

Women in *Beowulf*



P. S. Langeslag



Overview

Name	Roles	Lines
Wealhþeow	Queen (Danes), hostess, parent	612–641, (662–665), 1162–1232, (2173)
Freawaru	Peaceweaver (Danes → Heathobards)	2020–2069
Hildeburh	Peaceweaver (Danes → Frisians)	1071–1080, 1114–1118
Grendel's mother	Avenger	1256–1287, 1330–1569
Hygd	Queen (Geats)	1926–1931, (2172), 2369–1272
Fremu/Modþryðo	Queen (Angeln); wicked/reformed woman	1931–1962

Wealhþeow (Hrothgar's wife)

- ▶ Serves ale
- ▶ Hopes for Beowulf's success
- ▶ Pleads with her husband and with Beowulf on behalf of her sons

Freawaru (Hrothgar's daughter)

- ▶ Serves ale
- ▶ Promised to Ingeld of the Heathobards as a peaceweaver, apparently an ill-fated union

Hildeburg (Hnæf's sister)

- ▶ Married to Finn of the Frisians as a peaceweaver
- ▶ Taken back home after a resurgence of violence and the deaths of her husband, son, and brother

Hygd (Hygelac's wife)

- ▶ Offers Beowulf the throne after Hygelac's death because she does not trust her son Heardred to do a good job

Fremu/Modþryðo

- ▶ Feared by men because she would have them killed for looking at her
- ▶ Narrator calls this a feigned offence and no queenly virtue
- ▶ Married to Offa of Angeln; thereafter known as virtuous
- ▶ The name is a crux: *mōdþrȳðu* means “arrogant” and *freme* “beneficial”. Offa of Mercia (not of Angeln!) had a wife Cynethryth, and Saxo mentions a Drota and a Herminthrud.

Juxtaposition

- ▶ Wealhtheow's second appearance follows immediately upon the scop's telling of the fate of Hildeburh.
- ▶ The Modþryðo/Fremu critique follows a favourable discussion of Hygd. But if these are not names, it is not clear that a new character is introduced!

Grendel's Mother

- ▶ Avenges her son's death
- ▶ The scribe gives her a masculine pronoun on a few occasions