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Norman Maine Publishing

Beowulf and Grendel

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Beowulf and Grendel

COMIC DRAMA. In this retelling of *Beowulf* (700-1000 A.D.) Grendel and his mother are portrayed as misunderstood outcasts instead of beasts bent on wreaking havoc. As fear and panic spread, Beowulf, a young warrior, travels to Denmark to slay Grendel and rescue the Danes from his terror. However, when Beowulf encounters Grendel and his mother in their sea cave home, Beowulf discovers that they are anything but the evil creatures they have been rumored to be. Rather than beheading them, Beowulf devises a plan to convince King Hrothgar that Grendel and his mother pose no threat to the kingdom and are merely victims of fear and prejudice. But Beowulf must first overcome the flirtatious advances of King Hrothgar's vain daughter and save Grendel before the arrogant warrior Unferth slays him.

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes.

About the Story

Thought to be based on oral legends and then later written down by monks, the heroic epic poem *Beowulf* survives from a single untitled manuscript. Although the storyline deals primarily with Scandinavian matters, *Beowulf* is considered England's national epic and is thought to be the earliest full-length heroic epic to have survived in any Germanic language.

Characters

(4 M, 3 F, 7 flexible, opt. extras)

BEOWULF: Hero of Geatland.

UNFERTH: Warrior Dane, rival to Beowulf; haughty, arrogant.

KING HROTHGAR: King of Denmark.

PRINCESS FREAWARU: Hrothgar's daughter; flirtatious, vain.

GRENDEL: Ogre; appearance is both frightful and heartrending; flexible.

MOTHER: Grendel's mother.

CITIZEN 1: Female.

CITIZEN 2: Male.

GUARD 1, 2: Flexible.

DANISH SOLDIER 1, 2: Flexible.

GEAT SOLDIER 1, 2: Flexible.

EXTRAS (Optional): As Townspeople, Guards, and Soldiers.

Setting

Denmark, 8th century, C. E.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Evening, bare stage except for a boulder.

Scene 2: Heorot Hall, a great hall.

Scene 3: Later that night, outside Princess Freawaru's window.

Scene 4: The sea-cave dwelling of Grendel and his mother.

Scene 5: Heorot Hall, the following morning.

Props

Large boulder	Hairbrush
Small fake rock	Piece of cloth
2 Torches	Bowl of water
Swords	2 Sets of chains
Throne	Burial shroud
Knife, for Beowulf	Robe, for Hrothgar

Special Effects

Ground fog	Fake blood
Clarions	Drums
Echo of ocean waves	

*“The terrible things
one must endure
when the whole world
thinks you’re a monster,
a demon,
an incarnation of evil.”*

—Grendel

Scene 1

(Nighttime. The stage is dark and bare except for a boulder. Ground fog. Screams are heard offstage from all directions. Someone yells, "The monster Grendel is on the loose again!" Citizen 1 enters panic-stricken, trips and falls, stumbles back to her feet, and hides behind the boulder just as Grendel enters. His appearance is both frightful and heartrending. He notices the audience, snarls, and moves toward the boulder. Citizen 1 emerges and flings a rock at Grendel, striking him in the head. Citizen 1 freezes in terror as Grendel staggers about in shock.)

GRENDL: That hurt! *(Citizen 1 screams.)* Why are you screaming? You attacked me! *(Citizen 1 screams again and runs off. Citizen 2 rushes in and tackles Grendel from behind. Grendel breaks free of his grip. They struggle briefly, then Grendel flings him aside.)* Leave me alone! I was only out for a walk.

(Citizen 2 gets to his feet, drawing his sword.)

CITIZEN 2: You're out to kill us all!

(Citizen 2 attacks, striking Grendel on the arm with his sword. Grendel, howling in pain, drops to his knees. Citizen 2 gets ready to attack Grendel again, but Grendel rips the sword from Citizen 2's hand and whacks him on the side of the head with the flat area of the blade. Citizen 2 flees.)

CITIZEN 2: *(As he runs off.)* Aiieeee! I'm slain! I'm slain!

(Grendel stumbles downstage, clutching his injured, bleeding arm.)

GRENDL: *(To audience.)* The terrible things one must endure when the whole world thinks you're a monster, a demon, an incarnation of evil. First they strip you of your rights and

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your dignity, and then they strip you of your humanity.
(Pause. He tends to his injured arm.) I wouldn't treat a rabid
dog this way. (He staggers toward the exit and stumbles.) I'll
wreak vengeance on the lot of 'em! (Exits. Blackout.)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: *Heorot Hall. Clarions sound.*)

VOICE: (*Offstage.*) His majesty, Hrothgar, King of Denmark, has arrived.

(*Hrothgar enters rapidly, accompanied by Guards 1, 2, who are carrying torches. Hrothgar sits on his throne.*)

HROTHGAR: Where are those two negligent soldiers?

GUARD 1: In the antechamber, majesty.

GUARD 2: Bound in chains!

HROTHGAR: Bring them to us. (*The Guards rapidly bow and exit backward. To audience.*) Our kingdom is being terrorized by a bloodthirsty ogre from hell and his accursed mother. What do they want of us? Is this God's way of punishing us for our misdeeds? (*He drops to one knee.*) Tell us, Lord, what we must do. Give us the strength to vanquish these descendants of Satan once and for all. (*Guards 1, 2 enter accompanied by Danish Soldiers 1, 2, who are in chains. Hrothgar rises to his feet.*) Soldiers entrusted with the security of our blessed Denmark, approach your king. (*Danish Soldiers 1, 2 stumble hesitantly toward Hrothgar and bow.*) Speak. (*As Danish Soldiers 1, 2 approach, they trip over their chains and over each other. They adlib "Oops!" "Terribly sorry!" "My fault." "Wait, let me untangle this." "There!" "You go first," etc. Hrothgar loses patience.*) Dignify yourselves! (*He waits as Danish Soldiers 1, 2 straighten themselves out.*) Now then, tell us truthfully upon your lives, and without distortion, why you failed to protect our people against the archfiend Grendel.

DANISH SOLDIER 1: Mighty king, not a moment passed when we were not vigilant.

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DANISH SOLDIER 2: The demon must have made himself invisible when he attacked. We searched the darkest corners of—

HROTHGAR: Do not dare to vindicate yourselves! We shall throw you into the dungeons for your insolence.

DANISH SOLDIER 1: On second thought, majesty, I alone take full responsibility for our failure to detect and stop the fiend.

DANISH SOLDIER 2: No—no—it was I who first heard the cries, but spent too much time trying to decide the best course of action to take.

DANISH SOLDIER 1: By then it was too late. I should have been more closely attuned to strange noises in the midnight streets.

HROTHGAR: Stop your blathering, both of you!

(Guard 1 steps forward.)

DANISH GUARD 1: Majesty, if I may speak... *(Hrothgar nods.)* I witnessed the bravery of these honorable and vigilant soldiers. The moment the woman started screaming, they rushed into the fracas without a moment's hesitation.

DANISH GUARD 2: Grendel's ugliness alone is enough to cause anyone to shrink away in fear.

HROTHGAR: *(To Soldiers 1, 2.)* Was that it? The creature so frightened you that you allowed it to escape?

DANISH SOLDIER 1: No, majesty!

DANISH SOLDIER 2: We fear nothing, majesty.

HROTHGAR: *(To Guard 2.)* Take these knaves to the dungeons.

(Danish Soldiers 1, 2 bow in acquiescence. Guard 2 starts to lead them offstage. Unferth enters.)

GUARD 2: Hail Unferth!

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GUARD 1: Warrior Dane!

GUARD 2: A hero to our people!

GUARD 1: Fearless and intrepid—

(Unferth, in false modesty, gestures for them to be silent, then haughtily approaches the throne and bows. Guard 2 exits with Soldiers 1, 2.)

HROTHGAR: Well, Unferth, what brings you to the great hall of Heorot?

UNFERTH: *(Excited.)* My liege, I have brought with me my new sword, Hrunting! *(He draws his sword, raises it with both hands.)* Forged by wizards, sire, and tempered in the blood of ewes!

HROTHGAR: Ah, yes, a noble weapon indeed.

UNFERTH: With your divine permission, my liege, I shall slay the murderous archfiends with it.

HROTHGAR: We admire your bravado, Unferth. But what makes you think you can succeed this time? In the past you did little more than superficially wound Grendel, most likely aggravating the creature's wrath against us.

UNFERTH: Sire, the wizards assure me that Hrunting renders its wielder invincible.

(Hrothgar takes the sword from him and inspects it admiringly.)

HROTHGAR: Wizards sometimes deceive, Unferth. No warrior is ever invincible, even when wielding a sword forged by magic.

(Hrothgar returns the sword to Unferth.)

UNFERTH: But I can feel its power! It surges through me. It enhances my strength, just as your radiant daughter Freawaru enhances my strength.

HROTHGAR: Ah, the ulterior motive surfaces...

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UNFERTH: (*Unperturbed.*) She enflames my warrior's soul, majesty. I do not try to hide it.

HROTHGAR: We sense something else behind your ambition—it weighs heavily in your voice. It sticks in your craw.

UNFERTH: (*Reluctantly.*) I...I have heard a rumor...

HROTHGAR: Yes?

UNFERTH: That Beowulf, the legendary hero of the Geats, has come to us, intent on pursuing the fiend in its sea cave dwelling. Is that true?

HROTHGAR: That is not your concern. We know that you bravely faced Grendel once, but nevertheless, you failed to slay him.

UNFERTH: (*Blurts out.*) Do not judge me by a single scuffle. Permit me, majesty, to seek out Grendel with my Hrunting. (*He raises his sword once again.*)

HROTHGAR: Sheathe your blade. Let us first give the hero from Geatland his opportunity.

UNFERTH: But why should a foolhardy man from a rival nation—?

HROTHGAR: Bind your tongue, Unferth, before we bind you in the stocks, hero or not. Clearly, you dread Beowulf's rivalry, not only in battle, but in love! You're afraid that he may request my daughter's hand if he succeeds.

UNFERTH: I fear nothing!

HROTHGAR: Do not disgrace yourself further before your king. Your motives are ignoble. Leave us.

(*Unferth bows and then exits. Hrothgar motions to Guard 1, who also exits. Hrothgar waits impatiently. Guards 1, 2 enter.*)

GUARD 1: Your highness, Beowulf, hero of Geatland, who has landed on our shores, is now ready to be graced by your divine presence.

(*Clarions sound.*)

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GUARD 2: The son of Ecgtheow, beloved chieftain whose death had been mourned by all the world...

GUARD 1: Nephew of Hygelac, king of the noble and courageous Geats...

HROTHGAR: Yes, yes, get on with it. *(Aside.)* Why must we be obliged to suffer through this pomp and circumstance?

GUARD 2: Defender of his people, friend, and now protector of the Danes...

GUARDS 1, 2: *(Simultaneously.)* We welcome you to Heorot Hall, warrior prince!

(Beowulf enters and bows before Hrothgar.)

HROTHGAR: Welcome, welcome already! Beowulf, we've been eagerly awaiting your arrival. Our people are being terrorized, as you know. Our strongest and bravest soldiers have failed to kill the creature. What makes you think you can?

BEOWULF: For the simple reason that I carefully study the enemy's habits before I set out to confront him.

HROTHGAR: The mark of a wise warrior, indeed. Such wisdom is what we lack among our soldiers.

BEOWULF: I am ready for the challenge, great Hrothgar, for many years a steadfast ally to the people of Geatland.

HROTHGAR: And your ally wishes to send you into battle in grand style, Beowulf. Tonight our finest court dancers and jesters shall entertain you.

BEOWULF: I am flattered, but let there be time for celebration later. We mustn't wait a moment longer. There's no telling what ungodly acts of terror Grendel may be scheming this very moment.

(Hrothgar rises.)

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HROTHGAR: So be it. A great reward awaits thee, Beowulf, as soon as you deliver to us the head of Grendel, along with the head of his equally vile mother.

BEOWULF: *(Taken aback.)* You mean there are two of them?

HROTHGAR: Were you not told? *(Pause.)* Surely this does not intimidate the great Geat warrior!

BEOWULF: Certainly not.

HROTHGAR: *(Suddenly skeptical.)* Our Unferth has told us of your exploits, Beowulf—your foolhardy swimming contest with Breca in treacherous waters—a contest you lost and that nearly cost you your life.

BEOWULF: I see that the people of Denmark are not immune to accepting distorted rumor as truth. Unferth failed to mention that we had been caught in a sudden violent storm, one that had tossed me into a nest of sea monsters. Fortunately, I managed to cripple them with a simple but formidable knife I always carry—this very blade. *(He unsheathes his knife.)*

HROTHGAR: *(As if it were a joke.)* A knife...?

BEOWULF: A magic knife! Forged by—

HROTHGAR: Yes, yes, we know—by wizards. Well, magical or not, it won't be enough to slay Grendel or his mother.

BEOWULF: Of course, I also possess a sword every bit as powerful and as magical as Unferth's Hrunting.

HROTHGAR: In that case, Beowulf, we owe you an apology. We shall demand from Unferth the reasons for spreading ugly rumors about you.

BEOWULF: I do not care to seek reprisal against Unferth, majesty. It is an easy temptation for rivals to fall prey to—indeed, I have fallen prey to it myself. I honor Unferth as a fellow warrior.

HROTHGAR: Your heart is compassionate and noble, Beowulf. We seek only your assurance that you and your men have the wherewithal to vanquish these demons.

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BEOWULF: Rest assured. Demon-slaying is our specialty.
Geatland is full of them—not as fearsome as your Grendel,
perhaps, but—

HROTHGAR: Grendel inhabits godforsaken terrain, Beowulf.
Many warriors have ventured there, never to return.

BEOWULF: That doesn't intimidate me in the least, sire. We
shall not fail in ridding Denmark of its menace!

(Blackout.)

Scene 3

(AT RISE: Later that night. Ground fog. Freawaru is gazing out of her window SL. Beowulf is conversing with Geat Soldiers 1, 2, who are standing watch SR.)

GEAT SOLDIER 1: A thick fog is rolling in from the sea.

BEOWULF: An opportune time for monsters and demons to strike. Grendel will be nearly invisible.

GEAT SOLDIER 2: The fog won't deter us, Beowulf.

BEOWULF: It will limit us, though. *(He notices Freawaru at her window. She begins brushing her hair flirtatiously.)* We must be sure to compensate for poor visibility with clever, uhm, maneuverings.

(Freawaru waves at Beowulf, who waves back.)

GEAT SOLDIER 1: I see that the Princess Freawaru is entranced by the sight of you, Beowulf.

BEOWULF: So long as I do not become entranced by the sight of her! *(He waves to Freawaru. Freawaru waves back with even greater enthusiasm.)* It is foolhardy of me even to glance her way...isn't it? *(Geat Soldiers 1, 2 shrug. Beowulf forces himself to look away.)* Our attention must be fully devoted to the task at hand! *(He steals another glance at Freawaru.)* I know all too well how a woman's affections can subdue the blood-ferocity a warrior requires for battle.

(Freawaru blows Beowulf a kiss. Beowulf extravagantly blows her kisses with both hands.)

GEAT SOLDIER 2: *(To Geat Soldier 1.)* I doubt that even Grendel possesses the power to distract our warrior from the Princess Freawaru.

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GEAT SOLDIER 1: It certainly looks as if he's ready to forget about combat for awhile!

(Whispering and laughing, Geat Soldiers 1, 2 exit.)

BEOWULF: *(Raising his arms, to Freawaru.)* The night drapes you with its satin robe of stars, beautiful one.

FREAWARU: What a lovely thing to say...

BEOWULF: Your beauty makes even a battle-hardened heart like mine sing with poetry. *(Aside.)* I think I'm getting carried away here. I'd best be careful, lest Freawaru's charms do me in for good.

FREAWARU: Tell me, Beowulf, is it true that you are the greatest hero of the Geats?

BEOWULF: My people tend to exaggerate. But, yes, I have been so honored.

FREAWARU: Do you wish to win my hand, Beowulf, or will the arrogant Unferth beat you to it?

BEOWULF: I was unaware that we were in competition...over you.

FREAWARU: Oh, but it's true! Do you not agree that I am worth fighting over?

BEOWULF: Why, yes, of course! Oh, princess, you are far and away the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on.

FREAWARU: *(Beside herself with joy.)* Then you will fight Unferth to win me? After you kill the monsters?

BEOWULF: Forgive my curiosity, princess, but are you hoping it is I who wins?

FREAWARU: Ooooh, it's so hard to decide. Unferth is so—but you are so—oh my, I'm feeling faint... *(She starts to swoon.)*

BEOWULF: Princess, I must tear myself from your presence, difficult though it is, and retire for the night if I am to fulfill my warrior's duty at first light. Will you excuse me?

FREAWARU: Oh, Beowulf! *(Pause. Snaps out of swooning and realizes the flirtation game is over.)* You're excused.

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(Beowulf backs away from her, reluctantly.)

BEOWULF: Come dawn, I shall venture down to the sea caves
and return with the head of Grendel!

FREAWARU: And don't forget the head of his mother, too!

(Blackout.)

Scene 4

(Evening, the sea-cave dwelling of Grendel and Grendel's Mother. Darkness. The echo of ocean waves from inside a cavern is heard. After a moment, Grendel enters, limping. His arm is bleeding. He collapses CS, howling. His Mother rushes over to him.)

MOTHER: My poor son, once again they've wounded you.
And they call *us* monsters! I will apply a poultice to ease the pain.

GRENDDEL: Don't bother, Mother. It is our fate to suffer.
We've been cursed by the sin of our ancestor Cain. Any effort to ease our pain can only be met with even greater pain.

(Grendel's Mother dips a cloth in a bowl of water and presses the cloth against his bloody arm.)

MOTHER: I don't blame you for being such a pessimist,
Grendel, but we ourselves are to blame.

GRENDDEL: How can you say such a thing?

(Beowulf enters stealthily. He remains by the wings in shadow and listens.)

MOTHER: Just because our enemies insist that we're an accursed race doesn't mean we have to believe it!

GRENDDEL: What are we supposed to do? Wave a white flag in their faces? Grovel at their feet for banishing us into the bowels of the earth? Do you think that will make them respect us?

MOTHER: Terrorizing them or murdering them in their beds hasn't helped, either.

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GRENDEL: It is they who have turned us into the devils they accused us of being. We have a right to live too, even if it means being despised and hunted down.

MOTHER: There is nothing left of us, Grendel. The Danes have destroyed us all. *(Pause.)* Shhh...did you hear something?

(Grendel listens.)

GRENDEL: Only the desolate voice of the sea.

MOTHER: Your agony has overtaken your senses, Grendel. Listen! *(Pause.)* I think there's an intruder in our cave.

(Grendel staggers to his feet.)

GRENDEL: You're right! *(Sniffs.)* I can smell his foul presence.

(Beowulf emerges from the shadows, sword drawn.)

BEOWULF: Prepare to return to hell, murderous villains!

(Beowulf charges. Grendel evades him.)

GRENDEL: Who are you? You're not wearing the armor of the Danes. What do you have against us?

BEOWULF: I am Beowulf of Geatland, faithful ally to Denmark. Why do you bother to ask?

(Beowulf charges again. Grendel evades him.)

GRENDEL: We have nothing against your people. If the Danes call us monsters, do you simply take their word for it?

BEOWULF: They have no reason to lie. Besides, you are hideous like all of the devil's spawn.

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GRENDDEL: We are hideous from suffering and neglect.

MOTHER: We only wish to be left alone.

BEOWULF: You terrorize innocent citizens.

GRENDDEL: They hunt us down like animals. There is nothing left of us.

BEOWULF: But you are animals.

GRENDDEL: When we fight back out of self-defense, they cry out as though we're the culprits.

(Grendel's Mother approaches Beowulf.)

MOTHER: Think, Beowulf, think what it's like to be cursed and hated, to be turned into an object of ridicule and shame, to be considered a disease, every waking day of your life, all because of an ugly superstition that marked you as evil centuries before you were born. How would you feel?

BEOWULF: Keep your distance. How do I know you're not just trying to deceive me, to put me off my guard? It's Satan's oldest trick.

GRENDDEL: How do we know you're really Beowulf? How do you know this is really Denmark, or the world?

MOTHER: All of this could be hell. *(Aside.)* I can't imagine hell being much different!

BEOWULF: Am I supposed to just take your word for it? Return to Heorot empty-handed? I would be turned into a laughing stock!

(Beowulf attacks Grendel's Mother. They wrestle for a moment or two, then Grendel manages to seize Beowulf's knife and is about to stab him with it.)

MOTHER: No, Son!

GRENDDEL: I shall regain our honor with Beowulf's blood!

MOTHER: And become no better than our enemies. Do not harm him.

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(Grendel's Mother and Beowulf cease their struggle. There is a tense silence. Then Grendel extends the knife to Beowulf, handle first. Beowulf stares at it in amazement and retrieves it.)

BEOWULF: Why have you spared me? I have failed my quest. I deserve to die. *(He contemplates his knife.)* I must do the deed myself. *(He grips the handle with both hands and positions the blade over his heart.)*

MOTHER: Do not let your pride cloud your judgment, Beowulf. A true hero needs to distinguish between the guilty and the falsely accused.

GRENDDEL: And we have been falsely accused.

MOTHER: A real hero shows his people that fear and hatred are the true enemies of peace.

BEOWULF: You are only trying to confound my judgment! How can you be trusted?

GRENDDEL: Mother, we must give Beowulf the chains.

MOTHER: No! He will surely betray us!

GRENDDEL: This time the chains may set us free.

BEOWULF: What chains? What are you talking about?

GRENDDEL: It's our only hope, Mother.

MOTHER: Very well, then.

(She exits. Beowulf follows her to the wings. She re-emerges with two sets of chains and drops them at Beowulf's feet.)

BEOWULF: Where did these come from?

MOTHER: The Danish warrior Unferth had captured us once and brought us before King Hrothgar in these.

GRENDDEL: We had done nothing! But Hrothgar's vain and foolish daughter Freawaru told the equally vain and foolish Unferth that she would be his forever if he captured us alive, to be tortured to death for the people's amusement.

BEOWULF: How did you escape?

MOTHER: That must remain a secret. I can only tell you that the ones who helped us possessed special powers.

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BEOWULF: Why have you presented them to me?

MOTHER: So that you may chain us up, just as Unferth had done, and take us before the king. And if you cannot convince him that we are not demons and wish to live in peace, then you may do with us as you please.

(Beowulf examines the chains.)

BEOWULF: So this was all Freawaru's doing?

GRENDEL: And Unferth's.

BEOWULF: I have been summoned to Denmark on a false alarm, to slay creatures who have been falsely accused... Unferth and Freawaru have made sport of us. *(Pause. He realizes the gravity.)* You two have been greatly wronged.

MOTHER: Then you will help us?

BEOWULF: Yes, but it is going to be dangerous.

(Beowulf, Grendel, and Grendel's Mother huddle together. Blackout.)

[End of Freeview]