

THE COMPLETE
OLD ENGLISH
POEMS



Translated by
CRAIG WILLIAMSON

With an introduction by TOM SHIPPEY

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS PHILADELPHIA

Supported their king. Hrothgar's dream
 Was a meadhall built for his mighty band,
 The work of craftsmen, worth remembering,
 Where a king could share with the sons of men 70
 His gifts from God in his hall of glory—
 Stories, treasures, everything except
 The common land and the lives of men.
 The word went out—the craftsmen came
 From all over middle-earth to shape beams 75
 And raise up the glorious people's hall.
 They quickly finished this finest of buildings,
 This show of strength, and King Hrothgar,
 Whose fame had spread, named it Heorot
 After the ancient Hart. The king kept promise, 80
 Giving gold from the treasure-table,
 A feast of rings. The raftered hall,
 High, horn-gabled, was doomed to wait
 For battle-flames, the fierce sword-hate
 Of family feud, when oaths of in-laws 85
 Might mean less than murderous rage.

Then the monster who lived in shadows,
 The dark's demon, suffered pain
 When he heard the harp's sweet songs,
 The poet's music in the hall of joy. 90
 The shaper sang the world's creation,
 The origin of men, God's broad grandeur
 In sun-bright fields and surrounding waters.
 That greater Shaper set sun and moon
 As land-lights and adorned all earth 95
 With leaves and limbs, created each
 Green gift, each living thing,
 Each walking wonder of this bright world.
 The listening warriors lived in the hall,
 Surrounded by joy until a certain creature 100
 Began to commit crimes. A hell-fiend,
 A grim hall-guest called Grendel,
 Moor-stalker, wasteland walker,
 Demon of the fens, he dwelled in marshes,

In monstrous lairs, unhappy, unhoused, 105
 After God the Creator had rightly condemned
 The race of Cain, that murdering kin,
 When the Lord of life took vengeance
 On Abel's bane, that slaughtering son.
 No one found joy in that long feud, 110
 That banishment for family-killing.
 Out of Cain's crime what woke was evil,
 A brutal borning of orcs and elves,
 Gibbering giants, the living dead,
 Who fought God, finding a hard reward. 115
 In black night came the hall-marauder
 To see how the beer-drinkers soundly slept,
 A feast of dreamers who'd forgotten sorrow—
 They locked out misery, this mess of men.
 Unwhole, unholy, the monster came, 120
 Grim and greedy, ready, ravenous—
 A stalking mouth, he quickly seized
 Thirty thanes, hauled them home,
 His precious plunder, his proud slaughter—
 King of the lair, exulting in dinner. 125
 A dark cry woke before dawn,
 A wail of Danes long after dinner,
 Grendel's bloodbath their breakfast greeting,
 His war-craft the morning's misery.
 The glorious king had cold joy, 130
 Suffered for his thanes, drank sorrow,
 When he saw the bloody tracks
 Of the grim guest, the ravenous ghost.
 That strife was too strong, that loathing too long—
 He even invited himself back the next night 135
 For more murders and no mourning!
 He was bent on vengeance, savage in sin.
 Then it was easy to find a hero who sought
 A hall removed from the ravenous beast,
 A separate bed, once the blood-feud was known, 140
 The grim crime of the murderous hall-thane.
 Only those who left the hall escaped the hate!
 So Grendel ruled the greatest of halls,

Sabotaged the right, a monster unmatched
 Against many men, till the meadhall 145
 Stood empty, unguarded, an idle house—
 Twelve winters long, the time of grief
 That Hrothgar became king of nothing,
 Ruler of agony, lord of woe.
 Then the shaper's song to the sons of men 150
 Was of blood-feud and baleful sorrow,
 Grendel's stalking and Hrothgar's suffering:
 His night-hatred was no secret—
 His plan was to devour peace with the Danes.
 He offered no payment for past crimes, 155
 No gold for his gnawing. No hall-counselor
 Hoped to see shame's wergild in that claw.
 That hall-bane, fierce and relentless fighter,
 That death-shadow, moved against men.
 Out of the mist, up from the moors, 160
 He ambushed and ate, drank and devoured
 Both young and old, both able and feeble.
 He shaped the fens into endless night.
 No one knows where the hell-shades walk.
 The enemy of men, that lone horror, 165
 Brought endless shame home to the hall,
 A bed of terror to bright Heorot,
 A night-demon in the dark hall,
 But he was barred from the king's throne,
 Kept from the gift-seat and God's love, 170
 Separated from grace. That was wrack and ruin
 To Hrothgar, ravaging his brave heart.
 Wise men in secret counsel considered
 What brave men might best do
 To turn back terror. They offered sacrifices 175
 At heathen shrines, prayed that some soul-slayer,
 Some demon might ease their dark distress.
 Their hope was dire—they prayed to hell
 Instead of heaven. They knew no God,
 No Great Shaper, no Judge of Deeds. 180
 They laid praise at the mouth of hell,
 Sang no songs to the greatest Lord,

Asked no favors of the Glory-giver.
 Woe to those who in terrible affliction
 Must offer their souls to the flame's embrace; 185
 Well to those who on death's day
 Can seek their Lord's protecting power,
 Wrapped in the welcome of his embrace.
 So Hrothgar brooded, Healfdene's son,
 On seething sorrow. The wise king 190
 Could not stop that killing, ward off woe.
 That strife was too strong, that feud too fierce—
 That hall was home to the grimmest of night-woes.

Then the story spread so that Hygelac's thane,
 The greatest of Geats, heard about Grendel 195
 And his hateful crimes. Beowulf was a huge hero,
 Strongest in battle, mightiest of men
 Alive at the time. He ordered his ship built,
 A great wave-walker, and said he would seek
 Over the long sea, the swan's road, 200
 That well-known king needing brave new men.
 Beowulf was beloved at home, but counselors
 Laid no claim to his staying—they urged him on,
 Observed omens, figured the fates,
 Called his quest good. He picked out the bravest 205
 From the Geatish ranks. The group of fifteen
 Gathered for glory, sought the wave-wood,
 Followed their sea-skilled battle-lord
 Down to the shore-mark, the edge of land.
 The ship waited, a wave-floater, 210
 Under the tall cliffs. Time passed.
 Warriors prepared to climb the prow.
 Sea-currents shifted against the sand.
 Men bore bright war-gear
 To the ship's belly, smith-crafted armor. 215
 The ship shoved off, warriors willing—
 The sea lifting the well-braced wood.
 They went over water, driven by wind,
 The foam-necked floater like a great bird,
 Until the next day at the augured hour, 220

When the proud bird with a twisted prow
 Swooped toward land, as seafarers saw
 Bright sea-cliffs, high headlands,
 The stony shores. Sea-warriors knew
 The waves were crossed, the journey done. 225
 The Battle-Geats climbed down,
 Secured the boat, rattled their mail-coats,
 Bright war-shirts, and thanked God
 That they had found safety in the sea-crossing.

Then the cliff-guard, watchman for the Danes, 230
 Whose duty it was to survey the sea,
 Saw bright shields borne over the gangway,
 The glint of war-gear ready for the road.
 Curiosity burned: who were these men?
 Hrothgar's lookout leapt to his horse, 235
 Rode to the shore, brandished his spear,
 Spoke to the strangers, offering a challenge:
 "Who are you? What are you,
 War-bright, mail-coated men,
 Bringing your tall sails over the sea-streets? 240
 Long have I held this high lookout,
 Watching the waves for a threat to the Danes,
 So no ship-army, no enemy threat,
 Might sail up and sack us unawares.
 No shield-warriors have marched more openly 245
 Onto our shore than yours, nor did you count
 On the consent of my kinsmen for safe passage.
 Never have I seen a more splendid warrior,
 A mightier man, than one who walks with you.
 That's no mere retainer but a man of lineage, 250
 No mere warrior but an armored lord—
 Nothing belies such greatness. Now let me know
 Your lineage before you ride quietly forward
 Like spies on our land. Here's my plain thought:
 Tell me quickly where you come from." 255
 The greatest of Geats answered the coast-guard,
 The leader of war-men unlocked his word-board:
 "We will give you the gift of our lineage—

We are known as the nation of Geats,
 Hearth-companions of King Hygelac. 260
 My father was known at home and abroad—
 Ecgtheow, a great lord and leader.
 He lived long, endured many winters
 Before he went walking on his last road,
 An old man leaving hearth and home— 265
 No wise man now living has forgotten him.
 We come with true hearts and trusty swords
 To greet your king, the people's protector.
 Be courteous and give us good counsel.
 We come on an errand, a warrior's mission 270
 To the lord of the Danes. Let's all agree:
 Nothing should be secret, nothing hidden.
 The only thing hateful we've heard—you know:
 Something of darkness walks among the Danes,
 Some evil enmity, who knows what, 275
 A secret scourge, a shade of slaughter—
 An unknown malice moves among men,
 A shaper of corpses in the shadow of night.
 I am the healer who can help Hrothgar—
 I bring a remedy for the sickening foe. 280
 I offer counsel to the wise, good king,
 A remedy for ravaging, an end to woe,
 If he's to escape evil, reverse his fate—
 If he's ever to trade his seething sorrow
 For a cooler heart, or a hall's blessing 285
 For the hot rage of a tormented house.”
 The coast-guard spoke, high in his saddle,
 A fearless follower: “A smart shield-warrior
 Who thinks clearly with a keen mind
 Should know the difference between words and deeds. 290
 What I see is this—a brave troop bound
 To aid and sustain the king of the Danes.
 Go forth with your chain-mail and war-gear.
 I will guide you and order my men
 To guard your ship, tarred and ready, 295
 Against all enemies, till it bears back home
 Over the sea-streams its beloved warrior,

Carrying a hero with its curve-necked prow,
 And the good Geats who survive unharmed,
 Home whole, safe through this battle-storm.” 300
 The men marched out, the ship stayed still,
 A broad-bellied boat, rope-tethered
 And anchor-bound. Bright boar-shapes
 Gleamed over cheek-guards, high over helmets
 Fire-hardened, variegated, inlaid with gold, 305
 War-masks guarding the grim warriors.
 The men moved as one, a fell formation,
 Till they saw the hall, timbered, tessellated,
 Adorned with gold, the most beautiful building
 On middle-earth, the best-known hall 310
 Under heaven where the mighty one dwelled,
 Its gold light gleaming long on the land.
 The battle-brave coast-guard pointed to Heorot,
 The bright hall of men, showed them the way,
 Then wheeled his horse, speaking to the Geats: 315
 “I must go back to my post. May God the protector,
 The father of men, keep you whole.
 I return to the shore and my sea-watch
 To sound the alarm against enemy invaders.”

The street was stone-paved, the road straight, 320
 The walkway clear to the ranks of men.
 Their war-coats gleamed with bright chain-mail,
 Hard and hand-locked as they neared the hall—
 The rings of their corselets singing to Heorot.
 The sea-weary warriors set broad shields, 325
 Their round body-guards, against the wall—
 Brave men came boldly to bench-seats,
 Battle-gear ringing; spears stood together
 Like an ash-gray troop, the craft of smiths,
 A sharpness of shafts. That mailed troop 330
 Was an energy of armor, a worth of weapons.
 Then Wulfgar the hall-guard asked the warriors,
 Those grim house-guests about their ancestry:
 “Where do you come from with decorated shields,
 Gray-iron mail-coats, grim-masked helmets, 335

And a stand of battle-spears? I am Hrothgar's
 Herald and hall-guard. I've never seen
 Such bold faces on seafaring strangers.
 I think pride brings you—not anger or exile—
 With heart's courage to seek Hrothgar.” 340

The proud one answered, prince of the Geats,
 Unlocked words, hard under his helmet:
 “We are hall-thanes and hearth-companions
 Of noble Hygelac. Beowulf is my name.
 I would speak with the son of Healfdene, 345
 Glorious Hrothgar, lord of the Danes,
 If the king in his goodness would grant me leave.”

Wulfgar considered—his wisdom was known,
 His courage, clear: “I will ask the king,
 Lord of the Scyldings, giver of rings, 350
 Glorious prince, what you request,
 Regarding your journey, and as seems fit,
 Bring back his reply, whatever it is.”

Then Wulfgar hurried to where Hrothgar sat,
 Gray and grizzled, surrounded by thanes, 355
 A brave messenger before the Danish lord,
 Addressing his king as custom demanded.
 Wulfgar spoke to his beloved leader:

“Here are travelers from a long crossing,
 Seafarers, wave-warriors, men of the Geats— 360
 The bold, battle-scarred thanes name
 The greatest one Beowulf. They seek permission
 From you Prince Hrothgar to trade words,
 Mix wisdom. May you choose wisely
 And give them counsel, a good hearing. 365
 They are worthy in war-gear, esteemed in armor,
 And the leader who brought them here is good,
 Truly a war-gift, mighty among men.”

Hrothgar spoke, protector of Scyldings:
 “Young Beowulf was a boy I knew well. 370
 His famous father was called Ecgtheow.
 Hygelac's father, King Hrethel of the Geats,
 Made him a marriage-gift of his only daughter.

Now has his hard, strong son come here,
 A mighty warrior to sustain old friends. 375
 Seafarers said, who carried precious gifts,
 Gold to the Geats, that his hand-grip
 Held the strength of thirty men—
 It was battle-tested. Holy God
 In his great mercy has sent this savior 380
 To the beleaguered Danes to give Grendel
 The gift of his grip. That's my hope.
 I will give him treasures for courage,
 Gifts for tearing that terror from life.
 Order them in to meet our kinsmen— 385
 Bid them welcome to the Danish hold.”
 Then Wulfgar went to the hall door,
 Offered these words to the waiting warriors:
 “My lord of victories, leader of the Danes,
 Commands me to say he knows your lineage, 390
 And you seafaring warriors are welcome,
 You brave men, to our Danish lands.
 Now you may enter in battle-armor,
 Approach Hrothgar under war-grim helmets,
 But let your shields and slaughter-shafts rest 395
 By the wall, waiting the outcome of your words.”

Up rose the warrior, around him his men,
 A splendor of thanes; some stayed behind
 To guard their gear, as their chief commanded.
 The troop rolled in under Heorot's roof, 400
 Warriors behind their battle-commander.
 He stood on the hearth, hard under helmet,
 His corselet crafted by clever hands,
 A ring-net sewn by skillful smiths.
 Beowulf spoke, offered a greeting: 405
 “Hail Hrothgar, may you always be well.
 I am Hygelac's kinsman and thane.
 I have done deeds, gathered youthful glories.
 This story of Grendel has spread to the Geats—
 Seafarers say this greatest of halls 410
 Stands idle and useless, without warriors,

When the day's late light fades,
 Hidden under heaven. Wise ones counseled
 That I should come to King Hrothgar.
 They knew my cunning and battle-craft— 415
 They saw me come home from bloody combat,
 Stained with slaying a family of fiends—
 I challenged and crushed five fierce giants—
 Slaying night-monsters riding the waves.
 Their pain was my pleasure—they asked for trouble. 420
 I avenged the Geats, grinding the grim ones.
 Perhaps I might hold a private meeting
 With your monster, give a gift to Grendel,
 Settle his endless feud with the Danes.
 I entreat you now, great Lord Hrothgar, 425
 As I've come so far, to grant me this favor,
 Protector of Scyldings, prince of the people—
 Let me, alone with my band of hard warriors,
 Purge Heorot, clean out this hall.
 I have heard that the awe-striker, 430
 That skulking atrocity, wields no weapons.
 So, let's be fair. I'll scorn the sword,
 Meet that monster's reckless abandon
 With my fist. I'll fight tooth and nail
 With no broad shield, no yellow wood, 435
 Foe upon foe, talk terror with my hands.
 Let the warrior whom Death decides to take
 Trust in God's judgment, his fair doom.
 I expect if Grendel rules the day
 In this battle-hall, he'll ravage us all, 440
 Devour the Danes, eat some Geats.
 If death claims me, no need to cover
 My missing head, my bloody body!
 He'll haul home my bones and blood,
 My savory shroud, devour without sorrow 445
 My ravaged body, stain his lair.
 There'll be no need to feed my gobbled form,
 No need to mourn, no cause to grieve,
 No body to bury—but send home to Hygelac,
 If the battle takes me, the best of my war-clothes— 450

What's left of them—the chain-mail
 Protecting my chest, Hrethel's heirloom,
 The work of Weland. Let the fates fall."
 Hrothgar spoke, Lord of the Scyldings:
 "For our old favors to your father Ecgtheow, 455
 You have come to fight, Beowulf my friend.
 Your father slew Heatholaf with his hard hands,
 Struck up a feud with the warlike Wylfings.
 Then the Geats could no longer keep him—
 They were harried hard by the fear of war, 460
 So he sought the South-Danes' protection,
 Sailing over the sea-surge, the rolling waves,
 When I was a young king, ruler of the Danes,
 Keeper of the treasure-hoard of heroes.
 My older brother Heorogar, Healfdene's son, 465
 Was newly dead, my own dear kin,
 An unliving man—he was better than I.
 Afterwards I settled your father's feud
 With a wergild of treasures sent over waves,
 Ended his troubles. He swore me oaths. 470
 Now it's my shame and sorrow to say
 To any man what evil the monster Grendel
 Has wreaked in Heorot, his brooding hatred,
 His sudden ferocities, his unbound feud,
 His steady slaughter. My troop is depleted, 475
 My war-band shrunk. Fate has swept them
 Into the claw and clutch of Grendel's rage.
 God may easily separate that mad ravager
 From his foul deeds. Often my warriors,
 Have boasted over beer, angry over ale-cups, 480
 That they would wait to meet that terror,
 Greet Grendel with their grim swords.
 Then in the morning, the meadhall was stained
 Bright with blood, shining with slaughter
 When the day dawned, mead-benches broken 485
 And drenched with gore. I had fewer followers
 Since death carried my dear men off.
 But now, Beowulf, sit down to feast,
 Unlock your thoughts, share stories