4. Beowulf’s Death

Then Wiglaf with the treasures found his King and Friend,
His glorious Chief, a-bleeding,1 near his life’s end.
Again he plashed2 with water; until the point of word
Pierced through the breast-hoard3 of Beowulf, the old,
And spake4 he in his grieving, with gaze upon the gold:
“For this splendour-booty5 be thanks unto the Lord,
Unto the King-of-Glory, for what I here behold,
To God, the everlasting, in that ’tis mine to give
Such gifts unto my people, while an hour I live.
Now have I bartered for the hoard6 of gold
The end of this my old life. Look ye7 well, my fere,8
To my people’s needs now. I’m no longer here.
Bid the battle-bold men build a mound9 to me,
Shining, after death-pyre,10 on foreland11 by the sea;
Out upon Whale’s Ness,12 it shall lift on high,
Reminder to my people of the man was I,
That ever thereafter sailor-folk will hail
“Beowulf’s Barrow” when home from far they sail,
O’er the misty ocean, past the Ness-of-Whale.”
From his neck he doffed14 then, he, the Sturdy-Souled,15
And gave to his Retainer,16 a collar of gold;
Gave the young Spearman his helmet gold-bedight,17
His ring and his byrnie,18 bade him use them right:
“Thou art only remnant of our common line,
The Kin19 of the Waegmundis, Wiglaf mine.
Wyrd20 has swept before ye all my stock and stem,21
In their glory. I must after them.”
The last of words was that for which that aged Heart had breath,
Ere,23 he chose the bale-fire,24 the hot waves of death.
And so from breast of Beowulf the soul took flight
To seek the just award of souls soothfast25 in the right.26

The passage describes the last moments of Beowulf’s life. He has just been
wounded by the dragon and is dying. Near him is young Wiglaf. The two
characters are quite different from each other in age, behaviour and rank:
Beowulf lovingly calls Wiglaf “Wiglaf mine” (l. 25) while the boy considers
him his “King and Friend” (l. 1). Wiglaf is probably related to Beowulf since
he calls him the “only remnant of our common line” (l. 24) and apparently
appoints him to succeed him on the throne, asking him to look after his
people’s needs (ll. 11-12): “to this end he passes on to him his own collar of
gold, his helmet, his ring and his “byrnie.”
Beowulf seems to foreshadow the end of his own people; he knows he is
going to die and asks Wiglaf to build a mound for him on Whale’s Ness.

1. This modern version is by William E. Leonard (Beowulf, a New Verse Translation, New
York, 1923); though the original is not rhymed, this modern version is.