The narrator opens the poem with a discussion of Shield Sheafson, a great king of the ancient Danes and the founder of their royal line. He began life as a foundling (an infant abandoned by his parents) but quickly rose to be strong and powerful. All of the clans had to pay him tribute, and, when he died, he was honored with an elaborate funeral ceremony. His body was put into a boat, covered with treasures and armor, and cast off to sea. Shield Sheafson’s life ended as it began, with him cast adrift on the water.

Sheafson’s son, the renowned Beow, inherited the kingdom after his father’s death. In time, Beow too passed away and Halfdane, his son, became king. After Halfdane, Hrothgar stepped forward to rule the Danes. Under Hrothgar, the kingdom prospered and enjoyed great military success, and Hrothgar decided to construct a monument to his success—a mead-hall where he would distribute booty to his retainers. The hall was called Heorot, and there the men gathered with their lord to drink mead, a beerlike beverage, and listen to the songs of the bards.

For a time, the kingdom enjoyed peace and prosperity. But, one night, Grendel, a demon descended from Cain (who, according to the Bible, slew his brother Abel), emerged from the swampy lowlands, to listen to the nightly entertainment at Heorot. The bards’ songs about God’s creation of the earth angered the monster. Once the men in the mead-hall fell asleep, Grendel lumbered inside and slaughtered thirty men. Hrothgar’s warriors were powerless against him.

The following night, Grendel struck again, and he has continued to wreak havoc on the Danes for twelve years. He has taken over Heorot, and Hrothgar and his men remain unable to challenge him. They make offerings at pagan shrines in hopes of harming Grendel, but their efforts are fruitless. The Danes endure constant terror, and their suffering is so extreme that the news of it travels far and wide.

At this time, Beowulf, nephew of the Geatish king Hygelac, is the greatest hero in the world. He lives in Geatland, a realm not far from Denmark, in what is now southern Sweden. When Beowulf hears tales of the destruction wrought by Grendel, he decides to travel to the land of the Danes and help Hrothgar defeat the demon. He voyages across the sea with fourteen of his bravest warriors until he reaches Hrothgar’s kingdom.

Seeing that the newcomers are dressed in armor and carrying shields and other equipment for combat, the watchman who guards the Danish coast stops Beowulf and his crew and demands to know their business. He admits that he has never seen outsiders come ashore so fearlessly and guesses that Beowulf is a noble hero. Beowulf explains that he is the son of Ecgtheow and owes his loyalty to Hygelac. He says that he has heard about the monster wreaking havoc on the Danes and has come to help Hrothgar. The watchman gives his consent and tells Beowulf that he believes his story. He tells the Geats to follow him, mentioning that he will order one of the Danes to watch Beowulf’s ship for him.

It is not surprising that *Beowulf* begins with a tribute to the ancestry of King Hrothgar, since within the warrior culture that the poem depicts, patriarchal lineage is an extremely important component of one’s identity. Characters are regularly named as the sons of their fathers—Beowulf, for example, is often referred to as “Ecgtheow’s son.” Patriarchal history anchors the story in a linear time frame that stretches forward and backward through the generations. In light of the great importance of familial lineage in this culture, it is interesting that Shield Sheafson, who inaugurates the Danish royal line, is an orphan—he is both founder and “foundling.” The reader has the sense that if this ordinary personage had not been fatherless, of unknown lineage, the story could have no definitive starting point. We later learn that Beowulf was also left fatherless at a young age.

The delineation of a heroic code is one of the most important preoccupations of the poem. In this first section, some of the central tenets of this code become apparent. In the story of Sheafson in the poem’s opening lines, the poet offers a sketch of the life of a successful hero. Sheafson’s greatness is measured by the number of clans that he conquers. As the defeated have to pay him tribute, it is clear that strength leads to the acquisition of treasure and gold. In the world of the poem, warriors are bound to their lords by ties of deep loyalty, which the lords maintain through their protection of their warriors and also through ritualized gestures of generosity, or gift-giving. Because their king is powerful, Sheafson’s warriors receive treasure. A hero is therefore defined, in part, by his ability to help his community by performing heroic deeds and by doling out heroic sums of treasure. Because Sheafson receives so much booty from his conquests, the poet says of him, “That was one good king” (11). Hrothgar is likewise presented as a good leader, because he erects the mead-hall Heorot for his men.

Another major aspect of the heroic code in *Beowulf* is eloquence in speech. Beowulf is imposing not only because of his physical presence but also because of his powerful oratorical skill. Speech and poetry were extremely important among the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians, as they often are in civilizations that rely on oral narratives to preserve history and myth (characters in Homer’s *Iliad* are also judged by how they speak). Beowulf’s boastful demeanor as he declares his intention to slay the monster is not an indication of undue vanity but rather a customary part of heroic behavior. The watchman’s reply that

*[a]nyone with gumption
and a sharp mind will take the measure
of two things: what’s said and what’s done*

follows logically from Beowulf’s value of eloquence. In the -watchman’s eyes, brave words must be backed up by brave deeds (287–289).

A well-won reputation ensures that a warrior will become a part of history, of the social fabric of his culture, as the inclusion of the story of Sheafson in the poem immediately reminds us. Throughout the epic, fame is presented as a bulwark against the oblivion of death, which lurks everywhere in the poem and casts a sobering pall over even the most shining acts of heroism. The description of Sheafson’s funeral foreshadows the poem’s final scene, which depicts the funeral of another heroic king. The tales of heroism that unfold in the intervening lines are thus framed, like life itself, within the envelope of death. The sea acts as another important and ever-present boundary in *Beowulf*; the sea-burial with which the poem begins helps to establish the inexorable margins of life in the story.