

# 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**

### **Scene 5 - Grendel's Death is Celebrated**

## **Act 2**

**Scene 1 - Grendel's Mother Attacks Heorot**

**Scene 2 - The Warriors Take Stock**

**Scene 3 - Journey to the Mere**

**Scene 4 - Grendel's Mother**

**Scene 5 - The Hero Returns**

**Scene 6 - More Celebrations**

**Scene 7 - The Geats Take Their Leave**

**Scene 8 - Return to Hygelac's Court**

## **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**