

PLAYS FOR
New Audiences

A Division of Children's Theatre Company

Beowulf

by Toby Hulse

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The play was originally written for a cast of seven, who play:

In order of appearance

Hanneke Professor of Anglo-Saxon at a leading British university

Sophie Her much loved daughter, aged nine at the start of the play

Hrothgar Leader of the Scyldings, King of the Danes

Bard A bard

Grendel A hideous swamp-dwelling creature of darkness

Beowulf Prince, and then King, of the Geats

Unferth A scoffing member of Hrothgar's court

Warrior A hapless soul

Wealhtheow Adviser to Hrothgar

Grendel's Mother A monster every bit as hideous and evil as her son

Dragon A dragon

Thief A misguided soul

Much of the action is narrated by the **Ensemble**. This narration could be divided amongst the cast, or given to specific actors who will work as our storytellers, as suits the production.

Pronouncing Old English

All the letters in Old English are pronounced. This includes letters now silent in their Modern English descendants.

Vowels	Modern English equivalent
a	not
á	father
æ	hat
aé	mad
e	set
é	they
i	pit
í	mean
o	ought
ó	toad
u	put
ú	rude
y	as in French <i>tu</i>
ý	as in French <i>lune</i>

In Old English *diphthongs* the first vowel is always stressed more heavily than the second. The sound of the first vowel is as above. The second vowel is reduced to the schwa of Modern English.

Most *consonants* are pronounced as in Modern English. Since all letters in Old English represent sounds, double consonants should be enunciated twice eg *biddan* 'to pray' is pronounced 'bid-don'.

Consonants pronounced differently

- *sc* is like *sh* in Modern English *ship*
- *cg* is like *dg* in Modern English *edge*
- *h* at the beginning of a word is aspirated, as in Modern English *house*
- *h* elsewhere is like German *ch* in *ich*
- *c* and *g* are usually hard. However before or after *i* or *e*, and after *æ*, *c* has the sound of *ch* as in Modern English *child*, and *g* has the sound of *y* as in Modern English *yet*.
- *þ* (thorn) and *ð* (eth) represent the *th* sound, either the voiceless sound of Modern English *thin* or the voiced sound of Modern English *other*
- *s* and *f* are usually voiceless, but when they occur between two vowels they become voiced, as in *z* and *v*

Scene One – Beginnings and Endings

Hanneke's study.

Amongst the academic clutter of books, papers and coffee cups is a day bed.

Hanneke is sharing a much loved poem with her daughter Sophie. It is obviously something with which they are both very familiar.

Hanneke [Reading.] 'Hwæt! Wé Gár-Dena in gear-dagum,
þéod-cyninga, þrym gefrúnon,
hú ðá æpelingas ellen fremedon!'

Sophie 'Hwæt!' That's how all Anglo-Saxon poems start.

Hanneke How many Anglo-Saxon poems start.

Sophie 'Hwæt!' – 'Listen!'

Hanneke 'Gather round!'

Sophie 'This story is about to begin!'

Hanneke ... has already begun. Good. Carry on.

Sophie 'Wé' Easy. 'We'. It's the same.

Hanneke *Beowulf* is somewhere between one thousand to one thousand three hundred years old –

Sophie Then he's well dead.

Hanneke *Beowulf* the poem, not Beowulf the hero of the poem.

Sophie I know. I'm not stupid.

Hanneke No, you're not stupid – but the language that the Anglo-Saxons spoke, Old English, is the beginnings of Modern English. Many of the words have hardly changed.

Sophie 'Wé Gár-Dena' – 'We of the Spear-Danes'. That doesn't make sense.

Hanneke Where's the verb?

Sophie 'gefrúnon'?

Hanneke Yes!

Sophie 'We have heard...'

Hanneke Of what?

Sophie 'þrym' – 'glory'. 'We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes...'

Hanneke 'Péod-cyninga'?

Sophie 'the kings of the tribes'?

Hanneke Yes.

Sophie 'in gear-dagum' – 'in days of old'.

Hanneke Some people still say 'in days of yore' to mean a time long ago.

Sophie I like 'in days of old'. Or, 'in the old days'. Or, even better, 'in the old times'.

Hanneke It's your translation, Sophie dear, choose which you think is best...

Sophie 'In the old times'.

Hanneke ... although you're only getting away with it because I'm your mother. I wouldn't let any of my undergraduates translate it like that.

Hanneke gets up to move around, as she is obviously in some discomfort. Despite her relatively young age, she walks with the aid of a stick.

Now, see if you can finish the lines.

Sophie 'Gather round! We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes, the kings of the tribes, in the old times, and of how the princes showed great courage.'

Hanneke Excellent! Only another three thousand, one hundred and seventy nine lines to go.

Sophie It takes so long. Can you really just read it? *[She clicks her fingers.]* Like that?

Hanneke Yes, but I have been studying Old English since I was eighteen, and I do teach it every day, to students who aren't half as keen as you. And I know *Beowulf* very

well by now. The poem is extraordinary. It kind of gets into you, becomes part of you.

Sophie And you're a specialist.

Hanneke Yes, I am.

Sophie A world specialist.

Hanneke I suppose so.

Sophie The greatest specialist in the whole wide world of great specialists. The 'lof-geornost'.

Hanneke I wouldn't put it quite like that. And anyway, you're rather good on *Beowulf* yourself. I don't know many nine year olds that can translate Old English. Any, in fact.

Sophie Well, you have been reading it to me and telling me the story for as long as I can remember.

Hanneke Some mothers sing lullabies, some recite Anglo-Saxon poetry... I imagine that it's got into you too, become part of you.

Hanneke sits back down again.

So, what happens next?

Sophie We hear about the life of mighty Scyld Scefing, King of Denmark, and then his death and his burial at sea. His friends put him in a ship with all his treasures and send him out on to the ocean.

Hanneke Well remembered.

Sophie It says it, right here, in the margin.

Hanneke This story opens with a death and closes with a death.

Sophie Spoiler alert!

Hanneke That's Anglo-Saxon poetry for you.

Sophie Although, to be fair, it's kind of got death all the way through it too, but more *[She swiftly enacts a horrific bloody death in combat.]* death than 'Oh, my darling, I must go towards the light, my heart is breaking' death.

Hanneke I love these lines describing the burial at sea. I have always wondered if my funeral might be anything like this.

*For the briefest moment there is a tension between **Sophie** and **Hanneke**.*

*Then **Hanneke** begins reciting. As she recites we see, in some parallel imaginative universe, the sea-burial of Scyld Scefing, the day bed becoming the ship in which he is placed. At some point the **Ensemble** might take over the narration.*

‘Hí hýne þá ætbaéron tó brimes faroðe,
swaése gesípas, swá hé selfa bæd...

Sophie ‘Then they carried him to the frothy waves, his dear comrades, as he himself he bid...’

Hanneke ‘... Þaér æt hýðe stóð hringed-stefna,
ísig ond útfús, æpelinges fær.’

Sophie ‘There, at the harbour, stood the ring-carved prow, icy and keen to sail, a hero’s vessel.’

Hanneke ‘Álédon þá léofne þéoden,
béaga bryttan, on bearm scipes,
maérne be mæste...

Sophie ‘Then they laid down the beloved prince, the great ring-giver, on the ship’s beam, mighty by the mast...’

Hanneke ‘... Þá gýt hie him ásetton segen geldenne
héah ofer héafod...’

Sophie ‘... then they set the gold standard high overhead...’

Hanneke ‘...léton holm beran,
géafon on gár-secg; him wæs geómor sefa
murnende mód. Men ne cunnon
secgan tó sóðe, hwá þaém hlæste onféng.’

Sophie '... let the sea take him, gave him to the ocean; in them were grieving hearts, mourning minds. No one truly knows who received that cargo.'

We are back in the world of the study again.

Hanneke 'Men ne cunnon secgan tó sóðe, hwá þaém hlæste onféng.'

Sophie 'No one truly knows who received that cargo.'

Hanneke The cargo being the dead body of Scyld Scefing. I find those lines so sad, and yet so honest. 'No one truly knows who received that cargo.'

Beat.

What do you think happens to us after we die?

Sophie does not answer.

Sophie?

Silence.

Do you know what a mead hall is?

No answer.

Mead is the Anglo-Saxon drink made from honey. The mead halls where they met to drink together – a bit like banqueting halls – were the centre of their communities. Do you remember?

No response.

One Anglo-Saxon writer says that our lives are like the swift flight of a lone sparrow through a mead hall in winter. The bird flies in through one door and, almost before we notice it, disappears through the other. Outside the wintry storms of snow and rain are raging: inside it is warm, with the fire burning high. That sparrow has a few moments of comfort, and then vanishes from sight back into the darkness. We are alive on this earth, in that mead hall, for a brief time, a time, hopefully, of love, and warmth, and happiness, but we know nothing of what went before this life, or of what follows.

Sophie says nothing.

Sophie, we can talk about this, if... it will help.