



SELECTED READINGS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Volume 1



英国文学作品选读

**SELECTED READINGS
IN
ENGLISH LITERATURE**

Volume I

(In Three Volumes)

Edited With Annotations

by

Chen Jia

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FOREWORD

Selected Readings in English Literature is to serve as a textbook for *Readings in English Literature*, a companion-course to *History of English Literature*, for third- and fourth-year students majoring in English in Chinese colleges and universities.

The selected readings included herein are all taken from original writings in English literature through the centuries, with the exception of excerpts from *Beowulf* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* for which modern English translations are given in the place of the original works in Old English and Middle English. As a rule, short texts chosen are given in their entirety, while longer works are represented by excerpts. In accordance with the wishes of a number of teachers who will be using this book, we have included more selections here than are necessary for normal classroom use so that teachers may feel free to make their own choice.

Ample notes for difficult words and phrases in the selections are provided in simple English, in rare cases with added brief explanations in Chinese.

There are short introductory remarks to precede each selection and there are two appendices at the end of the book: Appendix I giving biographical sketches of the authors of the selections and Appendix II a list of books (with specified editions and dates of publication), from which the texts in this anthology are taken.

We have tried here to give selections of representative works in English literature from its beginnings to the 20th century, but our personal inclinations make it almost impossible to avoid arbitrary choices. We welcome suggestions for improvement from our readers so that revisions may be made from time to time.

Finally we wish to show our gratitude to all those who gave us their invaluable assistance and encouragement in the course of our

preparations for this compilation.

For assistance with the biographical sketches of the authors represented, with the introductory remarks to the selections and with the notes to the texts, the editor wishes to express his indebtedness first of all to Associate Professor Xie Chulan of Nanjing University and next to Mr. Yang Renjing, also a colleague at Nanjing University, and to two graduate students at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Liu Haiping and Wang Xisu. Acknowledgments are here made also to other friends and colleagues who have at different times contributed to the making of this book. In conclusion, the editor wants to show his gratitude to all the participants at a conference held shortly before the completion of the book, especially to Professors Li Funing, Yang Zhouhan of Beijing University, Wu Jingrong of Foreign Languages Institute of Beijing, Dai Liuling of Zhongshan University, Zhang Junchuan of Hangzhou University, Huang Hongxu of Normal University of Hebei and Zhang Jian of Shandong University, for their helpful suggestions on the selection of the texts, on the making of the notes and on other relevant matters.

Chen Jia

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BEOWULF

(Excerpts from the poem)

Beowulf is the most remarkable literary work in Old English that has been preserved. Existing at first in the oral tradition, the poem was sung probably at the end of the 6th century or the beginning of the 7th. About a century later, it was first written down as an epic. The manuscript preserved today belongs to the tenth century, consisting altogether of 3183 lines of alliterative verse in Old English.

The scene of the story is laid first in Denmark. The great hall Heorot, built by the Danish king Hrothgar for big gatherings and feasts with his followers, has been laid waste for twelve years by a monster named Grendel who has overwhelmed many brave warriors in his nightly visits to the place. The dreadful tidings spread to the Geats, a neighbouring tribe across the sea, in the south of Sweden. Beowulf, a nephew to the Geat king Hygelac and a famed slayer of monsters, sails to Denmark with fourteen companions and offers to fight with Grendel. In a terrible hand-to-hand battle at night, Beowulf tears off an arm of the monster who is mortally wounded and flees to his den beneath the sea.

The Danes rejoice over the victory, but in the night that follows, Grendel's mother comes to avenge her son and kills one of Hrothgar's kinsmen. Beowulf follows her to her cave under the waves, and in another terrific combat the Geat hero destroys the she-monster with a magic sword hung on the wall of the cave. The victor returns and a merry feast is held to celebrate the happy event. Beowulf is rewarded with gifts and he and his companions return to their native land.

Then in the last part of the poem the scene shifts to the land of the Geats. Beowulf has reigned over his people for fifty years, and a fire-dragon is now laying waste the country because one of the Geats has offended the monster by stealing a precious cup from the latter's hoard of treasure. Beowulf fights the dragon fearlessly. The dragon is killed but the aged king receives a mortal wound. The poem ends with the description of the hero's funeral and the people's panegyric of the dead king's virtues.

"Beowulf" is a powerful epic portraying the life and adventures of the Anglo-Saxon people and their national hero when they still lived on the European Continent and had to struggle against the elemental forces. As

it took several centuries for the epic to evolve from its early oral version to its present form in the preserved manuscript, the poem reflects both the earlier epoch of pagan tribalism and the later era of Christianized feudal society. The chief significance of the epic lies in the vivid portrayal of a great national hero, strong and courageous and selfless and ever helpful to his people and his kinsfolk.

The excerpts given below are taken from different parts of a prose translation in modern English by David Wright. The passage from "III" tells of Beowulf's departure for Denmark, near the beginning of the epic. The section from "VI" gives Beowulf's speech upon his arrival in Denmark when he is received by Danish King Hrothgar and his followers. The selections from "X", "XI" and "XII" describe the eve of the battle between Beowulf and Grendel, the battle itself and the hero's victory over the monster. The passage taken from "XLIII" is the concluding part of the poem, describing Beowulf's funeral and his people's eulogy of their dead king and hero.

III

But one of Hygelac's followers,¹ in his far-off country, heard about Grendel's doings. Well-born, stalwart, and the strongest of living men, this man was a hero among the Geats. He ordered a seaworthy vessel² to be equipped, and announced that he was crossing the sea to pay a visit to Hrothgar, since that famous prince stood in need of men. The wise³ did not really blame him for undertaking this expedition, although they loved him; but they urged him on, and watched the omens.⁴ From among the Geats the hero picked the bravest men that he could find, and took fourteen of them with him to the ship. Himself an experienced seaman, he led the way to the shore.

VI

... Beowulf spoke up.

'I salute you, Hrothgar! I am a nephew of Hygelac, and one of his followers. In my youth I have undertaken many notable exploits. I heard about the Grendel affair in my native country; for seamen

relate that this great hall stands empty and useless to all once the sun sets below the horizon. So the best and wisest among my countrymen urged me to visit you, King Hrothgar, because they knew of my vast strength. They were eyewitnesses of it when, stained with the blood of my adversaries, I emerged from a fight in which I destroyed an entire family of giants — capturing five of them — besides killing, by night, a number of sea-monsters. Although hard pressed, I destroyed the brutes (who had courted trouble⁵) and avenged their attacks upon the Geats. And now I mean to deal single-handed with the monstrous Grendel. King of the Danes, protector of fighting-men, I shall ask of you one favour, which you will not deny to me now that I have come so far. It is that I alone, with my tough company of fighting-men, may be allowed to purge Heorot.

‘They tell me that in his vain glory the monster is contemptuous of weapons.⁶ Therefore, as I wish to keep the good opinion of my lord Hygelac, I propose to dispense with any kind of sword or shield during the combat. Foe against foe, I shall fight the fiend to the death with my bare hands. Whichever of us is killed must resign himself to the verdict of God. Should Grendel prevail, as he has often done, I suppose that he will eat the Geat people, the flower of men, fearlessly in the hall of battle. And if death claims me, there will be no need for you to go to the expense of funeral rites, because Grendel will be in possession of my bloodstained corpse and will carry it off to devour. He will stain the swamps with my blood, and swallow me up without the least remorse; in which case you will have no need to trouble about the disposal of my body. If I am killed in combat, send to Hygelac the coat of mail⁷ which I am wearing. For it is the best corselet⁸ in the world, the work of Weland Smith,⁹ and an heirloom that once belonged to my grandfather Hrethel. Fate must decide.’

X

... the hero laid his cheek against the pillow. Around him many

brave seafarers sank to rest in the hall. Not one supposed that he would ever leave it to revisit his native land, his family, or the town where he grew up; for they knew that in the past slaughter had carried off far too many of the Danes in that banqueting hall. But God gave the luck of battle to the Geats. He furnished them with help, so that they all overcame their enemy through the skill and strength of one man. It is sure that almighty God has always ruled over the human race.

In black night the prowler of the dark¹⁰ came stalking. The soldiers who were supposed to defend the gabled hall¹¹ were asleep — all except one. It was generally believed that the fiend could not drag people into the lower shades¹² against the will of God. Yet Beowulf, keeping an angry watch against the enemy, waited for the outcome of the battle with growing fury.

XI

Now Grendel, with the wrath of God on his back,¹³ came out of the moors and the mist-ridden fells¹⁴ with the intention of trapping some man in Heorot. Under the clouds he strode, until he came in sight of the rich banqueting hall glistening with plated gold. It was not the first time that he had paid a visit to Hrothgar's hall; but never before or afterwards did he experience such bad luck with its defenders. When the unhappy creature approached Heorot, the door, which was secured with wrought-iron bars,¹⁵ burst open at the touch of his talons. In his malicious fury he tore down the entrance of the building. Then the raging fiend, with horrible firelit eyes, stepped quickly upon the tessellated floor.¹⁶ Inside the hall he saw a great band of brothers-in-arms sleeping together, at which he laughed to himself, for the cruel demon, who meant to kill every single one of them before daybreak, saw before him the prospect of a huge feast. But after that night it was not his luck to devour any more people. For Hygelac's mighty kinsmen was watching to see how the marauder¹⁷ would set about his murderous business.

The fiend wasted no time, but for a start snatched up a sleeping man. He tore him apart in an instant, crunched the body, drunk blood from its veins, and gulped it down in great bites until he had wholly swallowed the dead man, even the hands and feet. Then he advanced nearer. Reaching out with his open hand, the fiend was about to take hold of the hero on his bed. But Beowulf at once saw the hostile move and propped himself up on his elbow. The arch beast soon realized that nowhere in the world had he ever met a man with such might in the grip of his hand. Although terror-struck, he could get away none the faster. He had never met anything like this in his life before; his one idea was to slink off to his hiding-place to rejoin the fellowship of devils. But at this point Beowulf remembered the promise which he had made earlier in the evening. He stood upright and gripped Grendel so tightly that the talons cracked to bursting. The monster fought to escape, but Beowulf closed with him.¹⁸ The fiend was trying to break loose and make a bolt for¹⁹ his fen-refuge;²⁰ yet, as he knew only too well, his talons were fast in an enemy clutch. That was a fatal expedition which the demon made to Heorot. The hall thundered with the hubbub. Every one of the Danes who lived in the stronghold, soldiers and chieftains alike, was seized with extreme panic. The furious contestants for the mastery of the hall raged till the building rang. It was a miracle that the beautiful banqueting hall withstood such combatants without falling flat to the ground; but it was firmly braced inside and out with iron clamps forged by skilled craftsmen. They say that where the two antagonists fought, bench after bench inlaid with gold was uprooted from the floor. Till then the most far-sighted among the Danes had never imagined that anybody might wreck their splendid ivory-inlaid hall by ordinary means, or destroy it by dint of cunning (barring fire,²¹ which would envelop it in flame). A stupendous din went up. Pure terror laid hold of the Danes, and of everyone outside the hall who heard the howling; the dreadful scream of God's adversary²² wailing his defeat; the prisoner of hell²³ bellowing over his wound. He was

fast in the clutch of the strongest man alive.

XII

The hero had no intention of allowing the murderous visitor to escape with his life, for it was of no use to anyone. Many of Beowulf's followers brandished their ancestral swords to defend, if possible, the life of their beloved leader. When they joined the struggle, meaning to hack at Grendel from every quarter until they found a vulnerable spot,²⁴ these stout-hearted fightingmen did not realize that no earthly blade or sword of the finest metal could touch the miscreant,²⁵ who had laid a spell on every kind of edged weapon.²⁶ His death was to be a miserable one, and his outcast spirit to pass far into the power of devils. It was now that Grendel, the enemy of God who had wantonly committed numberless atrocities against the human race, discovered that his bodily strength was of no use when the valiant kinsman of Hygelac had got hold of him by the claw. Neither would give the other quarter.²⁷ The fiend suffered excruciating pain. An enormous wound became visible in his shoulder; his sinews snapped, and tendons burst. Victory was Beowulf's. Mortally wounded, Grendel had to take to his heels and make for his wretched home in the fens with the certainty that his days were numbered²⁸ and his life at an end.

By the close of that bloody fight the wish of all the Danes was fulfilled. It was thus that the resolute, cool-headed man who had come from a distant land purged Hrothgar's hall and defended it from attack. The Geat prince rejoiced in his night's work. For he had made good his boast to the Danes and put right their trouble, the nightmare²⁹ (no small affliction) which they had been forced to suffer. When the hero set up the talon, arm, and shoulder — Grendel's entire grasp³⁰ — under the great gables of Heorot, the evidence spoke for itself.

XLIII

The people of the Geats prepared for Beowulf, as he had asked of them, a splendid pyre³¹ hung about with helmets, shields, and shining corselets. Then, mourning, the soldiers laid their loved and illustrious prince in the midst. Upon the hill the men-at-arms lit a gigantic funeral fire. Black wood-smoke whirled over the conflagration; the roar of flames mixed with the noise of weeping, until the furious draught subsided and the white-hot body crumbled to pieces. Sadly they complained of their grief and of the death of their king. A Geat woman³² with braided hair keened³³ a dirge in Beowulf's memory, repeating again and again that she feared bad times were in the way, with bloodshed, terror, captivity, and shame. Heaven swallowed up the smoke.

Upon the headland the Geats erected a broad, high tumulus,³⁴ plainly visible to distant seamen. In ten days they completed the building of the hero's beacon. Round his ashes they built the finest vault that their most skilful men could devise. Within the barrow they placed collars, brooches, and all the trappings which they had plundered from the treasure-hoard.³⁵ They buried the gold and left that princely treasure to the keeping of the earth, where it yet remains, as useless to men as it was before.

Then twelve chieftains, all sons of princes, rode round the barrow lamenting their loss, speaking of their king, reciting an elegy, and acclaiming the hero. They praised his manhood and extolled his heroic deeds. It is right that men should pay homage to their king with words, and cherish him in their hearts, when he has taken leave of the body. So the Geats who had shared his hall mourned the death of their lord, and said that of all kings he was the gentlest and most gracious of men, the kindest to his people and the most desirous of renown.

NOTES

1. one of Hygelac's followers — referring to Beowulf.

2. **a seaworthy vessel** — a ship in a fit condition to sail on the seas.
3. **The wise** — referring to Hygelac and other old men of wisdom among the Geats.
4. **watched the omens** — carefully observed any prophetic signs that might foretell future events.
5. **courted trouble** — asked for trouble.
6. **the monster is contemptuous of weapons** — The monster holds the weapons in contempt (meaning: the monster trusts to bodily strength more than to the use of weapons in single combats).
7. **coat of mail** — 铠甲.
8. **corselet** — piece of armour covering the body.
9. **Weland Smith** — Weland is the name of a famous smith and magician in Germanic legends.
10. **the prowler of the dark** — referring to Grendel the monster (prowler — one who goes about in search of prey).
11. **the gabled hall** — referring to Heorot.
12. **the lower shades** — the underworld or hell, the place where the spirits of the dead go.
13. **with the wrath of God on his back** — carrying with him the wrath of God, i.e., being doomed to destruction because God was angry with him.
14. **the mist-ridden fells** — mountain slopes covered with mist.
15. **secured with wrought-iron bars** — fastened tightly with bars made of wrought-iron (wrought-iron = iron beaten into shape by tools 铸铁).
16. **the tessellated floor** — the pavement made of many small blocks of stone.
17. **marauder** — plunderer, referring here to Grendel.
18. **closed with him** — grappled with him.
19. **make a bolt for** — make a sudden start for, run away suddenly.
20. **his fen-refuge** — his place of shelter from danger in the low marshy land.
21. **barring fire** — except for fire.
22. **God's adversary** — referring to Grendel.
23. **the prisoner of hell** — referring to Grendel.
24. **a vulnerable spot** — a soft spot on the body that may be wounded.
25. **no earthly blade or sword of the finest metal could touch the miscreant** — implying that no ordinary weapon on earth, even if it were made of the finest metal, had the power to harm Grendel ("the miscreant" refers to Grendel).
26. **laid a spell on every kind of edged weapon** — uttered words of magic so that no edged weapon could harm him.
27. **give the other quarter** — let the other live (quarter = exemption from death that is granted to an enemy who surrenders in battle).
28. **his days were numbered** — He had only a certain number of days to live, he could not live long.
29. **the nightmare** — referring to the horrible appearance of Grendel who had brought so much suffering to the Danes.