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BEOWULF

a new verse translation by R. M. Liuzza

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broadview literary texts

PROLOGUE

Listen!

We have heard of the glory in bygone days
of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes,¹
how those noble lords did lofty deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing² seized the mead-benches
from many tribes, troops of enemies,
struck fear into earls. Though he first was
found a waif, he awaited solace for that —
he grew under heaven and prospered in honor
until every one of the encircling nations
over the whale's-riding³ had to obey him,
grant him tribute. That was a good king!
A boy was later born to him,
young in the courts, whom God sent
as a solace to the people — He saw their need,
the dire distress they had endured, lordless,
for such a long time. The Lord of Life,
Wielder of Glory, gave him worldly honor;
Beowulf,⁴ the son of Scyld, was renowned,
his fame spread wide in Scandinavian lands.
Thus should a young man bring about good
with pious gifts from his father's possessions,
so that later in life loyal comrades
will stand beside him when war comes,
the people will support him — with praiseworthy deeds
a man will prosper among any people.

Scyld passed away at his appointed hour,
the mighty lord went into the Lord's keeping;

- 1 The Danes are described by many different epithets in the poem; see the *Glossary of Proper Names* for further instances.
- 2 The name means "Shield, Son of Sheaf (i.e., of grain)." The mysterious origins of Scyld, who seems to arrive providentially from nowhere and is returned to the sea after his death, have occasioned much critical speculation.
- 3 A condensed descriptive image of the sea — the riding-place of whales. Elsewhere the sea is the "ganner's bath" and the "swan's riding."
- 4 Not the monster-slaying hero of the title, but an early Danish king. Many scholars argue that the original name was *Beow*.

3) The Scyldings

they bore him down to the brimming sea,
 his dear comrades, as he himself had commanded
 30 while the friend of the Scyldings¹ wielded speech —
 that dear land-ruler had long held power.
 In the harbor stood a ring-prowed ship,
 icy, outbound, a nobleman's vessel;
 there they laid down their dear lord,
 35 dispenser of rings, in the bosom of the ship,
 glorious, by the mast. There were many treasures
 loaded there, adornments from distant lands;
 1st person - (I have never heard) of a more lovely ship
 bedecked with battle-weapons and war-gear,
 40 blades and byrnies;² in its bosom lay
 many treasures, which were to travel
 far with him into the keeping of the flood.
 With no fewer gifts did they furnish him there,
 the wealth of nations, than those did who
 45 at his beginning first sent him forth
 alone over the waves while still a small child.³
 Then they set a golden ensign
 high over his head, and let the waves have him,
 gave him to the Deep with grieving spirits,
 50 mournful in mind. Men do not know
 how to say truly — not trusted counselors,
 nor heroes under the heavens — who received that cargo.

I

Then Beowulf Scylding, beloved king,
 was famous in the strongholds of his folk
 55 for a long while — his father having passed away,
 a lord from earth — until after him arose
 the great Healfdene, who held the glorious Scyldings

1 The Scyldings are the Danes, "sons of Scyld."
 2 A "byrnie" is a coat of ring-mail.
 3 Scyld was found destitute — this statement is an example of *litotes*, or ironic understatement, not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

all his life, ancient and fierce in battle.
 Four children, all counted up,
 were born to that bold leader of hosts:
 Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga the Good,
 I heard that ... was Onela's queen,¹
 dear bedfellow of the Battle-Scylding. 60

Then success in war was given to Hrothgar,
 honor in battle, so that his beloved kinsmen
 65 eagerly served him, until the young soldiers grew
 into a mighty troop of men. It came to his mind
 that he should order a hall-building,
 have men make a great mead-house
 which the sons of men should remember forever,²
 and there inside he would share everything
 with young and old that God had given him, *give ...*
 (except for the common land and the lives of men.)
 Then the work, as I've heard, was widely proclaimed
 to many nations throughout this middle-earth, 75
 to come adorn the folk-stead. It came to pass
 swiftly among men, and it was soon ready,
 the greatest of halls; he gave it the name "Heorot",³
 he who ruled widely with his words.
 He remembered his boast; he gave out rings, *boast.* 80
 treasure at table. The hall towered
 high and horn-gabled — it awaited hostile fires,
 the surges of war; the time was not yet near
 that the sword-hate of sworn in-laws
 should arise after ruthless violence.⁴ *foreshadowing* 85

A bold demon who waited in darkness

1 A name is missing from the manuscript here; it has been conjectured from parallel sources that it should be Yrse, or Ursula. The Swedish ("Scylding") king Onela appears later in the story, causing much distress to Beowulf's nation.
 2 Or "a greater meadhall / than the sons of men had ever heard of." The reading adopted here is that of Mitchell and Robinson.
 3 "Hart." An object recovered from the burial-mound at Sutton Hoo, perhaps a royal insignia, is surmounted by the image of a hart.
 4 The hall Heorot is apparently fated to be destroyed in a battle between Hrothgar and his son-in-law Ingeld the Heathobard, a conflict predicted by Beowulf in 2024-69. The battle itself happens outside the action of the poem.

wretchedly suffered all the while,
for every day he heard the joyful din
loud in the hall, with the harp's sound,
90 the clear song of the scop.¹ He said
who was able to tell of the origin of men
that the Almighty created the earth,
a bright and shining plain, by seas embraced,
and set, triumphantly, the sun and moon
95 to light their beams for those who dwell on land,
adorned the distant corners of the world
with leaves and branches, and made life also,
all manner of creatures that live and move.
— Thus this lordly people lived in joy,
100 blessedly, until one began
to work his foul crimes — a fiend from hell.
This grim spirit was called Grendel,
mighty stalker of the marches, who held
the moors and fens; this miserable man
105 lived for a time in the land of giants,
after the Creator had condemned him
among Cain's race — when he killed Abel
the eternal Lord avenged that death.²
No joy in that feud — the Maker forced him
110 far from mankind for his foul crime.
From thence arose all misbegotten things,
trolls and elves and the living dead,
and also the giants who strove against God
for a long while³ — He gave them their reward for that.

1 A scop is a poet-singer. This is the first of several self-reflexive scenes of poetic entertainment in the poem.

2 The story of Cain and Abel is told in Genesis 4:1-16.

3 The poet lists a collection of Germanic, classical, and biblical horrors; all are ultimately traced to their biblical roots, though the characters in the poem are not aware of this.

II

When night descended he went to seek out
the high house, to see how the Ring-Danes
had bedded down after their beer-drinking. 115
He found therein a troop of nobles
asleep after the feast; they knew no sorrow
or human misery. The unholy creature,
grim and ravenous, was ready at once, 120
ruthless and cruel, and took from their rest
thirty thanes;¹ thence he went
rejoicing in his booty, back to his home,
to seek out his abode with his fill of slaughter.
When in the dim twilight just before dawn 125
Grendel's warfare was made known to men,
then lamentation was lifted up after the feasting,
a great morning-sound. Unhappy sat
the mighty lord, long-good nobleman, 130
suffered greatly, grieved for his thanes,
once they beheld that hostile one's tracks,
the accursed spirit; that strife was too strong,
loathsome and long.

It was not longer
than the next night until he committed 135
a greater murder, mourned not at all
for his feuds and sins — he was too fixed in them.
Then it was easy to find a thane
who sought his rest elsewhere, farther away,
a bed in the outbuildings,² when was pointed out — 140
truly announced with clear tokens —
that hall-thane's hate; he kept himself afterwards
farther and safer, who escaped the fiend.
So he ruled, and strove against right,

1 A "thane" is a retainer, one of the troop of companions surrounding a heroic king in Germanic literature.

2 Hrothgar's hall is apparently surrounded by smaller buildings, including the women's quarters (see lines 662-5, 920-4). Under normal circumstances the men sleep together in the hall, ready for battle (1239-50).

145 one against all, until empty stood
the best of houses. And so for a great while —
for twelve long winters the lord of the Scyldings
suffered his grief, every sort of woe,
great sorrow, for to the sons of men
150 it became known, and carried abroad
in sad tales, that Grendel strove
long with Hrothgar, bore his hatred,
sins and feuds, for many seasons,
perpetual conflict; he wanted no peace
155 with any man of the Danish army,
nor ceased his deadly hatred, nor settled with money,
nor did any of the counselors need to expect
bright compensation from the killer's hands,¹
for the great ravager relentlessly stalked,
160 a dark death-shadow, lurked and struck
old and young alike, in perpetual night
held the misty moors. Men do not know *unknown*
whither such whispering demons wander about.

Thus the foe of mankind, fearsome and solitary,
165 often committed his many crimes,
cruel humiliations; he occupied Heorot,
the jewel-adorned hall, in the dark nights —
he saw no need to salute the throne,
he scorned the treasures; he did not know their love.²
170 That was deep misery to the lord of the Danes,
a breaking of spirit. Many a strong man sat
in secret counsel, considered advice,
what would be best for the brave at heart
to save themselves from the sudden attacks.
175 At times they offered honor to idols *idols*
at pagan temples, prayed aloud

1 Germanic and Anglo-Saxon law allowed that a murderer could make peace with the family of his victim by paying compensation, or *wergild*. The amount of compensation varied with the rank of the victim.

2 This is a much-disputed passage; my reading follows a suggestion made by Fred C. Robinson in "Why is Grendel's Not Greeting the *gifstol* a *wraec micel*?" and repeated in Mitchell and Robinson's *Beowulf*.

that the soul-slayer¹ might offer assistance
in the country's distress. Such was their custom,
the hope of heathens — they remembered hell
in their minds, they did not know the Maker,
the Judge of deeds, they did not know the Lord God,
or even how to praise the heavenly Protector,
Wielder of glory. Woe unto him
who must thrust his soul through wicked force
in the fire's embrace, expect no comfort,
no way to change at all! It shall be well for him
who can seek the Lord after his deathday
and find security in the Father's embrace.

III

With the sorrows of that time the son of Healfdene
seethed constantly; nor could the wise hero
turn aside his woe — too great was the strife,
long and loathsome, which befell that nation,
violent, grim, cruel, greatest of night-evils.

Then from his home the thane of Hygelac,²
a good man among the Geats, heard of Grendel's deeds —
he was of mankind the strongest of might
in those days of this life,
noble and mighty. He commanded to be made
a good wave-crosser, said that that war-king
he would seek out over the swan's-riding,
the renowned prince, when he was in need of men.
Wise men did not dissuade him at all
from that journey, though he was dear to them;
they encouraged his bold spirit, inspected the omens.
From the Geatish nation that good man
had chosen the boldest champions, the best

1 The Devil. In the Middle Ages the gods of the pagans were often regarded as demons in disguise.

2 The hero is not named until more than a hundred lines later. Hygelac is his uncle and king.

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Wergild.

SERMON

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he could find; one of fifteen,
he sought the sea-wood. A wise sailor
showed the way to the edge of the shore.
210 The time came — the craft was on the waves,
moored under the cliffs. Eager men
climbed on the prow — the currents eddied,
sea against sand — the soldiers bore
into the bosom of the ship their bright gear,
215 fine polished armor; the men pushed off
on their wished-for journey in that wooden vessel.
Over the billowing waves, urged by the wind,
the foamy-necked floater flew like a bird,
until in due time on the second day
220 the curved-prowed vessel had come so far
that the seafarers sighted land,
shining shore-cliffs, steep mountains,
wide headlands — then the waves were crossed,
the journey at an end. Thence up quickly
225 the people of the Weders¹ climbed onto the plain,
moored their ship, shook out their mail-shirts,
their battle-garments; they thanked God
that the sea-paths had been smooth for them.

When from the wall the Scyldings' watchman,
230 whose duty it was to watch the sea-cliffs,
saw them bear down the gangplank bright shields,
ready battle-gear, he was bursting with curiosity
in his mind to know who these men were.
This thane of Hrothgar rode his horse
235 down to the shore, and shook mightily
his strong spear, and spoke a challenge:
"What are you, warriors in armor, wearing
coats of mail, who have come thus sailing
over the sea-road in a tall ship,
240 hither over the waves? Long have I been
the coast-warden, and kept sea-watch
so that no enemies with fleets and armies
should ever attack the land of the Danes.

1 The Weders are the Geats.

Never more openly have there ever come
shield-bearers here, nor have you heard
any word of leave from our warriors
or consent of kinsmen. I have never seen
245 a greater earl on earth than that one among you,
a man in war-gear; that is no mere courtier,
honored only in weapons — unless his looks belie him,
his noble appearance! Now I must know
250 your lineage, lest you go hence
as false spies, travel further
into Danish territory. Now, you sea-travelers,
from a far-off land, listen to my
simple thought — the sooner the better,
255 you must make clear from whence you have come."

IV

The eldest one answered him,
leader of the troop, unlocked his word-hoard:
"We are men of the Geatish nation
260 and Hygelac's hearth-companions.
My father was well-known among men,
a noble commander named Ecgtheow;
he saw many winters before he passed away,
265 ancient, from the court; nearly everyone
throughout the world remembers him well.
With a friendly heart have we come
seeking your lord, the son of Healfdene,
guardian of his people; be of good counsel to us!
270 We have a great mission to that famous man,
ruler of the Danes; nor should any of it be
hidden, I think. You know, if things are
as we have truly heard tell,
275 that among the Scyldings some sort of enemy,
hidden evildoer, in the dark nights
manifests his terrible and mysterious violence,
shame and slaughter. With a generous spirit
I can counsel Hrothgar, advise him how,

Final check

wise old king, he may overcome this fiend —
280 if a change should ever come for him,
a remedy for the evil of his afflictions,
and his seething cares turn cooler;
or forever afterwards a time of anguish
he shall suffer, his sad necessity, while there stands
285 in its high place the best of houses.”

The watchman spoke, as he sat on his horse,
a fearless officer: “A sharp shield-warrior
must be a judge of both things,
words and deeds, if he would think well.

290 I understand that to the Scylding lord
you are a friendly force. Go forth, and bear
weapons and armor — I shall guide your way;
and I will command my young companions
to guard honorably against all enemies
295 your ship, newly-tarred, upon the sand,
to watch it until the curved-necked wood
bears hence across the ocean-streams
a beloved man to the borders of the Weders —
and such of these good men as will be granted
300 that they survive the storm of battle.”
They set off — their vessel stood still,
the roomy ship rested in its riggings,
fast at anchor. Boar-figures shone
over gold-plated cheek-guards,¹
305 gleaming, fire-hardened; they guarded the lives
of the grim battle-minded. The men hastened,
marched together, until they could make out
the timbered hall, splendid and gold-adorned —
the most famous building among men
310 under the heavens — where the high king waited;
its light shone over many lands.

¹ The boar was a sacred animal in Germanic mythology; in his *Germania* the Roman historian Tacitus mentions warriors wearing boar-images into battle (ch. 45). Images of boars may have been placed on helmets to protect the wearer from the “bite” of a sword, which was often quasi-personified as a serpent. Archaeologists have unearthed several Anglo-Saxon helmets with various kinds of boar-images on them.

Their brave guide showed them the bright court
of the mighty ones, so that they might go
straight to it; that fine soldier
wheeled his horse and spoke these words:
“Time for me to go. The almighty Father
guard you in his grace,
safe in your journeys! I must to the sea,
and hold my watch against hostile hordes.”

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V

The road was stone-paved, the path led
the men together. Their mail coats shone
hard, hand-linked, bright rings of iron
rang out on their gear, when right to the hall
they went trooping in their terrible armor.
Sea-weary, they set their broad shields,
wondrously-hard boards, against the building's wall;
they sat on a bench — their byrnie rang out,
their soldiers' war-gear; their spears stood,
the gear of the seamen all together,
a gray forest of ash. That iron troop
was worthy of its weapons.

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Then a proud warrior¹
asked those soldiers about their ancestry:
“From whence do you carry those covered shields,
gray coats of mail and grim helmets,
this troop of spears? I am herald and servant
to Hrothgar; never have I seen
so many foreign men so fearless and bold.
For your pride, I expect, not for exile,
and for greatness of heart you have sought out Hrothgar.”
The courageous one answered him,
proud prince of the Weders, spoke words
hardy in his helmet: “We are Hygelac's
board-companions — Beowulf is my name.

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¹ Later identified as Wulfgar.

I wish to explain my errand
345 to the son of Healfdene, famous prince,
your lord, if he will allow us,
in his goodness, to greet him.”
Wulfgar spoke — a prince of the Wendels,
his noble character was known to many,
350 his valor and wisdom: “I will convey
to the friend of the Danes, lord of the Scyldings,
giver of rings, what you have requested,
tell the famous prince of your travels,
and then quickly announce to you the answer
355 which that good man sees fit to give me.”

He hastily returned to where Hrothgar sat
old and gray-haired, with his band of earls;
he boldly went, stood by the shoulder
of the Danish king — he knew the noble custom.
360 Wulfgar spoke to his friend and lord:
“There have arrived here over the sea’s expanse,
come from afar, men of the Geats;
the oldest among them, the fighting men
call Beowulf. They have requested
365 that they, my lord, might be allowed
to exchange words with you — do not refuse them
your reply, gracious Hrothgar!
In their war-trappings they seem worthy
of noble esteem; notable indeed is that chief
370 who has shown these soldiers the way hither.”

VI

Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings:
“I knew him when he was nothing but a boy —
his old father was called Ecgtheow,
to whom Hrethel the Geat¹ gave in marriage
375 his only daughter; now his daring son
has come here, sought a loyal friend.

¹ Hrethel was the father of Hygelac and grandfather of Beowulf.

Seafarers, in truth, have said to me,
those who brought to the Geats gifts and money
as thanks, that he has thirty
men’s strength, strong in battle,
in his handgrip. Holy God
in His grace has guided him to us, God. 380
to the West-Danes, as I would hope,
against Grendel’s terror. To this good man
I shall offer treasures for his true daring.
Be hasty now, bid them enter 385
to see this troop of kinsmen all assembled;
and tell them in your words that they are welcome
to the Danish people.”

He announced from within:¹ 390
“My conquering lord commands me to tell you,
ruler of the East-Danes, that he knows your ancestry,
and you are to him, hardy spirits,
welcome hither from across the rolling waves.
Now you may go in your war-gear 395
under your helmets to see Hrothgar,
but let your battle-shields and deadly spears
await here the result of your words.”

The mighty one arose, and many a man with him,
powerful thanes; a few waited there, 400
guarded their battle-dress as the bold man bid them.
They hastened together as the man led them,
under Heorot’s roof; [the warrior went]²
hardy in his helmet, until he stood on the hearth.
Beowulf spoke — his byrnie gleamed on him, 405
war-net sewn by the skill of a smith — :
“Be well, Hrothgar! I am Hygelac’s kinsman
and young retainer; in my youth I have done
many a glorious deed. This business with Grendel 410
was made known to me on my native soil;
seafarers say that this building stands,

¹ There is no gap in the manuscript, but the two halves of the line do not alliterate, and something is probably missing from the text at this point. Most editors add two half-lines with the sense “Then Wulfgar went to the door.”
² A half-line is missing; the translation follows the most innocuous conjecture.

the hall's ornaments, when a way was open to me;
by no means gently was a journey allowed
3090 in under that earth-wall. In eager haste I seized
in my hands a great mighty burden
of hoard-treasure, and bore it out hither
to my king. He was still conscious then,
thoughtful and alert; he spoke of many things,
3095 an old man in his sorrow, and ordered that I greet you;
he asked that you build a great high barrow
for your prince's deeds, in the place of his pyre,
mighty and glorious, since he was of men
the most worthy warrior throughout the wide world,
3100 while he could enjoy the wealth of a hall.

Let us now make haste for one more time
to see and seek out that store of cunning gems,
the wonder under the wall; I will direct you
so that you can inspect them up close,
3105 abundant rings and broad gold. Let the bier be ready,
quickly prepared, when we come out,
then let us bear our beloved lord,
that dear man, to where he must long
rest in the keeping of the Ruler."

3110 Then the son of Weohstan, brave battle-warrior,
let it be made known to many heroes
and householders, that they should bring from afar
the wood for the pyre to that good one,¹
the leader of his folk: "Now the flames must devour,
3115 the black blaze rise over the ruler of warriors,
who often awaited the showers of iron
when the storm of arrows hurled from bow-strings
shot over the wall, the shafts did their duty
swift on feather-wings, sent on the arrow-heads."

3120 Lo, then the wise son of Weohstan
summoned from that host some of the best
of the king's thanes, seven altogether;
he went, one of eight, under that evil roof;

¹ The dead Beowulf.

one of the brave warriors bore in his hands
a flaming torch, and went before them. 3125
It was not chosen by lots who should loot that hoard,¹
once the men saw it sitting in the hall,
every part of it unprotected,
lying there wasting; there was little lament 3130
that they should have to hurry out with
the precious treasures. They also pushed the dragon,
the worm over the cliff-wall, let the waves take him,
the flood embrace the guard of that finery;
then the twisted gold, an uncountable treasure,
3135 was loaded in a wagon, and the noble one was carried,
the Gray-haired warrior, to the Cape of Whales.

XLIII

The people of the Geats then prepared for him
a splendid pyre upon the earth,
hung with battle-shields and helmets 3140
and bright byrnies, as he had bidden;
there in the middle they laid the mighty prince,
the heroes lamenting their dear lord.
Then the warriors kindled there on the cliff
the greatest of funeral pyres; dark over the flames 3145
the woodsmoke rose, the roaring fire
mingled with weeping — the wind lay still —
until it had broken that bone-house
hot at the heart. With heavy spirits
they mourned their despair, the death of their lord;
3150 and a sorrowful song sang the Geatish woman,²
with hair bound up, for Beowulf the king,
with sad cares, earnestly said

¹ I.e., everybody had a share; there was enough for all.
² The manuscript is damaged throughout this section and the readings in this passage are conjectural; it is not clear who the "Geatish woman" is, though her advanced age is indicated by her bound-up hair. Typically, in Germanic poetry, it is women (and poets) who mourn.

that she dreaded the hard days ahead,
the times of slaughter, the host's terror,
3155 harm and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

Then the Weder people wrought for him
a barrow on the headland; it was high and broad,
visible from afar to sea-voyagers,
and in ten days they built the beacon
3160 of that battle-brave one; the ashes of the flames
they enclosed with a wall, as worthily
as the most clever of men could devise it.
In the barrow they placed rings and bright jewels,
all the trappings that those reckless men
3165 had seized from the hoard before,
let the earth hold the treasures of earls,
gold in the ground, where it yet remains,
just as useless to men as it was before.

Then round the mound rode the battle-brave men,
3170 offspring of noblemen, twelve in all,
they wished to voice their cares and mourn their king,
utter sad songs and speak of that man;
they praised his lordship and his proud deeds
judged well his prowess. As it is proper
3175 that one should praise his lord with words,
should love him in his heart when the fatal hour comes,
when he must from his body be led forth,
so the men of the Geats lamented
the fall of their prince, those hearth-companions;
3180 they said that he was of all the kings of the world
the mildest of men and the most gentle,
the kindest to his folk and the most eager for fame.

gmræd. praise is worth of others.

Glossary of Proper Names

Abel

slain by his brother Cain; the story is told
in Genesis 4:1-16

Elfhere
Eschere

kinsman of Wiglaf
a prominent Dane, advisor to Hrothgar;
slain by Grendel's mother

Battle-Scylding
Battle-Scylfing
Beanstan
Beowulf
Breca

see Scyldings
see Scylfings
father of Breca
(prologue) Danish king, son of Scyld
engaged in a youthful swimming contest
with Beowulf

Bright-Danes
Brondings
Brosinga

see Danes
the people of Breca
makers of the magical necklace of Freya
in Norse myth, to which a necklace in
the story is compared

Cain

slayer of Abel in Genesis 4:1-16; father of
the race of monsters

Dæghrefn

a warrior of the Hugas slain by Beowulf
in hand-to-hand combat during
Hygelac's ill-fated raid on Frisia

Danes

Hrothgar's people; the Scyldings; also
called Bright-, Half-, Ring-, Spear-, East-,
West-, North-, and South-Danes.

Eadgils
Eanmund

son of Ohthere, brother of Eanmund
son of Ohthere, brother of Eadgils; slain
by Weohstan

East-Danes
Ecglaf
Ecgtheow
Ecgwala

see Danes
father of Unferth
father of Beowulf
a Danish king; the 'sons of Ecgwala' are
the Danes

Eofor

a warrior of the Geats; brother of Wulf;
slayer of Ongentheow

Eomer

son of Offa