

Beowulf, Parts IV-VII

Source: *Beowulf*, trans. Francis B. Gummere (The Harvard Classics, vol. 49, P.F. Collier & Son, 1910). *Internet Medieval Source Book*, 1998, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/beowulf.html>> (20th August 2009).

IV

To him the stateliest spake in answer;
the warriors' leader his word-hoard unlocked:--
"We are by kin of the clan of Geats,
and Hygelac's own hearth-fellows we.
To folk afar was my father known,
noble atheling, Ecgtheow named.
Full of winters, he fared away
aged from earth; he is honored still
through width of the world by wise men all.
To thy lord and liege in loyal mood
we hasten hither, to Healfdene's son,
people-protector: be pleased to advise us!
To that mighty-one come we on mickle errand,
to the lord of the Danes; nor deem I right
that aught be hidden. We hear -- thou knowest
if sooth it is -- the saying of men,
that amid the Scyldings a scathing monster,
dark ill-doer, in dusky nights
shows terrific his rage unmatched,
hatred and murder. To Hrothgar I
in greatness of soul would succor bring,
so the Wise-and-Brave¹ may worst his foes, --
if ever the end of ills is fated,
of cruel contest, if cure shall follow,
and the boiling care-waves cooler grow;
else ever afterward anguish-days
he shall suffer in sorrow while stands in place
high on its hill that house unpeered!"
Astride his steed, the strand-ward answered,
clansman unquailing: "The keen-souled thane
must be skilled to sever and sunder duly
words and works, if he well intends.
I gather, this band is graciously bent
to the Scyldings' master. March, then, bearing
weapons and weeds the way I show you.
I will bid my men your boat meanwhile
to guard for fear lest foemen come, --

¹ Hrothgar.

your new-tarred ship by shore of ocean
faithfully watching till once again
it waft o'er the waters those well-loved thanes,
-- winding-neck'd wood, -- to Weders' bounds,
heroes such as the hest of fate
shall succor and save from the shock of war."
They bent them to march, -- the boat lay still,
fettered by cable and fast at anchor,
broad-bosomed ship. -- Then shone the boars²
over the cheek-guard; chased with gold,
keen and gleaming, guard it kept
o'er the man of war, as marched along
heroes in haste, till the hall they saw,
broad of gable and bright with gold:
that was the fairest, 'mid folk of earth,
of houses 'neath heaven, where Hrothgar lived,
and the gleam of it lightened o'er lands afar.
The sturdy shieldsman showed that bright
burg-of-the-boldest; bade them go
straightway thither; his steed then turned,
hardy hero, and hailed them thus:--
"Tis time that I fare from you. Father Almighty
in grace and mercy guard you well,
safe in your seekings. Seaward I go,
'gainst hostile warriors hold my watch."

V

STONE-BRIGHT the street:³ it showed the way
to the crowd of clansmen. Corselets glistened
hand-forged, hard; on their harness bright
the steel ring sang, as they strode along
in mail of battle, and marched to the hall.
There, weary of ocean, the wall along
they set their bucklers, their broad shields, down,
and bowed them to bench: the breastplates clanged,
war-gear of men; their weapons stacked,
spears of the seafarers stood together,
gray-tipped ash: that iron band
was worthily weaponed! -- A warrior proud
asked of the heroes their home and kin.

² Beowulf's helmet has several boar-images on it; he is the "man of war"; and the boar-helmet guards him as typical representative of the marching party as a whole. The boar was sacred to Freyr, who was the favorite god of the Germanic tribes about the North Sea and the Baltic. Rude representations of warriors show the boar on the helmet quite as large as the helmet itself.

³ Either merely paved, the strata via of the Romans, or else thought of as a sort of mosaic, an extravagant touch like the reckless waste of gold on the walls and roofs of a hall.

"Whence, now, bear ye burnished shields,
 harness gray and helmets grim,
 spears in multitude? Messenger, I,
 Hrothgar's herald! Heroes so many
 ne'er met I as strangers of mood so strong.
 'Tis plain that for prowess, not plunged into exile,
 for high-hearted valor, Hrothgar ye seek!"
 Him the sturdy-in-war bespake with words,
 proud earl of the Weders answer made,
 hardy 'neath helmet:--"Hygelac's, we,
 fellows at board; I am Beowulf named.
 I am seeking to say to the son of Healfdene
 this mission of mine, to thy master-lord,
 the doughty prince, if he deign at all
 grace that we greet him, the good one, now."
 Wulfgar spake, the Wendles' chieftain,
 whose might of mind to many was known,
 his courage and counsel: "The king of Danes,
 the Scyldings' friend, I fain will tell,
 the Breaker-of-Rings, as the boon thou askest,
 the famed prince, of thy faring hither,
 and, swiftly after, such answer bring
 as the doughty monarch may deign to give."
 Hied then in haste to where Hrothgar sat
 white-haired and old, his earls about him,
 till the stout thane stood at the shoulder there
 of the Danish king: good courtier he!
 Wulfgar spake to his winsome lord:--
 "Hither have fared to thee far-come men
 o'er the paths of ocean, people of Geatland;
 and the stateliest there by his sturdy band
 is Beowulf named. This boon they seek,
 that they, my master, may with thee
 have speech at will: nor spurn their prayer
 to give them hearing, gracious Hrothgar!
 In weeds of the warrior worthy they,
 methinks, of our liking; their leader most surely,
 a hero that hither his henchmen has led."

VI

HROTHGAR answered, helmet of Scyldings:--
 "I knew him of yore in his youthful days;
 his aged father was Ecgtheow named,
 to whom, at home, gave Hrethel the Geat
 his only daughter. Their offspring bold

fares hither to seek the steadfast friend.
And seamen, too, have said me this, --
who carried my gifts to the Geatish court,
thither for thanks, -- he has thirty men's
heft of grasp in the gripe of his hand,
the bold-in-battle. Blessed God
out of his mercy this man hath sent
to Danes of the West, as I ween indeed,
against horror of Grendel. I hope to give
the good youth gold for his gallant thought.
Be thou in haste, and bid them hither,
clan of kinsmen, to come before me;
and add this word, -- they are welcome guests
to folk of the Danes."

[To the door of the hall
Wulfgar went] and the word declared:--
"To you this message my master sends,
East-Danes' king, that your kin he knows,
hardy heroes, and hails you all
welcome hither o'er waves of the sea!
Ye may wend your way in war-attire,
and under helmets Hrothgar greet;
but let here the battle-shields bide your parley,
and wooden war-shafts wait its end."

Uprose the mighty one, ringed with his men,
brave band of thanes: some bode without,
battle-gear guarding, as bade the chief.
Then hied that troop where the herald led them,
under Heorot's roof: [the hero strode,]
hardy 'neath helm, till the hearth he neared.
Beowulf spake, -- his breastplate gleamed,
war-net woven by wit of the smith:--
"Thou Hrothgar, hail! Hygelac's I,
kinsman and follower. Fame a plenty
have I gained in youth! These Grendel-deeds
I heard in my home-land heralded clear.
Seafarers say how stands this hall,
of buildings best, for your band of thanes
empty and idle, when evening sun
in the harbor of heaven is hidden away.
So my vassals advised me well, --
brave and wise, the best of men, --
O sovran Hrothgar, to seek thee here,
for my nerve and my might they knew full well.
Themselves had seen me from slaughter come
blood-flecked from foes, where five I bound,

and that wild brood worsted. I' the waves I slew
 nicors⁴ by night, in need and peril
 avenging the Weders,⁵ whose woe they sought, --
 crushing the grim ones. Grendel now,
 monster cruel, be mine to quell
 in single battle! So, from thee,
 thou sovran of the Shining-Danes,
 Scyldings'-bulwark, a boon I seek, --
 and, Friend-of-the-folk, refuse it not,
 O Warriors'-shield, now I've wandered far, --
 that I alone with my liegemen here,
 this hardy band, may Heorot purge!
 More I hear, that the monster dire,
 in his wanton mood, of weapons recks not;
 hence shall I scorn -- so Hygelac stay,
 king of my kindred, kind to me! --
 brand or buckler to bear in the fight,
 gold-colored targe: but with gripe alone
 must I front the fiend and fight for life,
 foe against foe. Then faith be his
 in the doom of the Lord whom death shall take.
 Fain, I ween, if the fight he win,
 in this hall of gold my Geatish band
 will he fearless eat, -- as oft before, --
 my noblest thanes. Nor need'st thou then
 to hide my head;⁶ for his shall I be,
 dyed in gore, if death must take me;
 and my blood-covered body he'll bear as prey,
 ruthless devour it, the roamer-lonely,
 with my life-blood redden his lair in the fen:
 no further for me need'st food prepare!
 To Hygelac send, if Hild⁷ should take me,
 best of war-weeds, warding my breast,
 armor excellent, heirloom of Hrethel
 and work of Wayland.⁸ Fares Wyrð⁹ as she must."

VII

HROTHGAR spake, the Scyldings'-helmet:--
 "For fight defensive, Friend my Beowulf,

⁴ The nicor, says Bugge, is a hippopotamus; a walrus, says ten Brink. But that water-goblin who covers the space from Old Nick of jest to the Neckan and Nix of poetry and tale, is all one needs, and Nicor is a good name for him.

⁵ His own people, the Geats.

⁶ That is, cover it as with a face-cloth. "There will be no need of funeral rites."

⁷ Personification of Battle.

⁸ The Germanic Vulcan.

⁹ This mighty power, whom the Christian poet can still revere, has here the general force of "Destiny."

to succor and save, thou hast sought us here.
Thy father's combat¹⁰ a feud enkindled
when Heatholaf with hand he slew
among the Wylfings; his Weder kin
for horror of fighting feared to hold him.
Fleeing, he sought our South-Dane folk,
over surge of ocean the Honor-Scyldings,
when first I was ruling the folk of Danes,
wielded, youthful, this widespread realm,
this hoard-hold of heroes. Heorogar was dead,
my elder brother, had breathed his last,
Healfdene's bairn: he was better than I!
Straightway the feud with fee¹¹ I settled,
to the Wylfings sent, o'er watery ridges,
treasures olden: oaths he¹² swore me.

Sore is my soul to say to any
of the race of man what ruth for me
in Heorot Grendel with hate hath wrought,
what sudden harrings. Hall-folk fail me,
my warriors wane; for Wyrð hath swept them
into Grendel's grasp. But God is able
this deadly foe from his deeds to turn!
Boasted full oft, as my beer they drank,
earls o'er the ale-cup, armed men,
that they would bide in the beer-hall here,
Grendel's attack with terror of blades.
Then was this mead-house at morning tide
dyed with gore, when the daylight broke,
all the boards of the benches blood-besprinkled,
gory the hall: I had heroes the less,
doughty dear-ones that death had reft.
-- But sit to the banquet, unbind thy words,
hardy hero, as heart shall prompt thee."

Gathered together, the Geatish men
in the banquet-hall on bench assigned,
sturdy-spirited, sat them down,
hardy-hearted. A henchman attended,
carried the carven cup in hand,
served the clear mead. Oft minstrels sang
blithe in Heorot. Heroes revelled,
no dearth of warriors, Weder and Dane.

¹⁰ There is no irrelevance here. Hrothgar sees in Beowulf's mission a heritage of duty, a return of the good offices which the Danish king rendered to Beowulf's father in time of dire need.

¹¹ Money, for wergild, or man-price.

¹² Ecgtheow, Beowulf's sire.