's father, Healfdane's grandfather, and Hrothgar's great grandfather. 3. For a description of the objects found in the excavation of a ship-burial in 1939 in England, see L. S. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Ho Ship-Burial. A Provisional Guide* (1956) and later publications of the same author.

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.

Then Beo was king in that Danish castle,
 Shild'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 kinsmen
 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 anything
 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,
 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.⁴ 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

4. Genesis 4. In some post-biblical traditions, Cain was regarded as the ancestor of monsters and evil spirits of various kinds.

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 Hrothgar's
 Heart was bent. The best and most noble
 Of his council debated remedies, sat
 In secret sessions, talking of terror

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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.⁵ 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's⁶
 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 currents,
 The seas beating at the sand, and were borne
 In the lap of their shining ship, lined

5. As Christianity was regarded as the only true and valid religion, all other religions and gods were ultimately traceable to the enemy of God, the Devil. 6. King of the Geats, a people of southern Sweden. Higlac is both Beowulf's feudal lord and his uncle.

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."

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

"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.
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
Is a great one, our business with the glorious king
Of the Danes no secret; there's nothing dark
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 slaughtered
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-wood 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:

"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:

"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:

"There are Geats who have come sailing 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
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
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."

6

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

Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed
The waiting seafarers with soldier's words:

"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 helmets,
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
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 themselves,
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

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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.⁷ Fate will unwind as it must!"

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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

7. Or *Weland*: a mythological blacksmith, known for his gifted hammer and wonderful workmanship.

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

Unferth⁸ spoke, Ecglaf'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,⁹ 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

8. One of Hrothgar's courtiers, skillful with words. 9. A contemporary and young companion of Beowulf.

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 protected
His towns and his people. He'd promised to outswim 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:
"Ahl 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. Creatures
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
Tight 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.

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 themselves!
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. Ecglaf's
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
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
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.

BEOWULF

PROLOGUE, SECTIONS 1-7 (pgs 1052-1063)

1. What is the purpose of the prologue?
2. Find examples of the theological discrepancies that show themselves in the opening section of *Beowulf*.:
 - *Provide examples of Christian references,*
 - *Find examples of Norse traditions*
3. Using the resources available to you, comment on the role and status of women in Norse society.
4. Provide a synopsis of events of the story. A few (no more than 5) well-written sentences for each numbered section.
5. Who or what is Herot?
6. Who or what is Grendel? Cite his assumed ancestry when answering.
7. What instigates Grendel's rampage? How long does it last?
8. What sort of information does Beowulf provide to Hrothgar when they first meet? Why?
9. What are Beowulf's "one request" and the conditions he puts upon himself? What reasons do you suppose are behind this request?

BACK