

Prologue

Listen!

We have heard of the glory in bygone days
of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes,¹
how those noble lords did lofty deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing² seized the mead-benches
from many tribes, troops of enemies, 5
struck fear into earls. Though he first was
found a waif, he awaited solace for that —
he grew under heaven and prospered in honor
until every one of the encircling nations
over the whale's-riding³ had to obey him, 10
grant him tribute. That was a good king!
A boy was later born to him,
young in the courts, whom God sent
as a solace to the people — he saw their need,
the dire distress they had endured, lordless, 15
for such a long time. The Lord of Life,
Wielder of Glory, gave him worldly honor;
Beowulf,⁴ the son of Scyld, was renowned,
his fame spread wide in Scandinavian lands.
Thus should a young man bring about good 20
with pious gifts from his father's possessions,
so that later in life loyal comrades
will stand beside him when war comes,
the people will support him — with praiseworthy deeds
a man will prosper among any people. 25

Scyld passed away at his appointed hour,
the mighty lord went into the Lord's keeping;
they bore him down to the brimming sea,

1 The Danes are described by many different epithets in the poem; see the Glossary of Proper Names (p. 145) for further instances.

2 The name means "Shield, Son of Sheaf (i.e., of grain)." The mysterious origins of Scyld, who seems to arrive providentially from nowhere and is returned to the sea after his death, have occasioned much critical speculation.

3 A condensed descriptive image of the sea—the riding-place of whales. Elsewhere the sea is the "gannet's bath" and the "swan's riding."

4 Not the monster-slaying hero of the title, but an early Danish king. Many scholars argue that the original name was Beow.

his dear comrades, as he himself had commanded
 while the friend of the Scyldings¹ wielded speech — 30
 that dear land-ruler had long held power.
 In the harbor stood a ring-prowed ship,
 icy, outbound, a nobleman's vessel;
 there they laid down their dear lord,
 dispenser of rings, in the bosom of the ship, 35
 glorious, by the mast. There were many treasures
 loaded there, adornments from distant lands;
 I have never heard of a more lovely ship
 bedecked with battle-weapons and war-gear,
 blades and byrnies.² In its bosom lay 40
 many treasures, which were to travel
 far with him into the keeping of the flood.
 With no fewer gifts did they furnish him there,
 the wealth of nations, than those did who 45
 at his beginning first sent him forth
 alone over the waves while still a small child.³
 Then they set a golden ensign
 high over his head, and let the waves have him,
 gave him to the sea with grieving spirits,
 mournful in mind. Men do not know 50
 how to say truly — not trusted counselors,
 nor heroes under the heavens — who received that cargo.

I

Then Beowulf Scylding, beloved king,
 was famous in the strongholds of his folk
 for a long while — his father having passed away, 55
 a lord from earth — until after him arose
 the great Healfdene, who held the glorious Scyldings
 all his life, ancient and fierce in battle.
 Four children, all counted up,

1 The Scyldings are the Danes, "sons of Scyld."

2 A *byrnie* is a coat of ring-mail.

3 Scyld was found destitute—this statement is an example of litotes, or ironic understatement, not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

were born to that bold leader of hosts: 60
Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga the Good,
I heard that ... was Onela's queen,¹
dear bedfellow of the Battle-Scylfing.

Then success in war was given to Hrothgar,
honor in battle, so that his beloved kinsmen 65
eagerly served him, until the young soldiers grew
into a mighty troop of men. It came to his mind
that he should order a hall-building,
have men make a great mead-house
which the sons of men should remember forever,² 70
and there within he would share everything
with young and old that God had given him,
except for the common land and the lives of men.
Then the work, as I've heard, was widely proclaimed
to many nations throughout this middle-earth, 75
to come adorn the folk-stead. It came to pass
swiftly among men, and it was soon ready,
the greatest of halls; he gave it the name "Heorot,"³
he whose words were heeded far and wide.
He remembered his boast; he gave out rings, 80
treasure at table. The hall towered
high and horn-gabled — it awaited hostile fires,
the surges of war; the time was not yet at hand
when the sword-hate of sworn in-laws
should arise after ruthless violence.⁴ 85

A bold demon who waited in darkness
wretchedly suffered all the while,
for every day he heard the joyful din
loud in the hall, with the harp's sound,

1 A name is missing from the manuscript here; it has been conjectured from parallel sources that it should be Yrse, or Ursula. The Swedish ("Scylfing") king Onela appears later in the story, causing much distress to Beowulf's nation.

2 Or "a greater mead-hall / than the sons of men had ever heard of." The reading adopted here is that of Mitchell and Robinson.

3 "Hart." An object recovered from the burial-mound at Sutton Hoo, perhaps a royal insignia, is surmounted by the image of a hart.

4 The hall Heorot is apparently fated to be destroyed in a battle between Hrothgar and his son-in-law Ingeld the Heathobard, a conflict predicted by Beowulf in 2024-69. The battle itself happens outside the action of the poem.

the clear song of the scop.¹ He who knew 90
 how to tell the ancient tale of the origin of men
 said that the Almighty created the earth,
 a bright and shining plain, by seas embraced,
 and set, triumphantly, the sun and moon
 to light their beams for those who dwell on land, 95
 adorned the distant corners of the world
 with leaves and branches, and made life also,
 all manner of creatures that live and move.
 — Thus this lordly people lived in joy,
 blessedly, until one began 100
 to work his foul crimes — a fiend from hell.
 This grim spirit was called Grendel,
 mighty stalker of the marches, who held
 the moors and fens; this miserable man
 lived for a time in the land of giants, 105
 after the Creator had condemned him
 among Cain's race — when he killed Abel
 the eternal Lord avenged that death.²
 No joy in that feud — the Maker forced him
 far from mankind for his foul crime. 110
 From thence arose all misbegotten things,
 trolls and elves and the living dead,
 and also the giants who strove against God
 for a long while³ — He gave them their reward for that.

II

When night descended he went to seek out 115
 the high house, to see how the Ring-Danes
 had bedded down after their beer-drinking.
 He found therein a troop of nobles

1 A *scop* is a poet-singer. This is the first of several self-reflexive scenes of poetic entertainment in the poem.

2 The story of Cain and Abel is told in Genesis 4:1-16.

3 The poet lists a collection of Germanic, classical, and biblical horrors; all are ultimately traced to their biblical roots, though the characters in the poem are not aware of this.

asleep after the feast; they knew no sorrow
 or human misery. The unholy creature, 120
 grim and ravenous, was ready at once,
 ruthless and cruel, and took from their rest
 thirty thanes;¹ thence he went
 rejoicing in his booty, back to his home,
 to seek out his abode with his fill of slaughter. 125
 When in the dim twilight just before dawn
 Grendel's warfare was made known to men,
 then lamentation was lifted up after the feasting,
 a great morning-sound. Unhappy sat
 the mighty lord, long-good nobleman; 130
 he suffered greatly, grieved for his thanes,
 once they beheld that hostile one's tracks,
 the accursed spirit; that strife was too strong,
 loathsome and long.

It was no long wait,
 but the very next night he committed 135
 a greater murder, mourned not at all
 for his feuds and sins — he was too fixed in them.
 Then it was easy to find a thane
 who sought his rest elsewhere, farther away,
 a bed in the outbuildings,² when they pointed out — 140
 truly announced with clear tokens —
 that hall-thane's hate; he who escaped the fiend
 held himself afterwards farther away and safer.
 So he ruled, and strove against right,
 one against all, until empty stood 145
 the best of houses. And so it was for a great while —
 for twelve long winters the lord of the Scyldings
 suffered his grief, every sort of woe,
 great sorrow, when to the sons of men
 it became known, and carried abroad 150
 in sad tales, that Grendel strove

1 A "thane" is a retainer, one of the troop of companions surrounding a heroic king in Germanic literature.

2 Hrothgar's hall is apparently surrounded by smaller buildings, including the women's quarters (see lines 662-65, 920-24). Under normal circumstances the men sleep together in the hall, ready for battle (1239-50).

long with Hrothgar, bore his hatred,
 sins and feuds, for many seasons,
 perpetual conflict; he wanted no peace
 with any man of the Danish army, 155
 nor ceased his deadly hatred, nor settled with money,
 nor did any of the counselors need to expect
 bright compensation from the killer's hands,¹
 for the great ravager relentlessly stalked,
 a dark death-shadow, lurked and struck 160
 old and young alike, in perpetual night
 held the misty moors. Men do not know
 whither such whispering demons wander about.

Thus the foe of mankind, fearsome and solitary,
 often committed his many crimes, 165
 cruel humiliations; he occupied Heorot,
 the jewel-adorned hall, in the dark nights —
 he saw no need to salute the throne,
 he scorned the treasures; he did not know their love.²
 That was deep misery to the lord of the Danes, 170
 crushing his spirit. Many a strong man sat
 in secret counsel, considered advice,
 what would be best for the brave at heart
 to save themselves from the sudden attacks.
 At times they offered honor to idols 175
 at pagan temples, prayed aloud
 that the soul-slayer³ might offer assistance
 in the country's distress. Such was their custom,
 the hope of heathens — they remembered hell
 in their minds, they did not know the Maker, 180
 the Judge of deeds, they did not know the Lord God,
 or even how to praise the heavenly Protector,
 Wielder of glory. Woe unto him

1 Germanic and Anglo-Saxon law allowed that a murderer could make peace with the family of his victim by paying compensation, or *wergild*. The amount of compensation varied with the rank of the victim.

2 This is a much-disputed passage; my reading follows a suggestion made by Fred C. Robinson in "Why is Grendel's Not Greeting the *gifstol* a *wraec micel*?" and repeated in Mitchell and Robinson's *Beowulf*.

3 I.e., the Devil. In the Middle Ages the gods of the pagans were often regarded as demons in disguise.

who must thrust his soul through wicked force
in the fire's embrace, expect no comfort, 185
no way to change at all! It shall be well for him
who can seek the Lord after his deathday
and find security in the Father's embrace.

III

With the sorrows of that time the son of Healfdene
seethed constantly; nor could the wise hero 190
turn aside his woe — too great was the strife,
long and loathsome, which befell that nation,
violent, grim, cruel, greatest of night-evils.

Then from his home the thane of Hygelac,¹
a good man among the Geats, heard of Grendel's deeds — 195
he was of mankind the strongest of might
in those days of this life,
noble and mighty. He commanded to be made
a good wave-crosser, said that he would seek out
that war-king over the swan's-riding, 200
the renowned prince who was in need of men.
Wise men did not dissuade him at all
from that journey, though he was dear to them;
they encouraged his bold spirit, inspected the omens.
From the Geatish nation that good man 205
had chosen the boldest champions, the best
he could find; as one of fifteen
he sought the sea-wood. A wise sailor
showed the way to the edge of the shore.
The time came — the craft was on the waves, 210
moored under the cliffs. Eager men
climbed on the prow — the currents eddied,
sea against sand — the soldiers bore
into the bosom of the ship their bright gear,
fine polished armor; the men pushed off 215
on their wished-for journey in that wooden vessel.

1 The hero is not named until more than a hundred lines later. Hygelac is his uncle and king. On Hygelac as Chlochilaicus, see Appendix A1; see also Appendix A2.

Over the billowing waves, urged by the wind,
the foamy-necked floater flew like a bird,
until in due time on the second day
the curved-prowed vessel had come so far 220
that the seafarers sighted land,
shining shore-cliffs, steep mountains,
wide headlands — then the waves were crossed,
the journey at an end. Thence up quickly
the people of the Weders¹ climbed onto the plain, 225
moored their ship, shook out their mail-shirts,
their battle-garments; they thanked God
that the sea-paths had been smooth for them.

When from the wall the Scyldings' watchman,
whose duty it was to watch the sea-cliffs, 230
saw them bear down the gangplank bright shields,
ready battle-gear, he was bursting with curiosity
in his mind to know who these men were.
This thane of Hrothgar rode his horse
down to the shore, and shook mightily 235
his strong spear, and spoke a challenge:
“What are you, warriors in armor, wearing
coats of mail, who have come thus sailing
over the sea-road in a tall ship,
hither over the waves? Long have I been 240
the coast-warden, and kept sea-watch
so that no enemies with fleets and armies
should ever attack the land of the Danes.
Never more openly have there ever come
shield-bearers here, nor have you heard 245
any word of leave from our warriors
or consent of kinsmen. I have never seen
a greater earl on earth than that one among you,
a man in war-gear; that is no mere courtier,
honored only in weapons — unless his looks belie him, 250
his noble appearance! Now I must know
your lineage, lest you go hence
as false spies, travel further

¹ The Weders are the Geats.

into Danish territory. Now, you sea-travelers
from a far-off land, listen to my
simple thought — the sooner the better,
you must make clear from whence you have come.”¹ 255

IV

The eldest one answered him,
leader of the troop, unlocked his word-hoard:
“We are men of the Geatish nation 260
and Hygelac’s hearth-companions.
My father was well-known among men,
a noble commander named Ecgtheow;
he saw many winters before he passed away,
ancient, from the court; nearly everyone 265
throughout the world remembers him well.
With a friendly heart have we come
seeking your lord, the son of Healfdene,
guardian of his people; be of good counsel to us!
We have a great mission to that famous man, 270
ruler of the Danes; nor should any of it be
hidden, I think. You know, if things are
as we have truly heard tell,
that among the Scyldings some sort of enemy,
a hidden evildoer, in the dark nights 275
makes known his terrible mysterious violence,
shame and slaughter. With a generous spirit
I can counsel Hrothgar, advise him how,
wise old king, he may overcome this fiend —
if a change should ever come for him, 280
a remedy for the evil of his afflictions,
and his seething cares turn cooler;
or else forever afterwards a time of anguish
he shall suffer, his sad necessity, while there stands
in its high place the best of houses.” 285

1 See Appendix E for a selection of other translations of this section of the poem, lines 229-57.

The watchman spoke, as he sat on his horse,
 a fearless officer: "A sharp shield-warrior
 must be a judge of both things,
 words and deeds, if he would think well.
 I understand that to the Scylding lord 290
 you are a friendly force. Go forth, and bear
 weapons and armor — I shall guide your way;
 and I will command my young companions
 to guard honorably against all enemies
 your ship, newly-tarred, upon the sand, 295
 to watch it until the curved-necked wood
 bears hence across the ocean-streams
 a beloved man to the borders of the Weders —
 and such of these good men as will be granted
 that they survive the storm of battle." 300
 They set off — their vessel stood still,
 the roomy ship rested in its riggings,
 fast at anchor. Boar-figures shone
 over gold-plated cheek-guards,¹
 gleaming, fire-hardened; they guarded the lives 305
 of the grim battle-minded. The men hastened,
 marched together, until they could make out
 the timbered hall, splendid and gold-adorned —
 the most famous building among men
 under the heavens — where the high king waited; 310
 its light shone over many lands.
 Their brave guide showed them the bright court
 of the mighty ones, so that they might go
 straight to it; that fine soldier
 wheeled his horse and spoke these words: 315
 "Time for me to go. The almighty Father
 guard you in his grace,
 safe in your journeys! I must to the sea,
 and hold my watch against hostile hordes."

1 The boar was a sacred animal in Germanic mythology; in his *Germania* the Roman historian Tacitus mentions warriors wearing boar-images into battle (ch. 45). Images of boars were placed on helmets to protect the wearer from the "bite" of a sword, which was often quasi-personified as a serpent. Archaeologists have unearthed several Anglo-Saxon helmets with various kinds of boar-images on them.