The Prelude to Beowulf's Fight with Grendel

by

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Beowulf[1] is the editorial title of the heroic poem of 3182 lines, the outline of which can be briefly stated. The young hero, Beowulf, *mǣg Higelāces*, a nephew of the king of the Geats, goes to the Danish people, whose king at the time is Hrothgar, destroys Grendel, destroys Grendel's mother who has executed an unexpected vengeance, returns to the Geats, serves his king, becomes king himself, and in his old age, after a fifty years' successful reign of his own people, destroys with the assistance of his young kinsman by the name of Wiglaf and is at the same time destroyed by a dragon who had been attacking the Geats.

Structurally speaking, the *Beowulf* poem consists of two distinct parts. The first part is Beowulf's vigorous and glorious conquer of the descendants of the life-destroyer Cain (cf. 107a), Grendel and his mother, in the Danish country. The second part is his wondrous but fatal fight with the fire dragon in his own country.

The substance of Beowulf's terrifying exploits with the Grendel race has been most thoroughly treated by a number of *Beowulf* scholars, and has been attributed in the main to folk-tales, which preserve a recognizable framework of incident which recurs again and again, no matter how widely separated the accounts in time and space. The prototype of this folk-tale is summarized in a kind of type-tale which is named "The Bear's Son Tale."[2] It is certain, therefore, that a young and powerful hero's fights with the super-natural beings were quite familiar to the people in the eighthcentury England, in which *Beowulf* is said to have been composed. Moreover, the audience, which was a rather small body, of the *Beowulf* poem undoubtedly "would believe in the monsters, in the creatures of evil lurking in the waste lands"[3] around them. The same audience is said to have been familiar with the doctrines of Christ. This ostensible self-contradiction in old England can be attributed to the similar Danish situation in which king Hrothgar reigned, as our poet says as follows:

> Hwīlum hīe gehēton   æt *hæ*rgtrafum
> wīgweorþunga,   wordum bǣdon,
> þæt him gāstbona   gēoce gefremede
> wið þēodþrēaum.   Swylc wæs þēaw hyra,
> hǣþenra hyht;   helle gemundon
> in mōdsefan,   Metod hīe ne cūþon,
> dǣda Dēmend,   ne wiston hīe Drihten God,
> nē hīe hūru heofena Helm   herian ne cūþon,
> wuldres Waldend.   Wā bið þǣm ðe sceal
> þurh slīðne nīð   sāwle bescūfan
> in fȳres fæþm,   frōfre ne wēnan,
> wihte gewendan!   Wēl bið þǣm þe mōt
> æfter dēaðdæge   Drihten sēcean
> ond tō Fæder fæþmum   freoðo wilnian!
>
> (175-88)

The above-quoted passage, as Klaeber suggests, refers to the heathen practice of the Danish people and the poet's Christian didactic comments. Klaeber goes on to state that "Since Hrōðgār is throughout depicted as a good Christian, the Danes' supplication to a heathen deity … might conceivably indicate that in time of distress they returned to their former ways —— as was done repeatedly in England, …."[4]

Then, what the *Beowulf* poet is primarily concerned with is how to present orally and possibly with a musical instrument of some kind to his audience the ancient but quite well-known material combined with manifold historical and episodic events which are at once suggestive of and pertinent to the narrative of a perfect picture of Beowulf, the ideal Germanic hero.

I, therefore, agree with Wrenn when he says that "*Beowulf* is not a narrative poem in anything like the usual sense of the term, nor a setting forth continuously of the life of its hero. It aims to afford poetic pleasure in the light of ultimate truth by bringing before its hearers the rising to full stature of Beowulf's glorious youth, and the death of the same hero in old age when he showed supreme qualities of excellence in meeting inevitable doom."[5]

In the earlier parts of the poem, the poet narrates that Grendel had harried Heorot for twelve years, seeking the splendid hall every night and devouring many a Danish warrior in defiance of their gracious king Hrothgar. The following portion of the king's first speech to Beowulf helps the audience to get acquainted afresh with the terrifying results of Grendel's ferocious attacks upon the Danish people:

Sorh is mē tō secganne on sefan mīnum
gumena ǣnigum, hwæt mē Grendel hafað
hȳnðo on Heorote mid his heteþancum,
fǣrnīða gefremed; is mīn fletwerod,
wīghēap gewanod; hīe wyrd forswēop
on Grendles gryre. God ēaþe mæg
þone dolsceaðan dǣda getwǣfan!
Ful oft gebēotedon bēore druncne
ofer ealowǣge ōretmecgas,
þæt hīe in bēorsele bīdan woldon
Grendles gūþe mid gryrum ecga.
Đonne wæs þēos medoheal on morgentīd,
drihtsele drēorfāh, þonne dæg līxte,
eal bencþelu blōde bestȳmed,
heall heorudrēore; āhte ic holdra þȳ lǣs,
dēorre duguðe, þē þā dēað fornam.

(473-88)

In my opinion, the prelude to the hero's combat with Grendel begins virtually with Beowulf's speech made in front of his kinsmen. Hrothgar and his queen Wealtheow had already been retired for the night after the banquet at Heorot held in honor of Beowulf and his own chosen warriors. Beowulf spoke the following:

'Nō ic mē an herewæsmun hnāgran talige
gūþgeweorca, þonne Grendel hine;
forþan ic hine sweorde swebban nelle,
aldre benēotan, þēah ic eal mæge;
nāt hē þāra gōda, þæt hē mē ongēan slêa,
rand gehēawe, þēah ðe hē rōf sîe
nīþgeweorca; ac wit on niht sculon
secge ofersittan, gif hē gesēcean dear
wīg ofer wǣpen, ond siþðan wītig God
on swā hwæþere hond hālig Dryhten
mǣrðo dēme, swā him gemet þince.'

(677-87)

The boasting of this kind is typical of Beowulf throughout the poem and it serves in part to anticipate the main action, the fight with Grendel; we can anticipate that Beowulf is going to put Grendel to sleep not with his sword but with his handgrip harder than that of any man on this middle-earth, as the poet says.

When Beowulf and his brave seamen lay down to wait for Grendel, the poet presents the following ominous statement:

Nǣnig heora þōhte, þæt hē þanon scolde
eft eardlufan ǣfre gesēcean,
folc oþðe frēoburh, þǣr hē āfēded wæs;
ac hīe hæfdon gefrūnen, þæt hīe ǣr tō fela micles
in þǣm wīnsele wældēað fornam,
Denigea lēode.

(691-96a)

All this serves to keep the audience in suspense; Grendel's ruthlessness told by Hrothgar earlier, Beowulf's boasting which might not be fulfilled, and the anxiety which Beowulf's men were having in their beds.

Grendel's approach to Heorot is said to be "a hair-raising depiction of death on the march,"[6] which could be conveniently divided into three stages.[7] In each new stage there is a sudden forward movement in Grendel's position, "as though a movie camera were moving from a long shot toward a close-up."[8] And each stage begins with the same verb form *cōm* which is followed by a different forceful verb of motion in the infinitive, *scrīðan*, *gongan*, and *siðian*.[9]

In the first stage (702b-9), our poet introduces Grendel, who is identified with *sceadugenga*, for he is still too far away from Heorot, the hall, in the dark, to be clearly seen. We can only see something moving with something light which turns out to be the flame from his eyes, as the poet says later:

him of ēagum stōd
ligge gelīcost
(726b-27a)

Our very initial sight of Grendel, who *cōm* … *scrīðan* in the distance in the black night, is located at the appropriate time of the day, for conventionally the darkness immediately before dawn is the time of greatest terror, among other things, such as sorrow or misery.

At this point we are told that in Heorot all the Geatish warriors with the exception of Beowulf, who has completely disarmed himself (cf. 671-74) for the night, are fast asleep, while Grendel is approaching the hall. The fact that those sleeping warriors might be sure to be an easy prey for Grendel serves effectively to raise a terrifying feeling in the minds of the audience.[10] One may wonder how it was possible, in the first place, for Beowulf to disarm himself when he knew that Grendel would attack Heorot at any moment and, in the second place, for the Geats to fall asleep when they were supposed to hold Heorot, the horned house, against Grendel? Did they have too many drinks of mead early in the evening at the time of the royal feast? They had come all the way to the Danish people with the express purpose of purging Heorot of nightly attacks of Grendel!

Beowulf's disarming himself can be explained at least in two ways. It was probably in accordance with a feature of "The Bear's Son" folk-tale that the hero fought with the supernatural being barehanded. Or Beowulf was confident in his physical strength, for

> sē wæs moncynnes   mægenes strengest
> on þǣm dæge   þysses līfes,
> æþele ond ēacen.
>
> (196–98a)

And also he is said to have had the strength of thirty men in his handgrip (cf. 379b–80).

The fact that Beowulf, allowing his men fall asleep, keeps vigil alone over Grendel can be understood in the following way. Beowulf "seems to have taken the first watch, as may be expected from a young chieftain in search of glory"[10] keeping in line with the folk-tale again, in which things are so arranged as to enhance the hero's achievement by minimizing others.[11] Beowulf, with his heart swollen in anger, appears to have been quite sure of God's will, as our poet assures us that:

> þā Metod nolde,
> se s[c]ynscaþa   under sceadu bregdan;–
>
> (706b–7)

Or all the Geatish companions may have been forced to sleep with Grendel's supernatural charm in pretty much the same way as their weapons were to be *forsworen* (804b) as they attempted to aid their lord, Beowulf, to overcome Grendel later.

The second stage (710–19), in which the figure seen vaguely in the first stage is now clearly identified with the very name of Grendel, begins with the verb *cōm* which is followed by the verb in the infinitive *gongan*. The interpretation of this verb of motion is crucial in order to visualize this particular scene. In one interpretation, this is meant to be "moving," and "gliding" in another. This ought to be interpreted as "walking," because Grendel has now become "larger" than before in the eyes of the audience, since he is the nearer to Heorot. Indeed, we can see that his countenance is full of *Godes yrre*.

Then, the poet's use of the verb *wōd* (714a), rather than *c̱ōm*, gives Grendel's own forward movement a horrifying vigor, for, he is walking "with baleful haste and murder in his heart; he knows where the hall stands, with the knowledge of murderous experience."[12] While it is true that the verb *cuman* sometimes means "to go," its normal meaning is "to come," as in Modern English. When this verb is used in the second or third person without the specification of any goal, it often suggests that the subject of the verb is seen by the one who makes the statement, that is, by the speaker,as advancing toward him. Therefore, the fact that the poet shifts the verb *cuman* to the verb *wadan*, which has no specific implication of point of view in contrast to *cuman*,[13] is extremely effective and dramatic, for this time Grendel's forward movement toward Heorot is being made, as it were, with audience.

At this point we are reminded that this was not Grendel's first visit to Heorot, but that it was assuredly hinted that this would be his very last visit to the hall.

In the third and final stage (720-45a), which again begins with the verb *cōm* which is followed again by the verb in the infinitive *siðian* , Grendel, who is identified with *rinc* here, comes up to the hall. The scene from here is narrated from Beowulf's point of view.[14] The use of the noun *rinc* whose usual meaning is "a warrior" is effective, for he is about to fight with another *rinc*, Beowulf. Moreover, Grendel is often treated in the poem as being "human," as well as "an evil," when he *mynte* (712a, 731a, 762a), or

Þā him ālumpen wæs
wistfylle wēn.

(733b-34a)

The supernatural strength of Grendel driven by evil desire is well pictured here at close range; when he merely touches the halldoor with his hands, it immediately springs open, fastened with fire-forged bands. And a flame-like light is coming out of his eyes, by means of which Beowulf can observe Grendel's actions at the hall. What Grendel does and intends to do is narrated as follows:

Geseah hē in recede rinca manige,
swefan sibbegedriht samod ætgædere,
magorinca hēap. Þā his mōd āhlōg;
mynte þæt hē gedǣlde, ǣr þon dæg cwōme,
atol āglǣca ānra gehwylces
līf wið līce, Þā him ālumpen wæs
wistfylle wēn.

(728-34a)

All this is observed by Beowulf alone who has been awake in his bed in the hall. Beowulf continues to watch Grendel suddenly seize a sleeping warrior, tearng him apart, drinking the blood from his veins, eating all of his body, feet and hands. This detailed depiction of Grendel's blood-curdling behavior is climactically depicted to heighten the accumulated horror in the minds of the audience.

Beowulf will not or cannot begin to act until Grendel, stepping closer to the hero,

nam Þā mid handa higeÞīhtigne
rinc on ræste, rǣhte ongēan
fēond mid folme;

(746-48a)

The prelude to Beowulf's fight with Grendel, as I have discussed it, is full of suspense and it is truly one of the finest passages in English literature.

NOTES

1. Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edition: Boston: Heath, 1950.
2. Klaeber, p. xiii.

W. W. Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition*, Harvard University Press, 1928, p. 181.

R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Poem*, Cambridge University Press, 1932, p. 365.

J. R. R. Tolkien' "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the Britsh Academy*, XXII (1936), 245–95, reprinted in *The Beowulf Poet*, edited by D. K. Fry, Prentice-hall, 1968, pp. 8–56.

R.M. Lumiansky, "The Dramatic Audience in *Beowulf*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, LI (1952), 545–550, reprinted in Fry, pp. 76–82.

A. G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf*, University of California Press, 1960, pp. 88–106.

A. Renoir, "Point of View and Design for Terror in *Beowulf*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, LXIII (1962), 154–167, reprinted in Fry, pp. 154–66.

In this connection it is a matter of interest and surprise for us to learn that even a Japanese version of the folk-tale —— "Watanabe No Tsuna" —— was studied in England as early as 1901. Cf. Klaeber, p. cxliii.

3. D. Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, with corrections, Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 72.
4. Klaeber, p. 135.
5. C. L. Wrenn, ed., *Beowulf: With the Finnesburg Fragment*, Boston: Heath, 1953, p. 66.
6. Brodeur, p. 90.
7. Renoir, among others, divides Grendel's approach to Heorot into four stages. Cf. Renoir in Fry, pp. 158ff.
8. H. D. Chickering, Jr., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*,

New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977, p. 306.

9. In Old English the construction of the verb of motion in the infinitive preceded by *cōm*, as in *cōm iernan* "came running" is not infrequently employed.
10. Renoir in Fry, p. 160.
11. Klaeber, p. 154.
    Lawrence, p. 176.
12. Brodeur, p. 91.
13. Renoir in Fry, p. 162.
14. Renoir in Fry, p. 163.