

## Prologue

Listen!

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

Often Scyld Scefing<sup>2</sup> 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-riding<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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,

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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 Scyldings<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>  
 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,

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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,<sup>1</sup>  
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,<sup>2</sup> 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,"<sup>3</sup>  
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.<sup>4</sup> 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,

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>  
 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 while<sup>3</sup> — 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

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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;<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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

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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,<sup>1</sup>  
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.<sup>2</sup>  
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-slayer<sup>3</sup> 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

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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,<sup>1</sup>  
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.

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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 Weders<sup>1</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>1</sup> 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

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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,<sup>1</sup>  
 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."

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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.