

# Selections from Beowulf: a new translation

**DANIEL JANEIRO (TRANSLATOR)**

## **THE BUILDING OF HEOROT AND THE COMING OF GRENDEL**

### **Shield Sheafing**

Now, we Danes have heard how in days of old,  
Kings of our clan clamored for glory,  
And how those warlords won it through courage.

Often Shield Sheafing made off with the meadbenches  
Of countless scrappers from scores of tribes.  
He troubled foes who was first an orphan,  
Castaway flotsam. Well, comfort found him.  
He strengthened under storms and strove after tribute  
Until each settlement on the surrounding shores  
Over the whale-path paid him mind  
As well as gold! What a good King!

A boy was afterwards born to Shield,  
A shoot in the garden, a godsend to hearten  
The people, to scry the scourge of dread  
That they had lived under, lacking a leader  
A long while. The Lifelord then,  
The Wielder of Splendor awarded him honor;  
Renown sprouted up for the offspring of Shield  
And the Northland rang with the name of Beow.  
So must a man work much when young,  
Be open-handed under the eye  
Of his father, that later his loyal people,  
His steadfast friends, will stand by his side  
When war comes. Courage and high deeds  
Earn a man honor always and everywhere.

### **The Funeral Boat of Shield**

Shield, still a force, at the fated time,  
Departed to go to God's own keeping.  
They shouldered him high to the shores of the sea,  
His battle-brothers, bid as they were  
By that lord of the land, who long had ruled,  
When he, folk-friend, still fashioned words.  
At the harbor hove, hoary and ready,

A ring-curled prow, a prince's craft.  
There they laid their beloved king,  
The Openhanded in the heart of the ship,  
Hard by the mast. Many a treasure  
From far-flung coasts was carried there.  
I have never caught wind of a keel so full:  
Weapons galore—wargear, armor,  
Blades, and hauberks. Heaped upon him,  
The many treasures were meant to attend him,  
To float with him into the flood's keeping.  
They rigged him round with riches and gifts,  
The wealth of his land, no less than those  
Who cast him off at the beginning  
Over the waves when only a boy.  
And lastly, they hung high overhead  
A golden pennon. They gave all this,  
Let the waves welcome it, yet woe remained,  
And the mournful heart. No man for certain,  
Neither hall-bound sage nor soldier under stars,  
Can say in the end who received that cargo.

#### **The Sons of Shield and Building of Heorot**

Then Beow was hailed in hall and bastion  
Lord of the Shieldings, a long time  
Favored by his folk (his father being far  
From the rule of this realm), until regal Halfdane  
Afterwards arose; He reigned his long life,  
Gluttonous for battle, over the gladsome Shieldings.  
He fathered children—four, all told,  
Woke in the world to that warrior-king:  
Heorogar, Hrothgar, Halga the good,  
And another, I have heard, who was Onela's queen,  
A match in bed for that battle-loving Swede.

The thrust of conquest carried Hrothgar  
So far in war-fame that his family followed  
His words willingly and the unwintered waxed  
In strength and number. It struck him then  
He might bid his thanes build a great hall,  
A meadhouse mightier than mankind ever  
Had seen or heard of, inside of which, he  
Could give all the good things God had granted him  
To young and old—Everything that is  
But the common land and the lives of men.

Far and wide word was spread  
To scores of tribes scattering the earth  
That the folkstead be adorned. In the fullness of time,

Though men thought it soon, it stood, all ready—  
A matchless hall. Heorot he named it,  
Whose words held force far and wide.

He made good on his boasts, gave out bangles and torclets,  
Rings at his table. Upreeared now, the hall  
Rose high and horn-browed. (Heat would engulf it,  
A burning fury. This fierce bloodfeud,  
Not long in coming, would cleave the oathbound,  
The vow-knit clans, after vengeful slaughter.)

### **The Coming of Grendel**

Then a twisted demon, a damned murk-dweller,  
For nights on end gnashed his teeth  
To hear, the day long, laughter and merriment  
Stream from the hall: the strum of the harp  
And the strong supple sound of the song-shaper's voice.  
He told of our origins, the time of our creation,  
Spoke how the Almighty molded the earth  
A radiant plain ringed with waters.  
He gloriously set the sun and moon,  
Light-giving lamps, to lead men below  
And decked the fields and dales with growth,  
Limbs and leaves; And life was also given  
By Him to what moves and has its being.

In this blissful manner, the blessed hall-dwellers  
Relaxed at their leisure till that lurking hell-spawn  
Began forming and shaping his foul misdeeds.  
He was known as Grendel, a grisly fiend,  
A scutler of the outskirts who skulked round the coves,  
Stalking firth and fenland. The foul one had lingered  
In the lairs of the accursed for a long while:  
Ever since the Creator had cast him aside  
As Cain's kindred. The killing of Abel  
Was afterwards avenged by the everlasting Lord:  
No good thing came of it—for his crime, he was driven  
By God the Fate-Wright far from mankind.  
Unwholesome spawn sprang from his seed:  
Ogres, goblins, and grave-breaking wraiths,  
As well as those giants that warred against God  
Again and again. He gave them their due.

During the night the demon ventured  
To scout out the hall, discover how the Danes  
Had settled into slumber after swilling their beer.  
Within, he came upon a company of men  
Sleeping off the feast: they had slipped sorrow's bonds,

Every man's birthright. The blighted ravager,  
Greedy for flesh, found his hunger,  
And in brutal onslaught, a berserker rush,  
Carried off thirty thanes to his hideaway.  
Thrilled and breathless, he bore his haul,  
Those bloody shambles, back to his lair.

### **Scourge of Grendel**

With the dawn's coming, in the daylight's glare,  
Grendel's mayhem was made known.  
From throats lately feasting broke forth a howl,  
A morning uproar. The mighty king,  
That storied warlord, sat stricken with grief,  
And suffered the sting of sorrow for his thanes  
When the spattered traces of the troll's footprints  
Were beheld by all. That hardship, loathsome  
And long-enduring, was indeed much.  
But the following night he fell on them again,  
Running amok remorselessly,  
Too firm now and flushed with his foul success.  
After that it was easy to find  
Those who would rather rest themselves  
In the outlying huts: the hard truth  
Of that hall-steward's spite, spelt in blood,  
A marked omen for the men who escaped  
The demon's clutches to keep their distance.  
So Grendel prevailed and vied against right,  
One against many, until that matchless hall  
Stood alone and avoided. The lord of the Shieldings  
Suffered that burden the brunt of twelve winters.  
And throughout that time each torment was felt,  
A wide-reaching woe. Word had spread  
To the sons of men, a sorrow well-known  
And grieved over in song, that Grendel warred  
The while with Hrothgar: a hateful rampage,  
Sin after sin, season after season,  
A siege without end. He desired no peace  
With any man among the Danes;  
There was no pause in slaughter nor payment forthcoming.  
No, none of the wise waited in hope  
For a splendid recompense from those rending hands.

But the haughty spirit was harrying them always,  
A shadow of death. He daunted or devoured  
Both bold and beardless, and, in unbroken night,  
Held the misty moors. What man can know  
Where the demonwise wend their steps?  
And so, the fell lonewolf, the foe of man,

Often accomplished his crimes and disgraces,  
His sordid torments. He seized Heorot,  
Made the adorned his den in the dark of night,  
But he could not lay hold of the highest throne,  
Nor might he look for the love of God.

Still, an awful feat; the friend of the Shieldings,  
Heavy of heart, took heed of his counselors,  
Strength seeking wisdom. They weighed all thoughts  
To find how the brave could best withstand  
A shocking onslaught. They would offer, at times,  
In heathen hallows unholy words  
To the soul-slayer to give succor and comfort  
Amid the curse of that land. It was custom with them,  
Their heathen hope. They held Hell dear,  
Nor did they pay mind to the Almighty Creator  
The Judge of deeds nor deem the Lord God,  
The Protector of heaven, praiseworthy,  
Though he wield all splendor. Woe to the man  
Who in dire peril plunges his soul  
Into the heart of the fire. He will feel no comfort.  
Damned are his ways. Well, though, the man  
Who may, after death, meet the Lord,  
And in the heart of the Father find his haven.

Throughout that sad time the son of Halfdane  
Wallowed in worry. The wise one could not  
Fend off this grievance—the grudgehard spite,  
The monstrous night-murder: the malice the land suffered  
Was too large, too loathsome, too long-enduring.

## **THE COMING OF BEOWULF TO HEOROT**

### **Beowulf's Voyage**

A hero in his homeland, Hygelac's thane  
In far Geatland, heard of Grendel's deeds.  
Mankind knew no one as mighty as he  
In this world at that time,  
As broad-armed or big-souled. He bid be rigged  
A sound sea-wanderer, and said he would seek  
Far over the swan road that famed king  
Who lacked strong men. Though he was loved by his people,  
No wise man gainsaid his going to sea.  
They spurred his high-heartedness and inspected the omens,  
While the champion gleaned a chosen few  
From the folk of the Geats. Fifteen in all  
Made their way to the longship. Learned in sea-lore,

A sailor made plain their pathway to the sea.

Days rose and died. Dawdling by the bank,  
The wave-topper waited. The warriors eagerly  
Clambered aboard while the breakers braided  
The sand with the sea. They stowed their gear,  
Their bright swords and banded armor,  
In the hull's hold. Then they heaved off  
In their well-rigged vessel on the wished-for voyage.  
The foam-shouldered boat, like a bird on the wing  
Wafted by the wind over waves, flew on,  
Until, the following day at the fitting time,  
The shapely prow had pressed so far  
That the seafarers caught sight of land,  
Shining cliffs, sheer banks,  
Wide headlands: and so the waters were crossed,  
Their sea-going at an end. Then up sprang  
The eager Geats onto the shore  
And moored their craft amid the clamor and din  
Of their gear and armor. They gave thanks  
To God that their sea-road had been smooth and easy.

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### Unferth's Challenge

Unferth spoke; Edglaf's son,  
Who shadowed the heels of his Shielding lord,  
Loosed a riddle of strife. The seastraying Beowulf  
And his gallant voyage were gall to him.  
It rankled his pride to reckon another  
Had won far more worldly honor  
Than he would ever earn himself.

"Are you truly that Beowulf who tried to best  
Breca in swimming the broad ocean,  
Where you tempted the flood in your towering pride  
And for bragging rights risked your lives  
On the high seas? Unheeded went the words  
Of friend and foe—you refused to be shamed  
From your pointless sport but paddled the water,  
Thatched the deep with the thrust of your arms,  
Swathed the waves with the weaving of your hands,  
And flew over the surface, while the sea frothed  
With winter's seething. For a week you fought  
In the fist of the sea, but in the surge, he outswam you,  
Showed greater mettle. On the morning tide  
The waters carried him to the coast of the Heathorams.  
He hurried on to his own dear country,  
Loved and admired, to the land of the Brondings,

To his rich holdings, where he had homestead,  
Tribe, and tribute. Truly, the son  
Of Beanstan made good on his boastful words.  
So I gather the end will be even worse  
If you try to last the length of a night  
Waiting for Grendel, great though the feats  
You may have accomplished in combat before."

**Beowulf's Reply**

Beowulf the offspring of Edgtheow replied,  
"Well, the ale must have addled you, Unferth my friend!  
You have blathered on about Breca and spoken  
Much of his travels. Truly, I say  
That I showed the most mettle on the waves,  
More than any other on the ocean before.  
As youngsters, we two had yearned for the bout,  
And though little better than boys at the time.  
We both had sworn to swim the high seas,  
To risk our lives. And risk them, we did.

As we paddled the currents, we clutched in our hands  
Bare blades, brought to fend off  
The fierce deepfiends. As fast as Breca was,  
He could swim the swells no swifter than I,  
Nor would I yet float far from him.  
We were side by side on the sea together  
The length of five nights when, at last, the sea  
Forced us apart—the foaming waves,  
The cold, north wind, and cloudy night,  
All loosed their battle-rage. The breakers grew savage:  
The wrath of the sea-beasts rose against us.  
A shelter for me was my shirt-mail then,  
Hand-linked and firm, a help against foes.  
It was this battle-rag, braided with gold,  
That lay on my breast when a lurking foe-beast  
Got a good hold and hauled me down,  
Grim in his grasp. Yet I was granted a chance  
To nick the brute with my blade's tip,  
My battle-stinger. At a stroke of my hand  
The great mermonster met his end.

And so, the nasty nibblers now and again  
Would loom below. I looked to my ladle,  
My dear sword, and served them well:  
Not that they found the feast to their taste,  
The wicked seabane, or savored much  
The banquet they sat to near the sea floor.  
In the morning light they lay about,

Cutter-scuttled, scraps on the waves,  
Hushed by my sword. Since then, I trust  
None have pestered the passage of sailors  
Over the lashing waves. The light of God's beacon  
Broke from the east, the ocean grew calm,  
And suddenly I saw the soaring cliffwall's  
Windworn face. Fate often prospers  
The undoomed man if he's undaunted as well.

Whatever the case, it came to pass  
That nine were slain. Never have I heard  
Of so hard-won a scrap held by night  
Under heaven's hollow, or so hapless a man.  
Though I had cleared the clutch of danger,  
I wearied of wayfaring; and so the waves bore me  
On a surging current to the seething fjords  
Of the Finnish coast. I cannot recall  
Having heard of you in such a hard tussle,  
Any real blade-shaker. Breca had never  
Seen much swordplay, and certainly neither of you  
Ever pulled off so daring a deed yourself  
With a bloodhoned edge. I boast no more of it.  
You sheathed your own blade in your brother's flesh,  
Killed your own kin. And as cunning as you are,  
You still will have hell to pay for it.  
I say to you truly, Son of Edglaf,  
That Grendel could never have aggrieved your lord  
With so many crimes, nor could that menace  
Have caused harm in Heorot, if your heart were as bold  
As your brazen tongue boasts you are.  
But he knows by now he need not fear  
The open hatred and honed sword-might  
Of your own tribe, the Triumph-Shieldings.  
He asks a high price, people of the Danes,  
And rewards you with what? He wars at pleasure,  
Rends you and ravages you, reckoning no payback  
Is forthcoming from the Speardanes. He will find soon, however,  
Grit and gumption enough, how a Geat unforeseen  
Will bring the battle to him; and may he that wishes to  
Go blithe to the banquet when the beams of the morning  
Fall on men's faces the following day,  
And heaven's own sentry southers in the sky."