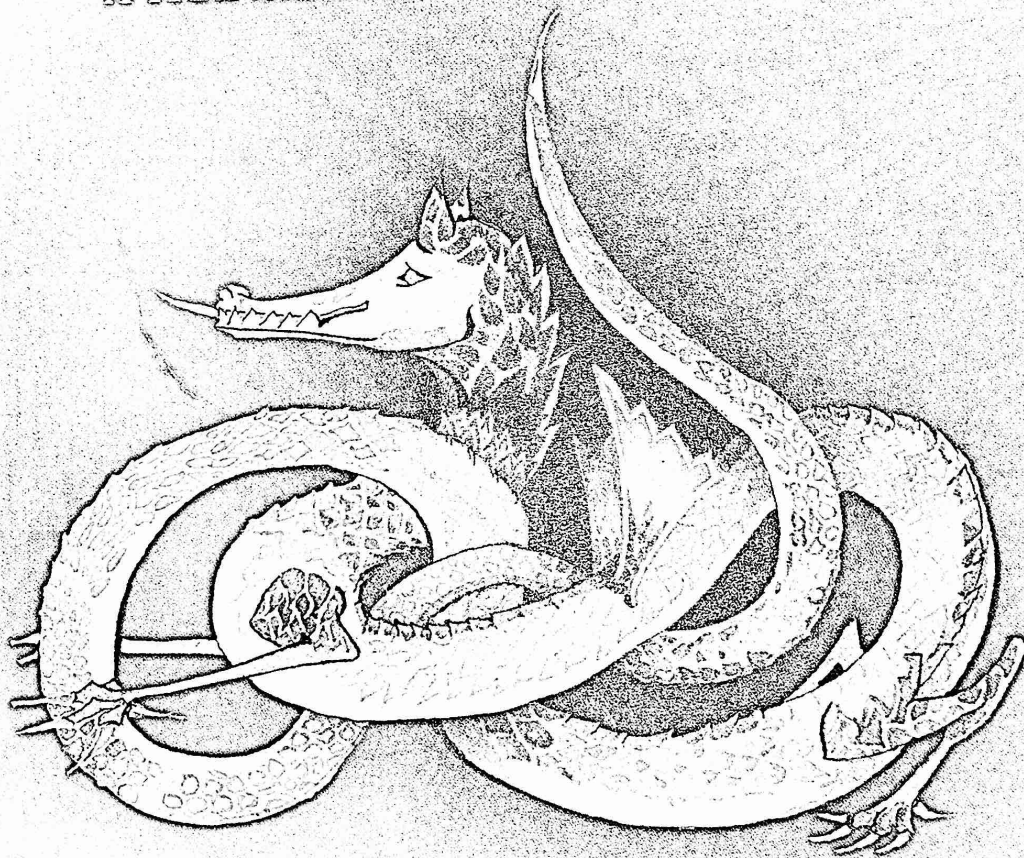


J.R.R.
TOLKIEN
BEOWULF
A TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY



together with

SELIC SPELL

Edited by CHRISTOPHER TOLKIEN

BEOWULF

Lo! the glory of the kings of the people of the Spear-Danes in
days of old we have heard tell, how those princes did deeds
of valour. Oft Scyld Scefing robbed the hosts of foemen,
many peoples, of the seats where they drank their mead, laid
5 fear upon men, he who first was found forlorn; comfort for
that he lived to know, mighty grew under heaven, throve in
honour, until all that dwelt nigh about, over the sea where the
whale rides, must hearken to him and yield him tribute – a
good king was he!

10 To him was an heir afterwards born, a young child in
his courts whom God sent for the comfort of the people:
perceiving the dire need which they long while endured
aforetime being without a prince. To him therefore the Lord
of Life who rules in glory granted honour among men: Beow
15 was renowned – far and wide his glory sprang – the heir
of Scyld in Scedeland. Thus doth a young man bring it to
pass with good deed and gallant gifts, while he dwells in his
father's bosom, that after in his age there cleave to him loyal
knights of his table, and the people stand by him when war
20 comes. By worthy deeds in every folk is a man ennobled.

Then at his allotted hour Scyld the valiant passed into the keeping of the Lord; and to the flowing sea his dear comrades bore him, even as he himself had bidden them, while yet, their prince, he ruled the Scyldings with his words: beloved
 25 lord of the land, long was he master. There at the haven stood with ringéd prow, ice-hung, eager to be gone, the prince's bark; they laid then their beloved king, giver of rings, in the bosom of the ship, in glory by the mast. There were many precious things and treasures brought from regions far away;
 30 nor have I heard tell that men ever in more seemly wise arrayed a boat with weapons of war and harness of battle; on his lap lay treasures heaped that now must go with him far into the dominion of the sea. With lesser gifts no whit did they adorn him, with treasures of that people, than did those
 35 that in the beginning sent him forth alone over the waves, a little child. Moreover, high above his head they set a golden standard and gave him to Ocean, let the sea bear him. Sad was their heart and mourning in their soul. None can report with truth, nor lords in their halls, nor mighty men beneath the
 40 sky, who received that load.

Then in the strongholds long was Beow of the Scyldings, beloved king of men, renowned among peoples – elsewhere had the prince his father departed from his home – until thereafter he begat Healfdene the high, who held the lordship
 45 while he lived, aged and fierce in war, over the fair Scyldings. To him were children four born in the world, in order named: captains of the hosts, Heorogar, and Hrothgar, and Halga the good; and [a daughter] I have heard that was Onela's queen, dear consort of the warrior Scylfing.

50 Thereafter was fortune in war vouchsafed to Hrothgar, and glory in battle, that the vassals of his own kindred hearkened willingly unto him and the numbers of his young warriors grew to a mighty company of men. Then it came into his heart that he would command men to fashion a hall and a
 55 mansion, a mightier house for their mead-drinking than the children of men had ever known, and there-within would he apportion all things to young and old such as God had granted him, save the people's land and the lives of men.

Then have I heard that far and wide to many a kindred
 60 on this middle-earth was that work proclaimed, the adorning of that dwelling of men. In a while, swiftly among men, it came to pass for him that it was all made ready, the greatest of houses and of halls. For it he devised the name of Heorot, even he whose word far and wide was law. His vow he belied
 65 not: the rings he dealt and treasure at the feast. The hall towered high with hornéd gables wide, awaiting the warring billows of destroying fire: the time was not far off that between father and daughter's spouse murderous hate in memory of a deadly feud should awake again.

70 Then the fierce spirit that abode in darkness grievously endured a time of torment, in that day after day he heard the din of revelry echoing in the hall. There was the sound of harp and the clear singing of the minstrel; there spake he that had knowledge to unfold from far-off days the first
 75 beginning of men, telling how the Almighty wrought the earth, a vale of bright loveliness that the waters encircle; how triumphant He set the radiance of the sun and moon as a light

for the dwellers in the lands, and adorned the regions of the
world with boughs and with leaves, life too he devised for
80 every kind that moves and lives.

Even thus did the men of that company live in mirth and
happiness, until one began to work deeds of wrong, a fiend
of hell. Grendel was that grim creature called, the ill-famed
haunter of the marches of the land, who kept the moors, the
85 fastness of the fens, and, unhappy one, inhabited long while
the troll-kind's home; for the Maker had proscribed him with
the race of Cain. That bloodshed, for that Cain slew Abel, the
Eternal Lord avenged: no joy had he of that violent deed, but
God drove him for that crime far from mankind. Of him all
90 evil broods were born, ogres and goblins and haunting shapes
of hell, and the giants too, that long time warred with God –
for that he gave them their reward.

Then went Grendel forth when night was come to spy
on that lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes after the ale-
95 drinking had ordered their abode in it; and he found therein
a lordly company after their feasting sleeping, sorrow they
knew not, the unhappy fate of men. That accursed thing,
ravenous and grim, swift was ready; thirty knights he seized
upon their couch. Thence back he got him gloating over his
100 prey, faring homeward with his glut of murder to seek his lairs.

Thereafter at dawn with the first light of day was Grendel's
strength in battle made plain to men; then was weeping after
feasting upraised, a mighty cry at morn. The glorious king,
their prince proven of old, joyless sat: his stout and valiant
105 heart suffered and endured sorrow for his knights, when men
had scanned the footprints of that foe, that demon cursed;

too bitter was that strife, too dire and weary to endure! Nor
was it longer space than but one night ere he wrought again
cruel murders more, and grieved not for them, his deeds of
110 enmity and wrong – too deep was he therein. Thereafter not
far to seek was the man who elsewhere more remote sought
him his couch and a bed among the lesser chambers, since
now was manifested and declared thus truly to him with
token plain the hatred of that hall-keeper; thereafter he who
115 escaped the foe kept him more distant and more safe.

Even thus did one lord it and against right make war, alone
against them all, until empty stood that best of houses. Long
was the while; twelve winters' space the Scyldings' dear lord
endured anguish and every woe and sorrow deep. So it was
120 made known to men and revealed to the children of mankind
sadly in songs that Grendel strove a while with Hrothgar,
wrought hate and malice, evil deeds and enmity, for many
a year, a strife unceasing; truce would he not have with any
man of the Danish host, nor would withhold his deadly cru-
125 elty, nor accept terms of payment; and there no cause had any
of the counsellors to look for golden recompense from the
slayer's hands; nay, the fierce killer pursued them still, both
knights and young, a dark shadow of death, lurking, lying in
wait, in long night keeping the misty moors: men know not
130 whither sorcerers of hell in their wanderings roam.

Thus many a deed of evil that foe of men stalking dread-
fully alone did often work, many a grievous outrage; in
Heorot's hall bright with gems in the dark nights he dwelt.
(Never might he approach the precious Throne of grace in
135 the presence of God, nor did he know His will). That was

great torment to the Scyldings' lord, anguish of heart. Many
 a mighty one sat oft communing, counsel they took what it
 were best for stouthearted men to do against these dire ter-
 rors. At times they vowed sacrifices to idols in their heathen
 140 tabernacles, in prayers implored the slayer of souls to afford
 them help against the sufferings of the people. Such was their
 wont, the hope of heathens; they were mindful in their hearts
 of hell, (nor knew they the Creator, the Judge of deeds, nor
 had heard of the Lord God, nor verily had learned to praise
 145 the Guardian of the heavens and the King of glory. Woe shall
 be to him that through fiendish malice shall thrust down his
 soul into the fire's embrace, to look for no comfort, in no
 wise to change his lot! Blessed shall be he that may after his
 death-day go unto the lord and seek peace in the bosom of
 150 the Father!)

Even thus over the sorrows of that time did the son of
 Healfdene brood unceasingly, nor could that wise prince put
 aside his grief; too strong was that strife, too dire and weary
 to endure, that had come upon that folk, torment fierce and
 155 cruel that they needs must bear, the greatest of miseries that
 came by night.

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
 160 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 renowned, since he had need of men. With

that voyage little fault did wise men find, dear though he
 165 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,
 170 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 bosom of the ship their bright harness, their cun-
 175 ning gear of war; they then, men on a glad voyage, thrust her
 forth with her well-joined 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
 180 the land, the cliffs beside the ocean gleaming, and sheer head-
 lands and capes thrust far to sea. Then for that sailing ship the
 journey was at an end. Thence the men of the Windloving
 folk climbed swiftly up upon the beach, and made fast the
 sea-borne timbers of their ship; their mail-shirts they shook,
 185 their raiment of war. They gave thanks to God that the pas-
 sage of the waves had been made easy for them.

Then from the high shore the watchman of the Scyldings,
 who of duty guarded the cliffs by the sea, saw them bearing
 over the gangway bright shields and gallant harness; anxiety
 190 smote him in his heart to learn what these men might be.
 He went then to the strand riding on his horse, Hrothgar's
 knight, and mightily he brandished in his hands his stout

spear-shaft, and in words of parley he asked: 'What warriors
 are ye, clad in corslets, that have come thus steering your
 195 tall ship over the streets of the sea, hither over deep waters?
 Lo! I long while have dwelt at the ends of the land, keeping
 watch over the water, that in the land of the Danes no foeman
 might come harrying with raiding fleet. Never have armed
 men more openly here essayed to land, knowing not at all
 200 the pass-ward of men in array of war, nor having the consent
 of kinsmen. Never have I seen on earth a greater among men
 than is one of you, a warrior in arms; no hall-servant is he in
 brave show of weapons, if his fair countenance lie not and
 his peerless mien. Now must I learn of what people you are
 205 sprung, rather than ye should pass on hence, false spies, into
 the land of the Danes. Come now, ye dwellers afar, voyagers
 of the sea, hear my thought plainly spoken: in haste it is best
 that ye declare whence your ways have led!'

To him then the chief made answer, the leader of the
 210 company, opened his store of words: 'We are by race men of
 the Geats and hearth-comrades of Hygelac. Famed among
 peoples was my father, a noble warrior in the forefront of
 battle; Ecgtheow was he called. Many a winter he endured
 ere in age he departed from his courts; full well doth every
 215 wise man remember him far and wide over the earth. With
 friendly purpose are we now come seeking thy master, the
 son of Healfdene, defender of his people. Be thou kindly in
 counsel to us! A mighty errand have we to him renowned,
 the lord of the Danes; and there a certain matter shall not be
 220 kept secret, as I think. Thou knowest if so it be, as in truth
 we have heard tell, that among the Scyldings I know not what

deadly thing, a doer of deeds of secret hatred, on dark nights
 in dreadful wise makes plain his monstrous malice, shame of
 men, and felling of the dead. Concerning that with ungrudg-
 225 ing heart I can give counsel to Hrothgar how he, wise and
 good, will overcome his enemy – should there ever come
 change or betterment in the torment of his woes – how those
 burning griefs will be assuaged; or else for ever after he will
 endure a time of tribulation and dire need, while there in its
 230 high place abides the best of houses.'

The watchman spake, sitting there upon his steed, fearless
 servant of the king: 'A man of keen wit who takes good heed
 will discern the truth in both words and deeds: my ears assure
 me that here is a company of friendly mind towards the Lord
 235 of the Scyldings. Go ye forward bearing your weapons and
 your armour! I will guide you! My young esquires, more-
 over, I will command honourably to guard your ship, your
 new-tarred vessel upon the sand, against every foe, until with
 its timbers and its wreathéd prow it bears back again over the
 240 streams of the sea its beloved master to the Weather-mark. To
 such a doer of good deeds it shall surely be granted that he
 will come sound and whole through this onset of war!'

They went then marching forth. Their fleet vessel
 remained now still, deep-bosomed ship it rode upon its
 245 hawser fast to the anchor. Figures of the boar shone above
 cheek-guards, adorned with gold, glittering, fire-tempered;
 fierce and challenging war-mask kept guard over life. The
 men hastened striding together until they could descry the
 builded hall adorned bright with gold, foremost it was in
 250 fame of all houses under heaven among the dwellers upon

earth, wherein the mighty one abode; the light of it shone
over many a land. Then that warrior bold pointed out to
them, clear to see, the court of proud men, that they might
march straight thither.

255 Then that warrior turned his horse, and thereupon spake
these words: 'Time it is for me to go. May the Almighty
Father in his grace keep you safe upon your quests! To the
sea will I go, against unfriendly hosts my watch to keep.'

260 The street was paved in stone patterns; the path guided
those men together. There shone corslet of war, hard, hand-
linked, bright ring of iron rang in their harness, as in their
dread gear they went striding straight unto the hall. Weary
of the sea they set their tall shields, bucklers wondrous hard,
against the wall of the house, and sat then on the bench.
265 Corslets rang, war-harness of men. Their spears stood piled
together, seamen's gear, ash-hafted, grey-tipped with steel.
Well furnished with weapons was the iron-mailed company.
There then a knight in proud array asked those men of battle
concerning their lineage: 'Whence bear ye your plated shields,
270 your grey shirts of mail, your masked helms and throng of
warlike shafts? I am Hrothgar's herald and servant. Never
have I seen so many men of outland folk more proud of bear-
ing! I deem that in pride, not in the ways of banished men,
nay, in greatness of heart ye have come seeking Hrothgar!'

275 To him then, strong and bold, the proud prince of the
Windloving folk replied, words he spake in answer, stern
beneath his helm: 'We are companions of Hygelac's table;
Beowulf is my name. To the son of Healfdene, glorious king,

I wish to tell mine errand, to thy lord, if he will vouchsafe
280 to us that we may approach him in his excellence.' Wulfgar
spake - noble prince of the Wendels was he, his heart's
temper, his prowess and wisdom, were known to many a
man: 'This will I enquire of the Friend of the Danes, lord of
the Scyldings, giver of rings, concerning thy quest, even as
285 thou prayest, and such answer quickly declare to thee as he
in his goodness is minded to give.'

Then swiftly he returned to where Hrothgar sat, old and
hoar-headed, amid his company of knights; valiant he strode
until he stood by the shoulder of the lord of the Danes, well
290 he knew the customs of courtly men. Wulfgar spake to his
beloved lord: 'Here are now landed, come from afar over the
encircling sea, noble men of the Geats; the chiefest of them
men of arms name Beowulf. They beg to exchange words with
thee, my king. Do not make denial to them of thy fair answer,
295 O gracious Hrothgar! In their harness of war they seem well
to merit the esteem of men; assuredly a man of worth is the
captain, who hath led these men of battle to this land.'

Hrothgar spake, protector of the Scyldings: 'I knew him
while he was yet a boy. His sire of old was called Ecgtheow;
300 to him Hrethel of the Geats gave as bride his only daughter;
it is his son that has now here come dauntless seeking a friend
and patron. Voyagers by sea, such as have borne gifts and
treasures for the Geats thither in token of good will, have
since reported that he hath in the grasp of his hand the might
305 and power of thirty men, valiant in battle. Holy God hath
sent him to us in his mercy, even to the West Danes, as is
my hope, against the terror of Grendel. To this good knight

I shall offer precious gifts to reward the valour of his heart.
Make haste now! Bid them enter here and look upon the
310 proud company of our kin here gathered together; tell them
too in words of greeting that they are welcome to the people
of the Danes!

[Then Wulfgar went toward the door of the hall, and]
standing within he pronounced these words: 'My victori-
315 ous lord, chieftain of the East Danes bade me say to you
that he knows your lineage, and that with your dauntless
hearts ye come as welcome guests to him over the surges of
the sea. Now may ye go in your harness of battle beneath
your masked helms to look upon Hrothgar. Leave here your
320 warlike shields and deadly shafted spears to await the issue
of your words.' Then that lordly man arose, and about him
many a warrior, a valiant company of knights. Some remained
behind guarding their gear of war, even as the bold captain
commanded. They went with speed together, the knight guid-
325 ing them, beneath the roof of Heorot. Stern beneath his helm
[strode Beowulf] until he stood beside the hearth. Words he
spake – his mail gleamed upon him, woven like stuff in crafty
web by the cunning of smiths: 'Hail to thee, Hrothgar! I am
Hygelac's kinsman and vassal; on many a renownéd deed I
330 ventured in my youth. To me on my native soil the matter of
Grendel became known and revealed; travellers upon the sea
report that this hall, fairest of houses, stands empty and to
all men useless, as soon as the light of evening is hid beneath
heaven's pale. Thereupon the worthiest of my people and
335 wise men counselled me to come to thee, King Hrothgar; for
they had learned the power of my body's strength; they had

themselves observed it, when I returned from the toils of my
foes, earning their enmity, where five I bound, making deso-
late the race of monsters, and when I slew amid the waves by
340 night the water-demons, enduring bitter need, avenging the
afflictions of the windloving Geats, destroying those hos-
tile things – woe they had asked for. And now I shall with
Grendel, with that fierce slayer, hold debate alone with the
ogre. Now therefore will I ask of thee, prince of the glorious
345 Danes, defender of the Scyldings, this one boon, that thou
deny not to me, O protector of warriors, fair lord of peoples,
since I have come from so far away, that only I may, and
my proud company of men, this dauntless company, make
Heorot clean. I have learned, too, that this fierce slayer in his
350 savagery to weapons gives no heed. I too then will disdain
(so love me Hygelac, my liege lord!) to bear either sword,
or wide shield, yellow-bossed, to battle, nay, with my gripe
I shall seize upon the foe, and engage in mortal contest with
hate against hate – there to the judgement of the Lord shall
355 he resign himself whom death doth take. Methinks he will,
if he is permitted to have the mastery, in this hall of battle
devour without fear the Gothic knights, the strong band of
Hrethmen, as he oft hath done. No need wilt thou have in
burial to shroud my head, but he will hold me reddened with
360 gore, if death takes me; a bloody corse will bear, will think to
taste it, and departing alone will eat unpitying, staining the
hollows of the moors. No need wilt thou have any longer to
care for my body's sustenance! Send back to Hygelac, should
battle take me, the mail-shirt most excellent that defends my
365 breast, fairest of raiment. Hrethel bequeathed it, the work of