

Beowulf vs Grendel's Mother

Translated by Seamus Heaney

They were a right people. They went to sleep. And one paid dearly for his night's ease, as had happened to them often, ever since Grendel occupied the gold-hall, committing evil until the end came, death after his crimes. Then it became clear, obvious to everyone Once the fight was over, that an avenger lurked and was still alive, grimly biding time. Grendel's mother, monstrous hill-bride, brooded on her wrongs. She had been forced down into fearful waters, the cold depths, after Cain had killed his father's son, felled his own brother with a sword. Branded an outlaw marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds, shunned company and joy. And from Cain there sprang misbegotten spirits, among the Grendel, the banished and accursed, due to come to grips with that watcher in Heorot waiting to do battle. The monster wrenched and wrestled with him but Beowulf was mindful of his mighty strength, the wondrous gifts God had showered on him: He relied for help on the Lord of All, on His care and favor. So he overcame the foe, brought down the hell-brute. Broken and bowed, outcast from all sweetness, the enemy of mankind made for his death-den. But now his mother had sallied forth on a savage journey, grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.

She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall, Danes lay asleep, earls who would soon endure a great reversal, once Grendel's mother attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less only by as much as an amazon warrior's strength is less than an armed man's when he hefted sword, its hammered edge and gleaming blade slathered in blood, razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet. Then in the hall, hard-honed swords were grabbed from the bench, many a broad shield lifted and braced; there was little thought of helmets or woven mail when they awoke in terror.

The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out, in mortal terror the moment she was found. She had pounced and taken one of the retainers in a tight hold, then headed for the fen. To Hrothgar, this man was the most beloved of the friends

he trusted between the two seas. She had done away with the great warrior, ambushed him at rest.

Beowulf was elsewhere. Earlier, after the award of treasure, the Geat had been given another lodging. There was uproar in Heorot. She had snatched their trophy, Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow to the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard, both parties having to pay with the lives of friends. And the old lord the grey-haired warrior, was heartsore and weary when he heard the news: his highest-placed adviser, his dearest companion, was dead and gone.

Beowulf was quickly brought to the chamber: the winner of fights, the arch-warrior, came first-footing in with his fellow troops to where the king in his wisdom waited, still wondering whether Almighty God would ever turn the tide of his misfortunes. So Beowulf entered with his band in attendance and the wooden floor-boards banged and rang as he advanced, hurrying to address the prince of Ingwins, asking if he'd rested since the urgent summons had come as a surprise.

So the noble prince proceeded undismayed up fells and screes, along narrow footpaths and ways where they were forced into single file, ledges on cliffs above lairs of water-monsters. He went in front with a few men, good judges of the lie of the land, and suddenly discovered the dismal wood, mountain trees growing out at an angle above grey stones: the bloodshot water surged underneath. It was a sore blow to all the Danes, friends of the Shieldings, a hurt to each and everyone of that noble company when they came upon Aeschere's head at the foot of the cliff.

Everybody gazed as the hot gore kept wallowing up and an urgent war-horn repeated its notes: the whole party sat down to watch. The water was infested with all kinds of reptiles. There was writhing sea-dragons and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff, serpents and wild things such as those that often surface at dawn to roam the sail-road and doom the voyage. Down they plunged, lashing in anger at the loud call of the battle-bugle. An arrow from the bow of the Geat chief got one of them as he surged to the surface: the seasoned shaft stuck deep in his

flank and his freedom in the water got less and less. It was his last swim. He was swiftly overwhelmed in the shallows, prodded by barbed boar-spears, cornered, beaten, pulled up on the bank, a strange lake-birth, a loathsome catch men gazed at in awe.

Beowulf got ready, donned his war-gear, indifferent to death; his mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail would soon meet with the menace underwater. It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe: no enemy's clasp could crush him in it, no vicious armlock choke his life out. To guard his head he had a glittering helmet that was due to be muddied on the mere bottom and blurred in the upswirl. It was of beaten gold, princely headgear hooped and hasped by a weapon-smith who had worked wonders in days gone by and adorned it with boar-shapes; since then it had resisted every sword.

And another item lent by Unferth at that moment of need was of no small importance: the brehon handed him a hilted weapon, a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.

The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns had been tempered in blood. It has never failed the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle, anyone who had fought and faced the worst in the gap of danger. This was not the first time it had been called to perform heroic feats.

When he lent that blade to the better swordsman, Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf, could hardly have remembered the ranting speech he had made in his cups. He was not man enough to face the turmoil of a fight under water and the risk to his life. So there he lost fame and repute. It was different for the other rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke: "Wisest of kings, now that I have come to the point of action, I ask you to recall what we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane

and gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall and suffer death while serving your cause, would act like a father to me afterwards.

If this combat kills me, take care of my young company, my comrades in arms. And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar, to send Hygelac the treasures I received. Let the lord of the Geats gaze on that gold, let Hrethel's son take note of it and see that I found a ring-giver of rare magnificence and enjoyed the good of his generosity. And Unferth is to have what I inherited: to that far-famed man I bequeath my own sharp-honed, wave-sheened wonder blade. With Hrunting I shall gain glory or die."

After these words, the prince of the Weather-Geats was impatient to be away and plunged suddenly: without more ado, he dived into heaving depths of the lake. It was the best part of a day before he could see the solid bottom.

Quickly the one who haunted those waters, who had scavenged and gone her gluttonous rounds for a hundred seasons, sensed a human observing her outlandish lair from above. So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him in her brutal grip; but his body, for all that, remained unscathed: the mesh of the chain-mail saved him on the outside.

Her savage talons failed to rip the web of his warshirt. Then once she touched bottom, that wolfish swimmer carried the ring-mailed prince to her court so that for all his courage he could never use the weapons he carried; and a bewildering horde came at him from the depths, droves of sea-beasts who attacked with tusks and tore at his chain-mail in a ghastly onslaught. The gallant man could see he had entered some hellish turn-hole and yet the water did not work against him because the hall-roofing held off the force of the current; then he saw firelight, a gleam and flare-up, a glimmer of brightness.

The hero observed that swamp-thing from hell, the tarn-hag in all her terrible strength, then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm: the decorated blade came

down ringing and singing on her head. But he soon found his battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade refused to bite. It spared her and failed the man in his need. It had gone through many hand-to-hand fights, had hewed the armor and helmets of the doomed, but here at last the fabulous powers of the heirloom failed.

Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about his name and fame: he never lost heart. Then, in a fury, he flung his sword away. Then keen, inlaid, worm-loop-patterned steel was hurled on the ground: he would have to rely on the might of his arm. So must a man do who intends to gain enduring glory in a combat. Life doesn't cost him a thought. The prince of War-Geats, warming to this fight with Grendel's mother, gripped her shoulder and laid about him in a battle frenzy: he pitched his killer opponent to the floor but she rose quickly and retaliated, grappled him tightly in her grim embrace. The sure-footed fighter felt daunted, the strongest of warriors stumbled and fell, So she pounced upon him and pulled out a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail on Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life, turned the edge and tip of the blade. The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth had the strong links and locks of his war-gear not helped to save him: holy God decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord, the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance once Beowulf got back on his feet.

Then he saw a blade that boded well, a sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon, one that any warrior would envy, but so huge and heavy of itself only Beowulf could wield it in a battle. So the Shieldings' hero, hard-pressed and enraged, took a firm hold of the hilt and swung the blade in an arc, a resolute blow that bit deep into her neck-bone and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed house of her flesh; she fell to the floor. The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated.

A light appeared and the place brightened the way the sky does when heaven's candle is shining clearly. He inspected the vault: with sword held high, its hilt raised to guard and threaten, Hygelac's thane scouted by the wall in Grendel's

wake. Now the weapon was to prove its worth. The warrior determined to take revenge for every gross act Grendel had committed- and not only for that one occasion when he'd come to slaughter the sleeping troops, fifteen of Hrothgar's house-guards surprised on their benches and ruthlessly devoured, and as many again carried away, a brutal plunder. Beowulf in his fury now settled that score: he saw the monster in his resting place, war-weary and wrecked, a lifeless corpse, a casualty of this battle in Heorot. The body gaped at the stroke dealt to it after death: Beowulf cut the corpse's head off.

Immediately the counselors keeping a lookout with Hrothgar, watching the lake water, saw a heave-up and surge of waves and blood in the backwash. They bowed grey heads, spoke in their sage, experienced way about the good warrior, how they never again expected to see that prince returning in triumph to their king. It was clear to many that the wolf of the deep had destroyed him forever.

The ninth hour of the day arrived. The brave Shieldings abandoned the cliff-top and the king went home; but sick at heart, staring at the mere, the strangers held on. They wished without hope, to behold their lord, Beowulf himself.

Meanwhile, the sword began to wilt into gory icicles, to slather and thaw. It was a wonderful thing, the way it all melted as ice melts when the Father eases the fetters of the frost and unravels the water-ropes. He who wields power over time and tide: He is the true Lord.

The Geat captain saw treasure in abundance but carried no spoils from those quarters except for the head and the inlaid hilt embossed with jewels; its blade had melted and scrollwork on it burnt, so scaling was the blood of the poisonous fiend who had perished there. Then away he swam, the one who had survived the fall of his enemies, flailing to the surface. The wide water, the waves and pools were no longer infested once the wandering fiend let go of her life and this unreliable world. The seafarers' leader made for land, resolutely swimming, delighted with his prize, the might load he was lugging to the surface. His thanes advanced in a troop to

meet him, thanking God and taking great delight in seeing their prince back safe and sound. Quickly the hero's helmet and mail-shirt were loosed and unlaced. The lake settled, clouds darkened above the bloodshot depths.

With high hearts they headed away along footpaths and trails through the fields, roads that they knew, each of them wrestling with the head they were carrying from the lakeside cliff, men kingly in their courage and capable of difficult work. It was a task for four to hoist Grendel's head on a spear and bear it under strain to the bright hall. But soon enough they neared the place, fourteen Geats in fine fettle, striding across the outlying ground in a delighted throng around their leader.