

Beowulf Notes

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Introduction

Introduction & Omissions

Beowulf is an Anglo-Saxon epic poem, probably written at some point between the 6th and 8th centuries and set in 6th century Denmark. The original is some 3000 lines long, and is written in a primarily West Saxon (IE from Wessex) dialect of Old English.

To adapt such a poem for the stage requires a good deal of changes to be made to the script, changes which are detailed in the accompanying document 'Beowulf - Additions and Omissions'. This document aims to provide a set of 'director's notes' to accompany the script, linking the actions in the script with the passages describing them and providing hints or explanations of details.

Notation

Parts of the play are referenced by their scene, while lines from the poem are numbered from the Michael Alexander translation rather than the original.

Notes accompanying the script

Act 1

Scene 1 - Introduction

The poem opens with a story about Scyld Shefing, founder of the royal house of the Spear-Danes, of which *Hrothgar* is a member. *The Bard* goes through much of the back story of the Syclding dynasty, the building of Heorot and introduces Grendel and Beowulf before the play proper begins.

The introduction is taken almost verbatim from the poem, merely missing out sections for brevity; such as the passage describing Scyld's burial.

While most of the contemporary audience would have been familiar with the story

described (hence the Bard's use of the phrase 'you have heard'), it serves as a useful introduction to the culture for a modern audience.

The long monologue from the Bard also mirrors the way the poem would have been performed.

Scene 2 - Beowulf's Arrival at Heorot

The play itself opens with *Beowulf's* arrival at Heorot (his departure from Geatland and subsequent arrival in Denmark having been narrated, while his conversation with the lookout has been omitted).

The transition between narration and performance occurs at the moment Beowulf and his companions enter: suddenly the story is made flesh.

The next few passages are almost entirely dialogue and cover the ritual greeting between host and guest; king and thegn.

Much of what has been cut describes small details - how Wulfgar is considered wise, and the quality of Beowulf's mail shirt.

After the greetings and Beowulf's request to be allowed to fight Grendel, a bench is cleared for the visitors and the feasting commences.

This is described in the poem as follows:

*A bench was then cleared for the company of Geats
there in the beer-hall, for the whole band together.
The stout-hearted warriors went to their places,
bore their strength proudly. Prompt in his office,
the man who held the horn of bright mead
poured out its sweetness. The song of the poet
again rang in Heorot. The heroes laughed loud
in the great gathering of the Geats and the Danes.*

Scene 3 - Feasting and Bragging

Scene 4 - Grendel

The fight with Grendel covers the entirety of lines 720-824 and goes into considerable detail.

My performance directions have been kept brief; the actors should study the following passage to work out exactly how they should perform the fight:

*Walking to the hall came this warlike creature
condemned to agony. The door gave way,
toughened with iron, at the touch of those hands.
Rage-inflamed, wreckage-bent, he ripped open
the jaws of the hall. Hastening on,
the foe then stepped onto the unstained floor,
angrily advanced: out of his eyes stood
an unlovely light like that of fire.
He saw then in the hall a host of young soldiers,
a company of kinsmen caught away in sleep,
a whole warrior-band. In his heart he laughed then,
horrible monster, his hopes swelling
to a gluttonous meal. He meant to wrench
the life from each body that lay in the place
before night was done. It was not to be;
he was no longer to feast on the flesh of mankind
after that night.*

*Narrowly the powerful
kinsman of Hygelac kept watch how the ravager
set to work with his sudden catches;
nor did the monster mean to hang back.
As a first step he set his hands on
a sleeping soldier, savagely tore at him,
gnashed at his bone-joints, bolted huge gobbets,
sucked at his veins, and had soon eaten
all of the dead man, even down to his
hands and feet.*

*Forward he stepped,
stretched out his hands to seize the warrior
calmly at rest there, reached out for him with his
unfriendly fingers: but the faster man
forestalling, sat up, sent back his arm.*

*The upholder of evils at once knew
he had not met, on middle earths
extremest acres, with any man
of harder hand-grip: his heart panicked.
He was quit of the place no more quickly for that.
Eager to be away, he ailed for his darkness
and the company of devils; the dealings he had there
were like nothing he had come across in his lifetime.*

*Then Hygelacs brave kinsman called to mind
that evenings utterance, upright he stood,
fastened his hold till fingers were bursting.
The monster strained away: the man stepped closer.
The monsters desire was for darkness between them,
direction regardless, to get out and run*

*for his fen-bordered lair; he felt his grips strength
crushed by his enemy. It was an ill journey
the rough marauder had made to Heorot.*

*The crash in the banqueting-hall came to the Danes,
the men of the guard that remained in the buildings,
with the taste of death. The deepening rage
of the claimants to Heorot caused it to resound.
It was indeed wonderful that the wine-supper-hall
withstood the wrestling pair, that the worlds palace
fell not to the ground. But it was girt firmly,
both inside and out, by iron braces
of skilled manufacture. Many a figured
gold-worked wine-bench, as we heard it,
started from the floor at the struggles of that pair.
The men of the Danes had not imagined that
any of mankind by what method soever
might undo that intricate, antlered hall,
sunder it by strength unless it were swallowed up in
the embraces of fire.*

*Fear entered into
the listening North Danes, as that noise rose up again
strange and strident. It shrilled terror
to the ears that heard it through the halls side-wall,
the grisly plaint of Gods enemy,
his song of ill-success, the sobs of the damned one
bewailing his pain. He was pinioned there
by the man of all mankind living
in this worlds estate the strongest of his hands.*

*Not for anything would the earls guardian
let his deadly guest go living:
he did not count his continued existence
of the least use to anyone. The earls ran
to defend the person of their famous prince;
they drew their ancestral swords to bring
what aid they could to their captain, Beowulf.*

*They were ignorant of this, when they entered the fight,
boldly-intentioned battle-friends,
to hew at Grendel, hunt his life
on every side that no sword on earth,
not the truest steel, could touch their assailant;
for by a spell he had dispossessed all
blades of their bite on him.*

*A bitter parting
from life was that day destined for him;
the eldritch spirit was sent off on his*

*far faring into the fiends domain.
It was then that this monster, who, moved by spite
against human kind, had caused so much harm
so feuding with God found at last
that flesh and bone were to fail him in the end;
for Hygelacs great-hearted kinsman
had him by the hand; and hateful to each
was the breath of the other.*

*A breach in the giant
flesh-frame showed then, shoulder-muscles
sprang apart, there was a snapping of tendons,
bone-locks burst. To Beowulf the glory
of this fight was granted; Grendels lot
to flee the slopes fen-ward with flagging heart,
to a den where he knew there could be no relief,
no refuge for a life at its very last stage,
whose surrender-day had dawned. The Danish hopes
in this fatal fight had found their answer.*

It should be noted that despite the lack of actual dialogue, the scene should still be noisy - in particular Grendel's sobs and shrill cries.

If desired, Beowulf can ad lib some lines or use the lines below when challenging Grendel before they begin wrestling:

Beowulf Grendel! Here stands undaunted
a warrior who will defend Hrothgar's land!

(Alternatively, in the Old English)

*Grendel! her stynt unforcu
e wile gealgean Hrothgar eard!*

Scene 5 - Grendel's Death is Celebrated

With regard to the gift giving, the exact gifts given are not so important. What is important is the idea that Hrothgar's generosity is enormous, and the gifts given extremely fine.

Act 2

Scene 1 - Grendel's Mother Attacks Heorot

Like the Grendel fight, this scene is is dialogue free, and the stage directions brief.

It is described in the poem like so:

*She came down to Heorot, where the heroes of the Danes
slept about the hall. A sudden change
was that for the men there when the Mother of Grendel
found her way in among them though the fury of her onslaught
was less frightful than his; as the force of a woman,
her onset in a fight, is less feared by men,
where the bound blade, beaten out by hammers,
cuts, with its sharp edges shining with blood,
through the boars that bristle above the foes helmets!*

*Many a hard sword was snatched up in the hall
from its rack above the benches; the broad shield was raised,
held in the hand firm; helmet and corselet
lay there unheeded when the horror was on them.*

*She was all eager to be out of the place
now that she was discovered, and escape with her life.
She caught a man quickly, clutched him to herself,
one of the athelings, and was away to the fen.
This was the hero that Hrothgar loved better
than any on earth among his retinue,
destroyed thus as he slept; he was a strong warrior,
noted in battle.*

Scene 2 - The Warriors Take Stock

Beowulf's address to Hrothgar upon being summoned to the hall is paraphrased in the poem; I have written a couple of lines.

Scene 3 - Journey to the Mere

A journey is difficult to stage, so the journey itself is narrated by The Bard, with the other actors taking over on arrival at the Mere.

Scene 4 - Grendel's Mother

The fight between Beowulf and Grendel's Mother is described in great detail in the poem. The stage directions are only a guide for movement; the poem as written is below:

*It was then that he saw the size of this water-hag,
damned thing of the deep. He dashed out his weapon,
not stinting the stroke, and with such strength and violence
that the circled sword screamed on her head
a strident battle-song. But the stranger saw
his battle-flame refuse to bite*

*or hurt her at all; the edge failed
its lord in his need. It had lived through many
hand-to-hand conflicts, and carved through the helmets
of fated men. This was the first time
that this rare treasure had betrayed its name.
Determined still, intent on fame,
the nephew of Hygelac renewed his courage.*

*Furious, the warrior flung it to the ground,
spiral-patterned, precious in its clasps,
stiff and steel-edged; his own strength would suffice him,
the might of his hands. A man must act so
when he means in a fight to frame himself
a long-lasting glory; it is not life he thinks of.*

*The Geat prince went for Grendels mother,
seized her by the shoulder he was not sorry to be fighting
his mortal foe, and with mounting anger
the man hard in battle hurled her to the ground.*

*She promptly repaid this present of his
as her ruthless hands reached out for him;
and the strongest of fighting-men stumbled in his weariness,
the firmest of foot-warriors fell to the earth.*

*She was down on this guest of hers and had drawn her knife,
broad, burnished of edge; for her boy was to be avenged,
her only son. Overspreading his back,
the shirt of mail shielded his life then,
barred the entry to edge and point.*

*Edgetheows son would have ended his venture
deep under ground there, the Geat fighter,
had not the battle-shirt then brought him aid,
his war-shirt of steel. And the wise Lord,
the holy God, gave out the victory;
the Ruler of the Heavens rightly settled it
as soon as the Geat regained his feet.*

*He saw among the armour there the sword to bring him victory,
a Giant-sword from former days: formidable were its edges,
a warriors admiration. This wonder of its kind
was yet so enormous that no other man
would be equal to bearing it in battle-play
it was a Giants forge that had fashioned it so well.
The Scylding champion, shaking with war-rage,
caught it by its rich hilt, and, careless of his life,
brandished its circles, and brought it down in fury
to take her full and fairly across the neck,
breaking the bones; the blade sheared*

*through the death-doomed flesh. She fell to the ground;
the sword was gory; he was glad at the deed.*

Scene 5 - The Hero Returns

Rather than perform this scene, I have chosen to have The Bard narrate it, so that Beowulf and his companions can make their entrance back into Heorot, echoing their prior arrival.

Scene 6 - More Celebrations

No notes (yet)

Scene 7 - The Geats Take Their Leave

As before, this journey is told via narration.

Scene 8 - Return to Hygelac's Court

The initial conversation on Beowulf's entry to the court is paraphrased in the poem, so I have written some dialogue for it. The relevant fragment of the poem goes like so:

*When he had offered greetings in grave words,
as usage obliged him, to his lord of men,
the survivor of the fight sat facing the king,
kinsman and kinsman. Carrying the mead-cup
about the hall was Hareths daughter,
lover of the people, presenting the wine-bowl
to the hand of each Geat. Hygelac then made
of his near companion in that noble hall
courteous inquiry. Curiosity burned in him
to hear the adventures of this voyage of the Geats.*

Interval

Act 3

Scene 1 - The Dragon Awakens

Scene 2 - The Dragon

Scene 3 - Beowulf Dies

Scene 4 - Grief

Scene 5 - The Dirge

Unlike the rest of the text; this scene is performed in the old English, it is sung rather than spoken, and it is taken from a different work.

The song which closes the performance is a fragment of the Old English poem *The Wanderer*.

Characters