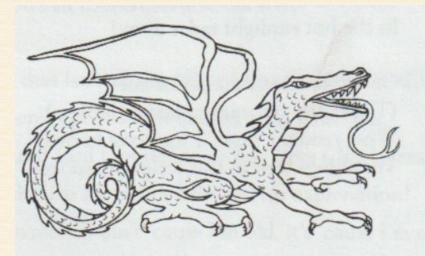
Dragon-Fighter By Patricia Masson

This poem won the 1988 Cædmon Prize for poetry in the Old English style (awarded by Tha Engliscan Gesithas, a British historical society). It was originally published in Withowinde 83, pp. 8-9.

Cursed is the country! · Kingless, nigh hopeless Of any chance of change · in their cheerless doom Of oppression and pain, \cdot the people have suffered long and with loathing, · for they lie in thrall to a dread demon · Dragon and warrior both he is, and baneful. · A blaze in the darkness and in sudden slaughter \cdot sleep is ended, farmland and forest-land · with a flame-crop replanted that rises, ripens, · reddens, and withers at last to a drear desert · At the dawn's breaking he shifts his shape, \cdot shows now the semblance of mocked humanity. · Men he has recruited by force or fee \cdot follow and serve him and call him King. With the coming of dark and the fading of light, \cdot as the falling sun's undermost edge \cdot meets the earth's far brink, the linden-shield · lifted to protect him and bloody broadsword · brandished in anger to deal death-blows · drop in a moment clattering in his clutches. · -- claws cannot grip them then his byrnie bursts · as his body grows vast, and like scabs on his skin \cdot scales are seen forming. First of all his flesh · the fierce-eyed countenance And haughty head \cdot are wholly changed, And while manlike on mould \cdot the monster stands A fell fountain of fire · forced from his grinning jaws, Weapon of his worm-shape, · worse to contend with Than sword-blade or spear-point, · seeks out its victim Whose shape shrivels down · into sheer cinders to be wafted away \cdot on the winds of night.

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A stranger came striding by. · Destruction and harm on all sides he saw, \cdot and the sufferings of the people grieved him greatly. · Grim in warfare though young in years, · and used to battle he would fight to set free \cdot folk so tormented. Others had ere this · uttered bold speeches to the merciless monster; • maiming and slaughter rewarded each of them. • They weakened in the fight while the dragon-man endured. · Doughtier is this hero, strong enough and steadfast · to withstand all harm and by courage and cunning · conquer the enemy. On a ruined riverbank, · to raven-blackness Charred by dragon-breath, · he challenged the tyrant, facing him fearlessly, · defying his menace; waits now in that wasteland · his word to make good either to fall in the field \cdot or free them from their thraldom.



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