Beowulf sails to Denmark (194–224)

E. Talbot Donaldson
(pages 6–7)

A thane of Hygelac, a good man among the Geats, heard in his homeland of Grendel’s deeds: of mankind he was the strongest of might in the time of this life, noble and great. He bade that a good ship be made ready for him, said he would seek the war-king over the swan’s road, the famous prince, since he had need of men. Very little did wise men blame him for that adventure, though he was dear to them; they urged the brave one on, examined the omens. From the folk of the Geats the good man had chosen warriors of the bravest that he could find; one of fifteen he led the way, the warrior sought the wooden ship, the sea-skilled one the land’s edge. The time had come: the ship was on the waves, the boat under the cliff. The warriors eagerly climbed on the prow — the sea currents eddied, sea against sand: men bore bright weapons into the ship’s bosom, splendid armor. Men pushed the well-braced ship from shore, warriors on a well-wished voyage. Then o’er the sea waves, blown by the wind, the foam-necked traveled, most like a bird, until at good time on the second day the curved prow had come to where the seafarers could see land, the sea-cliffs shine, towering hills, great headlands. Then was the sea crossed, the journey at end.

Seamus Heaney
(194–224)

When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac’s thane was on home ground, over in Geatland.
There was no one else like him alive. In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth, high-born and powerful. He order a boat that would ply the waves. He announced his plan: to sail the swan’s road and search out that king, the famous prince who needed defenders. Nobody tried to keep him from going, no elder denied him, dear as he was to them. Instead, they inspected omens and spurred his ambition to go, whilst he moved about like the leader he was, enlisting men, the best he could find; with fourteen others the warrior boarded the boat as captain, a canny pilot along coast and currents. Time went by, the boat was on water, in close under the cliffs.
Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank, sand churned in surf, warriors loaded a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear in the vessel’s hold, then heaved out, away with a will in their wood-weathered ship. Over the waves, with the wind behind her and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird until her curved prow had covered the distance and on the following day, at the due hour, those seafarers sighted land, sunlit cliffs, sheer crags and looming headlands, the landfall they sought. It was the end of their voyage
Beowulf sails to Denmark (194–224)

In his own homeland, the thane of Hygelac, the valiant Geat, heard the tales told of Grendel. This Geat was among men the greatest in strength, most noble and mighty, for as long as his life-days were destined to last. He directed a wave-traveler to be well prepared, and said he would seek the Danish war-king, that renowned ruler, over the swan-road, since the Dane was in need. The wise men of the Geats could find no fault with that journey, though their hero to them was dear: they inspected the omens and urged on the brave one. This excellent chieftain had chosen as comrades the best and the bravest from among the Geats that he might find. With these fourteen he sought the sea-planks, a skillful sailor, leading the way down to the end of the land. The time was ready, with the ship on the waves, the boat beneath cliffs. Well-equipped young warriors stepped up on the prow. Sea-currents wound round, sea against sand. Then the warriors bore into the ship's bosom the shining war-gear, their splendid arms. The men shoved off the well-bound vessel, for the much-sought voyage. The foamy-necked boat, most like a bird, soared over the waves, made eager by wind—until in due time, the following day, the tightly-wound prow had traveled so far that the seafarers now sighted the land: shining shore-cliffs, the towering banks, the broad headlands. The boat crossed the waters, to the end of the sea.
Beowulf sails to Denmark (194–224)

Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy


(168–192)

A thane of Hygelac heard in his homeland of Grendel's deeds. Great among Geats, this man was more mighty than any then living.

He summoned and stocked a swift wave-courser, and swore to sail over the swan-road as one warrior should for another in need.

His elders could find no fault with his offer, and awed by the omens, they urged him on.

He gathered the bravest of Geatish guardsmen.

One of fifteen, the skilled sailor strode to his ship at the ocean's edge.

He was keen to embark: his keel was beached under the cliff where sea-currents curled surf against sand; his soldiers were ready.

Over the bow they boarded in armor, bearing their burnished weapons below, their gilded war-gear to the boat's bosom.

Other men shoved the ship from the shore, and off went the band, their wood-braced vessel bound for the venture with wind on the waves and foam under bow, like a fulmar in flight.

On the second day their upswept prow slid into sight of steep hillsides, bright cliffs, wide capes at the close of their crossing, the goal of their voyage gained in good time.

J. R. R. Tolkien


(pages 18–19)

Of this, of Grendel's deeds, the knight of Hygelac, esteemed among the Geats, heard in his home afar; in that day of man's life here in might the strongest of mankind was he, noble and of stature beyond man's measure. He bade men prepare for him a good craft upon the waves, saying that over the waters where the swan rides he would seek the warrior-king, that prince of renown, since he had need of men. With that voyage little fault did wise men find, dear though he were to them; they encouraged his valiant heart, and they observed the omens.

Champions of the people of the Geats that good man had chosen from the boldest that he could find, and fifteen in all they sought now their timbered ship, while that warrior, skilled in the ways of the sea, led them to the margins of the land. Time passed on. Afloat upon the waves was the boat beneath the cliffs. Eagerly the warriors mounted the prow, and the streaming seas swirled upon the sand. Men-at-arms bore to the bottom of the ship their bright harness, their cunning gear of war; they then, men on a glad voyage, thrust her forth with well-jointed timbers. Over the waves of the deep she went sped by the wind, sailing with foam at throat most like unto a bird, until in due hour upon the second day her curving beak had made such way that those sailors saw the land, the cliffs beside the ocean gleaming, and sheer headlands and capes thrust far to sea. Then for that sailing ship the journey was at an end.
Beowulf fights Grendel (790–818)

E. Talbot Donaldson
(page 15)

Not for anything would the protector of warriors let the murderous guest go off alive: he did not consider his life-days of use to any of the nations. There more than enough of Beowulf’s earls drew swords, old heirlooms, wished to protect the life of their dear lord, famous prince, however they might. They did not know when they entered the fight, hardy-spirited warriors, and when they thought to hew him on every side, to seek his soul, that not any of the best of irons on earth, no war-sword, would touch the evil-doer: for with a charm he had made victory-weapons useless, every sword-edge. His departure to death from the time of this life was to be wretched; and the alien spirit was to travel far off into the power of fiends. Then he who before had brought trouble of heart to mankind, committed many crimes — he was at war with God — found that his body would do him no good, for the great-hearted kinsman of Hygelac had him by the hand. Each was hateful to the other alive. The awful monster had lived to feel pain in his body, a huge wound in his shoulder was exposed, his sinews sprang apart, his bone-locks broke.

Seamus Heaney
(790–818)

But the earl-troop’s leader was not inclined to allow his caller to depart alive: he did not consider that life of much account to anyone anywhere. Time and again, Beowulf warrior’s worked to defend their lord’s life, laying about them as best they could with their ancestral blades. Stalwart in action, they kept striking out on every side, seeking to cut straight to the soul. When they joined the struggle there was something they could not have known at the time, that no blade on earth, no blacksmith’s art could ever damage their demon opponent. He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge of every weapon. But his going away out of this world and the days of his life would be agony to him, and his alien spirit would travel far into fiends’ keeping.

Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men with pain and affliction in former times and had given offence to God found that his bodily powers failed him. Hygelac’s kinsman kept him helplessly locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived, he was hateful to the other. The monster’s whole body was in pain, a tremendous wound appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split and the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted the glory of winning.
Beowulf fights Grendel (790–818)

John McNamara
(791–819)

This protector of warriors did not at all wish to let loose the death- bringer while still alive, nor did he count Grendel's life-days of value to anyone at all. There many a man of Beowulf's band eagerly brandished their ancient sword-blades, wishing to protect the life of their lord, the widely famed chief, any way they could. While engaged in the fray, these brave-minded warriors sought to strike at the foe from every side, but could not figure how to hew Grendel down, how to seek out his soul: nor might any war-sword, not the strongest of irons in all of the earth, even touch to do harm to that evil destroyer— for Grendel wove spells round all human weapons, on all swords of victory. Yet severed from life, he was fated to feel misery at the end of his days, his time on the earth, and the alien terror must now embark on a far journey into the power of fiends.

Then that one found out, who so often before had wrought wicked evils, terrified the spirits of the race of men—he waged war against God—that this time his fearsome strength would fail him, for his high-spirited foe, the kinsman of Hygelac, held him fast by the hand. Each hated the other, while they both lived. The dreaded demon suffered terrible torture, as his shoulder tore open, a great wound gaping as sinews sprang apart, and the bone-locks burst. To Beowulf then was glory given in battle.

Edward L. Risden
(788–809)

He held him fast, he who of them was the strongest in might in those days of this life.
Nor would the protector of men by any means leave alive the murderous-visitor, nor did any of the men consider useful his life-days. There most often Beowulf's men drew old swords; they wished to defend their lord's life, the fame of the leader as best they could. They did not know, when they drew into the fray, stern-minded sword-soldiers, and on every side thought to hew, to seek the life of the evil-enemy, that throughout the earth none of the best of swords, none of the battle-blades would touch him, but victory-weapons he had made useless by magic, any sword. It had to be that his death in those days of this life be miserable and the alien-spirit in the power of fiends to travel far.

Then he discovered, he who before many crimes committed against the race of men to spirits' sorrow—he fought against god—that his body would not serve, but the mighty one, kinsman of Hygelac, had him in his hands; each to the other was, living, loathsome. The horrible monster suffered a body-wound: in his shoulder was manifest a sin-payment; sinews sprung out, joints burst. To Beowulf was given glory in battle.
Beowulf fights Grendel (790–818)

Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy
(lines 705–727)

That shielder of men meant by no means to let the death-dealer leave with his life, a life worthless to anyone elsewhere.

Then the young soldiers swung their old swords again and again to save their guardian, their kingly comrade, however they could.

Engaging with Grendel and hoping to hew him from every side, they scarcely suspected that blades wielded by worthy warriors never would cut to the criminal’s quick.

The spell was spun so strongly about him that the finest iron of any on earth, the sharpest sword-edge left him unscathed.

Still he was soon to be stripped of his life and sent on a sore sojourn to Hell.

The strength of his sinews would serve him no more; no more would he menace mankind with his crimes, his grudge against God, for the high-hearted kinsman of King Hygelac had hold of his hand.

Each found the other loathsome in life; but the murderous man-bane got a great wound as tendons were torn, shoulder shorn open, and bone-locks broken.

J. R. R. Tolkien
(pages 35–36)

In no wise would that captain of men permit that deadly guest to go forth alive, nor did he account the days of his life of use to any man. There many a knight of Beowulf drew swift his ancient blade, wishing to defend the life of his lord and master renowned prince, if so he might. They know it not, young warriors brave-hearted, as they fought their fight, and on each side sought to hew the foe and pierce his vitals: that doer of evil none upon the earth of swords of war would touch, no the most excellent things of iron; not so, for he had laid a spell upon all victorious arms and upon every blade. On that day of this life on earth unhappy was fated to be the sending forth of his soul, and far was that alien spirit to fare into the realm of fiends. Now did he perceive who aforetime had wrought the race of men many a grief of heart and wrong — he had a feud with God — that his body’s might would not avail him, but the valiant kinsman of Hygelac had him by the arm — hateful to each was the other’s life. A grievous hurt of body that fierce slayer and dire now endured; a might wound was seen upon his shoulder; the sinews sprang apart, he joint of his bones burst.
Beowulf fights Grendel’s mother (1537–69)

E. Talbot Donaldson

(1537–69)

Then he seized by the hair Grendel’s mother—the man of the War-Geats did not shrink from the fight. Battle-hardened, now swollen with rage, he pulled his deadly foe so that she fell to the floor. Quickly in her turn she repaid him his gift with her grim claws and clutched at him: then weary-hearted, the strongest of warriors, of foot-soldiers, stumbled so that he fell. Then she sat upon the hall-guest and drew her knife, broad and bright-edged. She would avenge her child, her only son. The woven breast-armor lay on his shoulder: that protected his life, withstood entry of point or edge. Then the son of Ecgtheow would have fared amiss under the wide ground, the champion of the Geats, if the battle-shirt had not brought help, the hard war-net — and holy God brought about victory in war; the wise Lord, Ruler of the Heavens, decided it with right, easily, when Beowulf had stood up again.

Then he saw among the armor a victory-blessed blade, an old sword made by the giants, strong of its edges, glory of warriors: it was the best of weapons, except that it was larger than any other man might bear to war-sport, good and adorned, the work of giants. He seized the linked hilt, he who fought for the Scyldings, savage and slaughter-bent, drew the patterned blade; desperate of life, he struck angrily so that it bit her hard on the neck, broke the bone-rings. The blade went through all the doomed body. She fell to the floor, the sword was sweating, the man rejoiced in his work.

Seamus Heaney

(1537–69)

Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to this fight with Grendel’s mother, gripped her shoulder and laid about him in a battle frenzy: he pitched his killer opponent to the floor but she rose quickly and retaliated, grappled him tightly in her grim embrace. The sure-footed fighter felt daunted, the strongest of warriors stumbled and fell. So she pounced upon him and pulled out a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail on Beowulf’s shoulder shielded his life, turned the edge and tip of the blade. The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth had the strong links and locks of his war-gear not helped to save him: holy God decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord, the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance once Beowulf got back up on his feet.

Then he saw a blade that boded well, a sword in her armory, and ancient heirloom from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon, one that any warrior would envy, but so huge and heavy of itself only Beowulf could wield it in battle. So the Shieldings’ hero, hard-pressed and enraged, took a firm hold of the hilt and swung the blade in an arc, a resolute blow that bit deep into her neck-bone and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed house of her flesh; she fell to the floor.

The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated.
Beowulf fights Grendel’s mother (1537–69)

John McNamara
(1537–69)

Not flinching from the feud, the prince of the War-Geats grasped hold of the shoulder of the mother of Grendel, and bulging with rage, fighting hard in the battle, he swung her around till she fell on the floor.

Right away after that she repaid his tactic and crushed him against her in brutal embrace. She wrestled to throw her spirit-weary foe, the strongest of warriors, till he slipped and fell down. She sat on her hall-guest and drew out her dagger, broad and bright-edged, hoping to avenge her son, her only offspring. Across his shoulders lay the woven mail-shirt watching over his life, guarding against both knife-point and blade.

Then the son of Ecgtheow, stout hero of the Geats, would have journeyed to death, under wide earth, except that the battle-shirt, the mail made for war, provided protection—and the holy God decreed which was the victor. For the wise lord, the Ruler of Heaven, decided according to right, so the hero of the Geats easily got to his feet.

Then he saw among war-gear a victory-blessed sword, an old blade made by giants with edges strong and sharp, the glory of warriors. That was the greatest of weapons, though its size was so large that no other man might bear it out to the play of battle—it was huge and heroic, the work of giants. The champion for the Danes, in a dreadful fury, despairing of life, seized the hilt of the sword, swung its great blade and angrily struck so that it dug deep in the neck of the monster, breaking the bone-rings, slicing all the way through her body doomed by fate, and she fell dead on the floor. The sword sweat blood, while the warrior rejoiced.

Edward L. Risden
(1537–69)

The man of the war-Geats then seized by the shoulder Grendel’s mother—he did not mourn for that feud. The strong one flung into the fight the mortal foe when he was enraged, so that she fell on the hall-floor. She quickly after paid him requital with fierce grips and seized him against her. The strongest of men then stumbled disheartened so that he fell, foot-warrior. She then sat on her hall-guest and drew her knife, broad and bright-edged; she wished to avenge her son, her only progeny. On his shoulder lay the woven breast-net: that saved his life—it withstood entry against point and edge. Then Ecgtheow’s son had perished under the earth, champion of the Geats, but the battle-byrnie provided help, hard war-net, and holy god brought him battle-victory—the wise lord, ruler of the heavens, decided it rightly, quite easily, once he again stood up.

He saw then among the armor a victory-blessed blade, an old monstrous sword with firm edges, honor-memorial of men; that was the best of weapons, though it was larger than any other man could carry into battle-play, good and noble, the work of giants. He grasped the ring-hilt, adventurer of the Scyldings, fierce and battle-grim, drew the ring-decorated one, despairing of life, and angrily struck so that it grievously gripped against her neck. Bone-rings broke; the blade passed entirely through the death-fated flesh-home. She crashed on the floor. The sword was bloody; the soldier rejoiced in the deed.
Grabbing the tresses of Grendel's mother, the Geats' battle-chief, bursting with wrath, wrestled her down: no deed to regret but a favor repaid as fast as she fell. With her grim grasp she grappled him still. Weary, the warrior stumbled and slipped; the strongest foot-soldier fell to the foe. Astraddle the hall-guest, she drew her dagger, broad and bright-bladed, bent on avenging her only offspring. His mail-shirt shielded shoulder and breast. Barring the entry of edge or point, the woven war-shirt saved him from harm. The Scyldings' shielder took hold of the hilt and swung up the sword, though despairing of life. He struck savagely, hit her hard neck and broke the bone-rings, cleaving clean through her fated flesh. She fell to the floor; the sword sweated; the soldier rejoiced.
Fire advanced in waves; shield burned to the boss; mail-shirt might give no help to the young spear-warrior; but the young man went quickly under his kinsman’s shield when his own was consumed with flames. Then the war-king was again mindful of fame, struck with his war-sword with great strength so that it stuck in the head-bone, driven with force: Nægling broke, the sword of Beowulf failed in the fight, old and steel-gray. It was not ordained for him that iron edges might help in the combat. Too strong was the hand that I have heard strained every sword with its stroke, when he bore wound-hardened weapon to battle: he was none the better for it.

Then for the third time the folk-harmer, the fearful fire-dragon, was mindful of feuds, set upon the brave one when the chance came, hot and battle-grim seized all his neck with his sharp fangs: he was smeared with life-blood, gore welled out in waves.

Then, I have heard, at the need of the folk-king the earl at his side made his courage known, his might and his keenness — as was natural to him. He took no heed for that head, but the hand of the brave man was burned as he helped his kinsman, as the man in armor struck the hateful foe a little lower down, so that the sword sank in, shining and engraved, and then the fire began to subside. The king himself then still controlled his senses, drew the battle-knife, biting and war-sharp, that he wore on his mail-shirt: the protector of the Weather-Geats cut the worm through the middle. They felled the foe, courage drove his life out, and they had destroyed him together, the two noble kinsmen.
Beowulf and Wiglaf kill the dragon (2672–2708)

John McNamara

Waves of fire swept Wiglaf's shield, burned it up to its boss, nor might the mail-coat provide needed protection to the young warrior, but the youth fought bravely, nonetheless, under his kinsman's shield, when his own was consumed, in the storm of fire. Then once more the famed war-king was mindful of glory, and with mighty strength, pressed hard by the evil foe, swung his battle-sword, so it stuck in the dragon's head. Yet Naegling shattered, Beowulf's great blade, the ancient gray iron, failed in the fighting. It was not given to him that he might get help in that hard-fought battle from the edge of the sword—for his hand was too strong, so he over-taxed every sword, as I have heard told, with the power of his swing, when he bore into battle a wondrously hard weapon. He got nothing from that!

Then for the third time, the threatening monster, the frightful fire-dragon, mindful of their feud, rushed on the famed ruler when he saw an opening, seething and battle-grim, surrounding his neck with fierce sharp fangs, digging into his flesh to drain life from his body, as the blood streamed out. When the prince of the people had greatest need, I have heard that his comrade displayed great courage, great skill and boldness, as befit his nature. Brave Wiglaf did not strike at the head of the beast, but his hand was burned in helping his kinsman, striking the creature somewhat lower down, so the warrior's sword, gleaming with gold, plunged into the dragon, and the deadly flames began to die down. Then once more the king gained control of himself, and gripped his short sword, sharpened for battle, that he wore at his waist, and the people's protector sliced through the serpent. They had felled their foe, bravely taking its life, and the two had together brought down the dragon as noble kinsmen.

Edward L. Risden

The fire flowed in waves, burnt up the shield to the rim; the byrnie could not provide help for the young spear-warrior, but the young kinsman went with courage under his kinsman's shield when his own was consumed in flames. Then yet the war-king remembered glory, with might-strength struck with battle-blade so that it stood in the head, compelled by ferocity: Naegling burst, failed in battle, Beowulf's sword, old and gray. To him it was not given that edges of iron could help in battle: the hand was too strong, that which with a stroke, I have heard, overtaxed each sword when he to battle bore weapons hard with wounds, nor was he any the better for them.

Then the enemy of the people was for a third time mindful of the feud, fearsome fire-dragon. He rushed the renowned one when the chance was granted him, hot and battle-grim, completely clasped the neck, the bones of the fierce one. He was bloodied with soul's-blood: the fluid welled in waves. Then in his need I have heard of the king that the man at his side showed courage, skill and boldness, as was natural to him. Nor did he heed that head, but the hand of the brave man was burned when he helped his kinsman because he struck the evil-guest somewhat farther down, man in armor, so that the sword dived in, shining and gold-coated, such that the fire began to abate afterwards. Then the king himself yet ruled his senses, drew his slaughter-knife, bitter and battle-sharp, that he bore in his byrnie. The protector of the Weathers cut the worm through the middle. The enemy fell—courage avenged life—and they both had killed him, the noble kinsmen.
Beowulf and Wiglaf kill the dragon (2672–2708)

Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy

(2358–91)

His dreadful fire-wind drove in a wave, charring young Wiglaf's shield to the boss, nor might a mail-shirt bar that breath from burning the brave spear-bearer's breast. Wiglaf took cover close to his kinsman, shielded by iron when linden was cinder. Then the war-king, recalling past conquests, struck with full strength straight at the head.

J. R. R. Tolkien

(page 91–92)

His buckler in the billowing flames was burned even to the boss, his corslet could afford no help to that young wielder of the spear; but beneath his kinsman's shield stoutly fared that warrior young, when his own crumbled in the glowing fires. Now once more the king of battles recalled his renownèd deeds, with mighty strength he smote with his warlike sword, and fast in the head it stood driven by fierce hate. Nægling burst asunder! Beowulf's sword, old, grey-bladed, had failed him in the fight. It was not vouchsafed to him that blades of iron might be his aid in war: too strong that hand, that as I have heard with its swing overtaxed each sword, when he to the battle bore weapons marvelously hard; no whit did it profit him.

Then for the third time the destroyer of the folk, the fell fire-dragon, bethought him of deeds of enmity, and rushed upon the valiant man, now that a clear field was given him, burning and fierce in battle. His neck with his sharp bony teeth he seized now all about, and Beowulf was reddened with his own life-blood; it welled forth in gushing streams. I have heard tell that in that hour of his king's need the good man unbowed showed forth his valour, his might and courage, as was the manner of his kin. He heeded not those jaws; nay, his hand was burned, as valiant he aided now his kinsman, and smote that alien creature fierce a little lower down — a knight in arms was he! — so that bright and golden-hilted his sword plunged in, and the fire began thereafter to abate. Once more the king himself mastered his senses; drew forth a deadly dagger keen and whetted for the fray, that he wore against his mail; Lord of the windloving folk he ripped up the serpent in the midst. They had slain their foe — valour had vanquished life; yea, together hey had destroyed him, those two princes of one house.

Beowulf Translations 12 of 12