

Beowulf - Additions & Omissions

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Introduction

Overview

While adapting Michael Alexander's verse translation into a play; I realised that it would be necessary to cut or change a substantial amount of the play. This document aims to explain what was changed, and why.

A poem, by its very nature, has fewer limitations than a stage play. One of these is the ability to gloss over actions or dialogue that in a play must be performed in their entirety. For all of these instances, I have been forced to write dialogue to fill the gaps suggested by the poet. I have tried my best to match the style of the original, and have noted in this document every insertion.

Likewise, poems can contain elements that would be difficult to stage, or severely disrupt the flow of the plot. For the former I have employed the device of a narrator, to describe those events that cannot be staged - for example the journey from Heorot to the Mere. For the latter, I have cut them as much as possible leaving only what is directly relevant to the plot. The account of Scyld Shefing's ship burial has been entirely cut, and the following genealogy reduced to its' bare essentials.

The poem also contains numerous references to other stories. Several of these are told by bards within Heorot, and so if desired could be sung as part of the background noise during the appropriate scenes.

Lastly, in a few places I have cut dialogue for brevity. This has been done only in a few scenes, where the character has veered off on a tangent and all dialogue is otherwise faithful to the translation.

The narrator has also been employed to introduce and end scenes, keeping the story moving. I hope that the transition between that which is performed, and that which is narrated will be seamless.

Notation

Each scene in the play has been given its own section, and within each scene I have listed all the changes which should be easily understandable. Line numbers relate to the line numbers in the *Michael Alexander* translation, not the original.

Script - Additions and Omissions

Act 1

Scene 1 - Introduction

The play opens with a condensed version of the first 324 lines of the poem. The genealogy of Hrothgar is cut down to the barest minimum, and the passage concerning the burial of Scyld Shefing is almost completely removed.

Also removed is the Geats' arrival in Denmark and their conversation with the coastguard. I felt that this passage didn't add anything to the story, and since virtually everything in it is repeated when they arrive at Heorot I decided to omit it.

Scene 2 - Beowulf's Arrival at Heorot

There is a bit of a continuity error here - at line 328 the Geats put down their spears and shields. At line 387 Wulfgar tells them to leave their weapons before going to the king. It is unclear whether Wulfgar is telling them to down their weapons, or telling them not to take them up again; since I have omitted the passage which describes them placing them down, I have decided to have the Geats leave their weapons after Wulfgar's instruction.

Scene 3 - Feasting and Bragging

Beowulf and Unferth's conversation proceeds as in the poem, before Wealhtheow arrives.

Her arrival is described in the poem (lines 611-630), but her lines are paraphrased.

All of her dialogue for this fragment was written by me, to fit the following lines:

*There was laughter of heroes, harp-music ran,
words were warm-hearted. Wealhtheow moved,
mindful of courtesies, the queen of Hrothgar,
glittering to greet the Geats in the hall,
peerless lady; but to the lands guardian
she offered first the flowing cup,
bade him be blithe at the beer-drinking,
gracious to his people; gladly the conqueror
partook of the banquet, tasted the hall-cup.*

*The Helming princess then passed about among
the old and the young men in each part of the hall,
bringing the treasure-cup, until the time came
when the flashing-armed queen, complete in all virtues,
carried out to Beowulf the brimming vessel;*

*she greeted the Geat, and gave thanks to the Lord
in words wisely chosen, her wish being granted
to meet with a man who might be counted on
for aid against these troubles. He took then the cup,
a man violent in war, at Wealhtheow's hand,
and framed his utterance, eager for the conflict.*

Scene 4 - Grendel

As most of this scene as written is dialogue free, I have paraphrased the prose into stage directions, and taken the liberty of writing some lines for Beowulf which are loosely based on Eorlorman Byrhtnoth's challenge in *The Battle of Maldon*.

Scene 5 - Grendel's Death is Celebrated

After the fight, lines 836- 873 describe how Grendel is tracked back to the Mere, while lines 874-919 tell of Sigemund. Both have been omitted.

In addition to the banner, mail shirt, helmet and sword given to Beowulf, Hrothgar also gives eight horses and saddles. These I have omitted as being hugely impractical to stage.

While giving the gifts, Hrothgar is described as telling Beowulf to 'use them well'. I have written dialogue to this effect.

After the gift giving is another passage of exposition, telling of Finn's sons. Like all the unrelated stories in the poem, I have omitted it.

Hrethric and Hrothmund, the sons of Hrothgar have no lines and only feature in this scene.

For that reason I have not included them in the cast, although if desired they could be added in with little change to the play. If included, Beowulf should be seated between them.

Wealhtheow then gives Beowulf arm rings, robes, rings and a 'rich collar'. I have abbreviated this list to just the arm rings and necklance for practicality. While doing this, she speaks some lines which are only hinted at; I have written some.

After this, the poet is briefly sidetracked talking about a collar stolen by Hama; this has been omitted.

The passage introducing Grendel's Mother, from 1250-1277, has been cut down somewhat.

Act 2

Scene 1 - Grendel's Mother Attacks Heorot

No changes made.

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.

Likewise, I have written a couple of lines for Hrothgar at the end of the scene.

Scene 3 - Journey to the Mere

On arrival at the Mere, Beowulf kills a sea snake with his bow. This I omitted as being difficult to stage and irrelevant to the plot.

Beowulf and Unferth then have a conversation during which Unferth lends Beowulf his sword. Because this is paraphrased in the poem, I have written dialogue for them.

Scene 4 - Grendel's Mother

No changes made.

Scene 5 - The Hero Returns

I have cut lines 1605-1622 because they describe what happens when Beowulf cuts off Grendel's head - this I have included in the previous scene as part of his fight with Grendel's Mother.

Scene 6 - More Celebrations

No changes made.

Scene 7 - The Geats Take Their Leave

As before, the coastguard's part has been cut.

Lines 1929 - 1960 tell of Modthryth and Offa, and being irrelevant to the plot, have been cut.

Scene 8 - Return to Hygelac's Court

I have cut lines 2019-2068 - in them the poet goes off on a tangent talking about Freawaru and Ingeld.

Line 2079 refers to Handsco being eaten whole. This would be

impractical to stage so has been removed.

Lines 2162-2165 refer to the horses given by Hrothgar. Since I cut these (Act 1 Scene 5), they have been removed.

I have changed the ordering of the end of the scene somewhat; Hygelac's presentation of gifts has been moved forward slightly so that the Bard's text happens all together at the end of the act.

As Hrothgar's words are paraphrased in the poem, I have written some dialogue. The original passage is as follows:

*Then the king bold in war, keeper of the warriors,
required them to bring in the bequest of Hrethel,
elaborate in gold; the Geats at that day
had no more royal treasure of the rank of sword.
This he then laid in the lap of Beowulf
and bestowed on him an estate of seven thousand hides,
a chiefs stool and a hall.*

Interval

Act 3

Scene 1 - The Dragon Awakens

Scene 2 - The Dragon

Scene 3 - Beowulf Dies

Scene 4 - Grief

The play proper closes with most of lines 2842-3179 of the poem.

Lines 2842-2860 are performed, rather than spoken.

Wiglaf's speech to the cowards (lines 2861-2888) is performed in its entirety, after which the narrator takes over and recites lines 2889-2906, before skipping the poet's predictions of doom for the Geats, which takes up lines 2907- 3003.

The narrator resumes at line 3004, and recites the lines attributed to the messenger up to line 3034. The narration then skips lines 3035-3073 and Wiglaf takes up the story once more.

His speech, covering lines 3074-3106 is included in full, with a brief interjection from the narrator before continuing from lines 3111-3116.

The rest of the play proper, covering lines 3117-3179 of the poem, is entirely

narrated without change from the poem.

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*.

The original is 119 lines long, and the fragment included covers lines 92-109 inclusive.