# Beowulf Faces Grendel’s Mother

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Mother of All Grendels

*Y*

*ou could well imagine, sister-son, the rewards then lavished upon Beowulf and his men. Banners, horses, a fancy golden helmet. You’ve seen celebrations of this sort. Someone fixes a roof, and suddenly we’re all subjected to endless sagas of heroes from the past, comparing the roof-fixer to heroes such as Sigemund the dragonslayer, followed by tales of dire warning about Finn and how he died, the lessons of Hengest, and kings who did not rule well, and so on. There is plenty of food and drink, endless songs and tales, and everyone feels good about everything for a time. Gold gets handed out.*

*In fact, when we craft tales, we say that pretty much everything is made of gold. Roofs, helmets, banners, sword-hilts, drinking goblets, horse tack. Everything. We could say that a faithful warrior was given a wooden bowl and a tin cup, but where is the poetry in that? So it’s always gold.*

*Thus it must have been with Beowulf. Some even say that Hrothgar seemed ready to adopt him, though Wealhtheow had some reservations about what this might do to her own children’s chance at ruling one day. But with that enormous arm nailed up there to the wall as the centrepiece of Heorot, and workers toiling all day long to try to repair the fairly thoroughly wrecked hall, Beowulf looked like the top dog alright. And everything was great.*

*Until Grendel’s mother paid them a visit.*

She had come in the night with her knife when the celebrations of Beowulf and his men, and their conversations with the king, had taken them off away from the now-cleansed Heorot. She had crept in far more silently than had her son, in search of his arm. She could not stand to know it was hung up as a trophy in Heorot. Spitefully, she grabbed Æschere, one of Hrothgar’s best men, and carried him and the arm off into the night.

Hrothgar sent for Beowulf immediately to see what he had to say.

As the dawn was coming into the sky over Heorot, Beowulf and his men arrived. “Good morning!” Beowulf began.

“Do not speak to me of good mornings when the retainer who served me longest and best is missing!” Hrothgar told him. “Æschere, elder brother of Yrmenlaf is almost certainly dead. You killed Grendel yesternight and hung up his arm. This night, a creature stole into the hall and now Æschere and the great arm are both missing. My subjects have spoken in the past of seeing a pair of night creatures moving about after dark in the marshlands, one an enormous male, and a smaller one that looked female. These creatures have whittled my soldiers down to only a few men, and not the best. And now only of you, Beowulf, can I ask assistance.”

Back to the Mere

*I*

*t is anyone’s guess why Unferth’s behaviour changed, my sister-son. Was he somehow tricking Beowulf and hoping the adventure would kill him, so he could become Hrothgar’s champion, in Æschere and Beowulf’s absence? Or did he wish he had the courage and the strength to face Grendel’s mother himself, so was trying to offer Beowulf his best sword?*

*We cannot know what watching Beowulf disarm and run the creature out of Heorot did to Unferth’s opinion of Beowulf, nor what he thought or felt about the whole affair.*

*It is certain that at first he was belligerent and aggressive, then was quiet, and then generous. The motivations for Unferth’s changes of heart vary from tale to tale.*

*We can only guess, and every man tells the tale how he imagines it.*

The previous morning they had tracked Grendel’s flight from Heorot to a bottomless stinking mere in the middle of the fens, bordered on two sides by rocky escarpments. They’d wanted to make sure he was dead. The creature had bled profusely from his shoulder wound the whole way, and the blood made tracking him very easy. The trailed ended at the mere, but they could find in it no sign of him apart from a great deal of dark blood in and around the water.

So Beowulf geared up and they made their way to the mere again on this grim morning. Grendel’s blood was still visible in the grass, and tracks of a second, smaller, barefoot creature as well. At the mere, Unferth turned away for a moment.

“What is it?” Hrothgar asked him.

“Æschere’s head,” Unferth told him. This gory item lay abandoned beside the rocky brink that surrounded the oily waters of the bottomless pond itself, which still remained dark with Grendel’s blood a day later. How the mere might be connected to rivers running to the sea, or in fact to the ocean itself, was hard to tell. Things moved under the surface of the unquiet water. Large, angry things.

Unferth turned to Beowulf. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Beowulf just grinned.

Unferth paused. “Well, this sword has always served me well,” the big blond Dane said, and handed Beowulf his sword Hrunting. It was old and of excellent make, but it had signs of scoring from acid on the blade, and even some encrusted gore from old battles not quite cleaned out of its hilts. Unferth was more of a drinker and a braggart than a swordsman these days, and had been since the days of his youth when he’d killed both of his brothers with it.

Beowulf took this troubling, ancient weapon, adjusted the ornately decorated, bejeweled helmet Hrothgar had given him on his head, and stood looking into the mere. One of Hrothgar’s men shot an arrow into the water, and it hit something in there. Something which was more angered than hurt by the shaft. They fired no more arrows.

It was all up to Beowulf now.

Into the Mere

A

s soon as Beowulf hit the bloody water, they grabbed him. The water boiled with furred backs and fins, tusks, teeth and tentacles. They dragged him down and tried to tear at him, but his mail shirt protected him. Their tusks would surely have impaled him but for the shirt, but without any form of under-armour padding, the rings bit cruelly into his flesh his blood trailed in a cloud behind him as he went downward. He was not interested in resisting them. He *wanted* to go down. Down even farther than they wanted to drag him.

Kicking free, Beowulf continued downward, somehow using the single mighty breath and swimming for hours until he could dimly see the bottom. Because the bottom was where he was headed, scanning for an opening of some kind. To a den or cave.

But it was the she-wolf of the sea, the enraged mother of Grendel, who burst from hiding, grabbed Beowulf, and dragged him off toward her lair. As she did, enormous sea snakes and deep sea creatures with twisted teeth, stiff stings and groping tentacles bit and stung at him and tried to crush him. Some creatures with teeth like tusks tore at his mail coat and popped some of the rings apart, so it flapped in the current, partly torn open. Grendel’s mother clutched him tight and swam hard. And Beowulf knew that, even with his ability to hold his breath, he would need a second breath now, or he would die. But he breathed in only chill water and he began to drown.

Then, they broke through into a place below the sea where there somehow was no water. Beowulf coughed and choked and vomited up sea water in a cathedral-like space with an arched, vaulting ceiling and a golden glow. Grendel’s mother stood before him, shaped vaguely like a human woman, but twisted somehow, and larger than human, though not as large as her late son. A jagged knife almost the size of a sword was tucked into the waist of the shift she wore. Beowulf tried not to speculate as to what kind of skin her clothing was fashioned from. All he knew for sure was that her dress had a nipple that was not Grendel’s mother’s own.

Beowulf was lying down, and Grendel’s mother was standing, on moldering, weed-encrusted treasure. Gems glinted, and the rusting hafts of axes and swords projected. Many of these weapons looked as if they had been crafted for people larger than regular human beings.

Being female and smaller, Beowulf expected that Grendel’s mother could not be as strong as her offspring had been, though he’d been strong enough.

Somehow, in all that had transpired, Beowulf had not lost his grip on Unfurth’s jeweled, stained falchion Hrunting. With a watery growl, he raised it two handed now, planted his feet and smashed downward with it at her head. It did not bite into her skull, though with the force of the swing and the craftsmanship of the blade, it should by rights have cloven her head in twain. It simply rebounded off as if he had struck an apple with a trout.

Having taken his best cut at her with the weapon, the Geatish prince threw the apparently useless weapon to one side in disgust and prepared to grapple with the scrabbling, long-fingered Child of Cain the way he had wrestled with her son. She tried to snatch him up again, and Beowulf gripped her by the shoulder and threw her onto the floor, making sure she struck her sword-proof head hard on the way down. This enraged her and she squealed and howled and leapt back up and did exactly the same thing to him. Before he could anything, Beowulf was grabbed by the shoulder, flung to the floor, hitting his head, and before he could spring back up, she sat on him.

Beowulf struggled, but he was almost entirely enveloped by her monstrous rubbery grey buttocks. And as he struggled, she drew her outsized knife, held it high in both hands, and brought it flashing down at the middle of his struggling back where his mail corslet was rent.

Beowulf managed to squirm unheroically to one side so an intact portion of his once-glorious mail shirt stopped the blade from doing more than prick his skin through the mail and smash its iron rings into the soft tissue of his back. The blow hurt him, but did not cut him.

As accomplished a wrestler as had ever lived, Beowulf used the force of Grendel’s mother’s attack to throw her off balance, and when she raised the blade again for a second, desperate death blow, he used leverage to add energy to her movement and topple her off him.

Beowulf leaped back and, in desperation, grabbed at the handle of a sword that was hanging on the wall like a trophy of special importance. It was a sword few other men could have raised from the ground. It was longer than Beowulf was tall, and very wide as well, with two edges. It was gold-handled, with runes and engravings all over it. It looked unimaginably ancient, but there was no rust on it. Beowulf took it off the wall, planning at the least to use it to block the blows of the large knife, even if the giant sword did not bite Grendel’s mother’s flesh.

Seeing him grasping this enormous weapon from her trove, Grendel’s mother rushed at Beowulf shrieking and hooting, clashing her long teeth together, her large knife outstretched to slash at him.

Planting his feet, Beowulf swung wildly. The weight of the sword was such that it overbalanced him, sending him stumbling forward half a step, but as the blade moved in its painfully slow arc, it smashed Grendel’s mother’s knife from her hand, knocked her arm out of the way and clove deeply into her neck, shattering its bones. She toppled sideways to the ground in a heap, head hanging on only by a scrap of shoulder muscle. A foot twitched spasmodically and was then still.

Carrying the weighty sword with him, steaming and dripping, Beowulf moved toward the back of the enormous underwater room, noting it was fully half as large as Heorot itself entire. On a table in the back, the body of Grendel, his torn arm lying beside it, was laid out tenderly in deathly repose. Beowulf snarled at the sight and with one blow, took off Grendel’s head. He grabbed the creature’s head by its sparse hair to take with him as evidence of the purification of Heorot, when he noticed something: the giant blade was getting lighter.

The blood of Grendel and his mother dripped from the steaming blade still, but besides this, the blade was, itself, dripping. Like an icicle in the sun on a hot day, the sword slowly, but steadily melted, an eldritch swordsicle. The hot, dark blood of the Grendelkin smoked and smouldered on the blade and on the sandy floor. Beowulf watched this happen, until the entire blade melted and only the hilt of the massive weapon remained intact.

The Return

*I*

*’m sure, my sister-son, you have heard some tell the tale, saying that Grendel’s mother was an underworld god, and that this, her own sword, was required to kill her. In some tales, the thunder giant is killed with a hammer made of thunder, or the god of lightning has his eye put out with a spear made of lightning. In many tales, swords are ensorcelled and enchanted, carved with magic runes of ancient power.*

*But I ask you, if this sword were magic, why did it melt when exposed to blood? Surely this is a crucial failing in a magic sword? Melts when you get blood on it? As useful as a magic candle that can only be lit in direct sunlight, I should imagine.*

*Grendel’s mother was larger than human, in this story, but was she a giant, or the ancient foe of giants, and vulnerable to weapons they forged to defeat such as she? Why did the one sword work and the other sword not? Was the sword of a brother-slayer a poor choice of weapon with which to defeat a Child of Cain? Or did it simply require a sword as heavy as a blacksmith’s anvil to do the job?*

*Again, it all depends upon who is telling the story.*

At first, waiting at the mere, the Danes felt eager and happy. They stood around the bottomless pool, looking down at the gory waters and expecting to see Beowulf resurface at any moment, victorious. Then an hour went by and they knew no one could hold his breath that long. Then two hours. Then three. Then the sun set and most of them went home to bed.

The next morning Queen Wealhtheow and two ladies in waiting went at dawn into a meadow and gathered bunches of flowers to toss into the bloody mere, in memory of Beowulf.

When they arrived at the pool, arms weighed down with bunches of flowers in white, blue and yellow, a young man stood there in a white tunic. As they soberly tossed in their flowers into the now very still mere to honour the vanished hero, shedding a few tears, the man asked, “Ladies, why are you crying?”

“Our would-be deliverer Beowulf is lost to us and we seek to honour his memory,” the Queen began.

“Oh, no, he’s fine,” the young man explained. “He came back up an hour ago. He’s gone back to Heorot for some food and dry clothes, and he’s sending some men back here to carry Grendel’s head back for him.” The young man gestured toward something they had mistaken for a boulder.

And so it was that it took four mighty Geatmen to carry the enormous gape-mouthed head back to the towering golden hall, skewered up the neck on four spears. By the time Hrothgar and Wealhtheow formally appeared in Heorot, the enormous head was hung up by the hair, and the Geats and several of their Danish friends were busy getting day drunk.