

PLAYS FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

A PARTNERSHIP OF SEATTLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND CHILDREN'S THEATRE COMPANY-MINNEAPOLIS

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Beowulf

By
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Beowulf was first presented by Bristol Old Vic, UK, in 2018.

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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.

<i>Vowels</i>	<i>Modern English equivalent</i>
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,
Péod-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, æþelinges 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.

Sophie still says nothing.

I think that we should talk about it. Sophie?

Sophie gets out her phone.

Hanneke sighs, and starts to read.

Scene Two - Heorot

The action is continuous.

Hrothgar and the Scyldings enter.

We see the construction of Heorot.

Ensemble Hrothgar, great King of the Danes was given such victory in battle, such glory in war, that the men of his house served him eagerly, and the younger warriors grew in strength. It came to his mind that he would order a royal palace, a mighty mead hall, to be built by men, that the sons of men would hear of forever.

The hall towered high, high and horn-gabled, the greatest of buildings; and he whose words had weight everywhere, uttered its name:

Hrothgar Heorot.

*The mead hall is filled with laughter, music and celebration, with **Hrothgar** at its centre.*

*A **Bard** picks up a small harp and begins to sing.*

Bard *[Singing.]* Ælmihtiga eorðan worhte,
wlite-beorhtne wang swá wæter bebúgeð:
gesette sige-hréþig sunnan ond mónan
léoman tó léohte land-búendum,
ond gefræt Wade foldan scéatas
leomum ond léafum; líf éac gesceóp
cynna gehwylcum þára ðe cwice hwyrfaþ.

[The Almighty made the earth, this bright shining plain, which the waters surround: set up, triumphant, the sun and the moon, lights as lamps for earth-dwellers, and adorned the corners of the earth with limbs and leaves; life too he created in each of the species that live and move.]

Hrothgar Here in Heorot we are safe. We have bolted the doors, and shut out the blasts of winter. Eat, drink, and then sleep. Nothing can harm us.

We see the Scyldings settle down for the night, and then the terrifying events that follow unfold before our very eyes.

Ensemble A great monster, restless,
suffering in dark, felt fierce pain,
hearing each day, loud in the hall,
laughter and song, the music of life;
a murderous demon, Grendel by name,
marsh stalker, haunting the wasteland
and desolate fens, from the race of evil:
ents, and elves, the walking dead,
and the terrible giants who fought against God.

Night came, and Grendel came,
looked round the hall, saw how the Ring-Danes
lay on the floor, full from their feasting,
not a care in the world.

Wiht unhaélo,
grim ond graédig, gearo sóna wæs,
réoc ond réþe, ond on ræste genam
þrítig þegna.

[The unholy spirit, grim and greedy, was soon ready, savage and cruel, and from their rest, snatched thirty thanes.]

Then home he returned, proud with his plunder,
his banquet of butchery, back to his lair.

Night after night the merciless Grendel
savagely struck, till the greatest of halls,
lay empty, deserted, all life signs ripped out.

Scene Three – Cancer

The action is continuous.

Hanneke goes over to **Sophie**.

Hanneke The cells in our body are constantly dying off, but they are also constantly multiplying to make new cells. It's part of being alive. It's amazing. A real miracle. However, sometimes, cells can go wrong. They grow the wrong way, and then they can start destroying the healthy cells. It's called cancer.

Sophie I know.

Hanneke There are all sorts of reasons why this happens, but it's not something that you can catch from another person, like catching a cold, or the chicken pox.

Sophie hugs her mother.

The problem is that cancer cells multiply much quicker than healthy cells. When this happens they can stick together to form lumps called tumours. The tumours can damage the parts of your body where they are growing, and cells from the tumours can seep into your blood and so spread the cancer.

Sophie Is there a cure?

Hanneke There's no absolute cure yet, but there are many ways of getting rid of it. Doctors can cut the tumours out, and then any cancer cells that are left in the body can be treated with either chemotherapy – very strong drugs that target the fast-growing cells – or radiotherapy – powerful radiation similar to x-rays that destroys the cancer cells. Some people need both.

Sophie So the cancer can be attacked and got rid of forever.

Hanneke Yes. It can be.

Scene Four – Grendel

The action is continuous.

Beowulf and his troop of Geats enter from an unexpected direction. Where previously we would have been hard-pressed to say whether **Sophie** could have seen **Hrothgar** and the events in Heorot, and vice versa, **Beowulf** can definitely see **Sophie**, and **Sophie** can see him.

Sophie What? Who are you?

Beowulf Wé synt gum-cynnes Géata léode
ond Higeláces heorð-genéatas.
Wæs mín fæder folcum gecýped,

æþele ord-fruma Ecgþéow háten.

[We are of the tribe of the Geatish nation, and Hygelac's hearth-companions. My father was known to (your) folk, a noble leader in battle, called Ecgtheow.]

Sophie I'm sorry? Could you say that again, but slower?

Beowulf Wé synt gum-cynnes Géata léode –

Sophie Stop. 'We are'... 'gum-cynnes'... 'of the tribe'... 'Géata léode'... 'of the Geatish nation'. 'We are of the tribe of the Geatish nation'?

Beowulf *nods.*

'We are Geats'. Why do you Anglo-Saxons have to make such a meal of everything you say?

Beowulf *laughs.*

Ok, carry on.

Beowulf ... ond Higeláces heorð-genéatas.

Sophie 'And'... 'Higeláces'... Hygelac is a name?

Beowulf *nods.*

'heorð-genéatas'... 'hearth-companions'... 'We are of the tribe of the Geatish nation, and Hygelac's hearth-companions.' Am I right so far?

Beowulf *smiles at Sophie.*

Next!

Beowulf Wæs mín fæder –

Sophie Stop! We'll find out about your father in a moment. You can understand what I'm saying, can't you?

***Beowulf** smiles sheepishly.*

You can!

Beowulf Yes. I can.

Sophie Then why on earth were you speaking to me in Old English?

Beowulf I'm an Anglo-Saxon. It is the way that things are properly done. You stand sentry on the shore, watching the waves for raiders. I arrive with my troop in chain mail, bearing swords and shields. You shake your spear and challenge me, after commenting on the fact that you have never seen a mightier warrior. Then I tell you who I am.

Sophie But why in Old English?

Beowulf You seemed to understand me.

Sophie I did, but only because my mother has been banging on about it ever since I was little.

Beowulf Your mother?

Sophie Over there.

***Sophie** points towards **Hanneke**. She has fallen asleep.*

She sleeps a lot these days. She's not very well.

Beowulf She has been injured in battle.

Sophie Yeah, kind of.

Pause.

So, who are you?

Beowulf Wé synt gum-cynnes –

Sophie In Modern English.

Beowulf First you must shake your spear.

Sophie Really?

Beowulf Really.

***Sophie** picks up her mother's stick and shakes it at **Beowulf**.*

Good. Now tell me that I am the mightiest warrior that you have ever seen.

Sophie You are the mightiest warrior that I have ever seen. Now, who are you?

Beowulf I am Beowulf, son of Hygelac, and I have come to save you.

Sophie But how are you here?

Beowulf We have ridden the swan's road in our foamy-necked vessel.

Sophie 'Swan's road' – the sea. Nice kenning.

Beowulf Thank you.

Sophie But how are you here?

Beowulf I have just told you: we have ridden the swan's road in our foamy-necked vessel.

Sophie No, I mean, how are you *here*, in my mother's study?

*Before **Beowulf** has to answer this mind-bending question, **Hrothgar** steps forward.*

Hrothgar Beowulf. I knew your father. The last time we met you were a mere boy.

Beowulf And now I am a man, noble King Hrothgar.

Hrothgar How are you here?

Beowulf In Geatland we have heard that, in darkest night, a terrible monster stalks your mead hall, bringing death and destruction. It is said that Heorot, the home of life, stands empty, poisoned by this curse.

Hrothgar It is true. Grendel has brought pain and great grief. There are few of us Scyldings left alive.

Beowulf I have come to rid you of this forever.

Hrothgar One night a troop of my bravest warriors, made bolder still by mead, thought the same, waited for Grendel, met him with a great rush of swords. By dawn the mead hall was bright with blood, the benches where the men had sat spattered with the slaughter. He cannot be harmed by weapons.

Beowulf Then I will fight him barehanded.

Hrothgar Then he will eat you alive.

Beowulf Then you won't need to worry about burying me.

Unferth interrupts them.

Unferth Beowulf, I have heard of you, and your proud boasts.

Hrothgar Unferth –

Unferth You arrogantly challenged Breca to a swimming contest on the open sea. But the story goes that he beat you, that he was the first to reach land, after seven days and nights of swimming. [*To Hrothgar.*] My lord, do not put your faith in a man who boasts about things that he cannot do.

Hrothgar I have heard this story. Why should I trust you?

Beowulf We were young boys, full of pride.

Unferth I see no difference now that you are older.

Beowulf We swam out to sea with swords in our hands, protection against the whales' tusks.

Unferth 'Whales' tusks'?

Beowulf For five nights we swam shoulder to shoulder, until the waves drove us apart. Those same waves stirred up a sea-monster from the deep. It seized me in its jaws and dragged me down into the deep. I killed it with a single thrust. But the sea-monster's blood drew its fellows. Again and again they attacked, again and again I fought back. By morning the shore was littered with their bodies, the waves washing their blood on to the beach. Breca was the first to reach land: I had made sea-passage safe for ocean-faring men.

Sophie Cool.

Beowulf The sea's waters were cold, yes.

Sophie Wicked.

Beowulf And the monsters evil.

Sophie Sick.

Beowulf Not even a sniffle.

Sophie No, I mean... never mind.

Beowulf I have never heard a story like this told about you, Unferth. Maybe if your sword were as sharp as your tongue, Grendel would have never brought your leader such pain. *[To Hrothgar.]* My lord, for the sake of the bond between our two ancient families, accept my help. I made up my mind, when I set out to sea, boarded the ship with my band of warriors, that I would rid you of this poison, or else die in the struggle, fast in his grip. I will do this tonight and live, or else walk out into the darkness and leave the mead hall forever.

Silence.

Hrothgar Since the day that I was strong enough to raise a shield on this arm, I have never trusted another with Heorot, the mead hall of the Danes. Tonight I trust it to you. Heal it.

Sophie You have come to heal?

Beowulf I have. *[To Hrothgar.]* I will do all that I can to prove myself worthy of your trust.

Hrothgar Now it is time to sleep. Darkening night begins to cover all, and shifting shadows creep towards us, black under the clouds. The monster Grendel has been planning his attack since dawn. Watch for your enemy, Beowulf, for he comes when you least expect it.

Ensemble The battle-brave noble sat down to rest,
Round him were laying many brave seamen.
None of them thought they would leave there again,
See their dear homes once more,
The families who raised them.

We see the approach of Grendel.

Cóm on wanre niht
scríðan sceaðu-genga. Scéotend swaéfon.

In the colourless night the shadow walker came slinking. The archers were sleeping.

Đá cóm of more, under mist-hleopum,
Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bær.

From off the moor, under misty cliffs, Grendel came walking, filled with the anger of God.

Cóm þá to recede rinc síðian
dréamum bedaéled. Duru sóna onarn!

[He came to the hall, the warrior travelling, cut off from joy. The door burst open!

*The noise of the door being forced wakes **Beowulf**. He crouches, ready, in the darkness. Everyone else sleeps on.*

***Grendel** enters Heorot. He sees **Hanneke** asleep in her chair. He advances towards her.*

Sophie

No! Stop!

***Grendel** turns to see **Sophie**. He now has a new victim. A younger, tastier victim.*

***Sophie** shrinks away from him but still he advances.*

Closer and closer...

*Suddenly **Beowulf** is on **Grendel**. An epic hand-to-hand struggle, which ends with **Beowulf** tearing **Grendel's** arm from its socket.*

*Mortally wounded, **Grendel** escapes from Heorot.*

Ensemble

Wounded and death-sick, so Grendel fled
To his desolate den under the fen banks,
His life's end had come, the sum of his days.

We followed the trail of the lifeblood dripping
Back to his lair in the lake of monsters -

The water was boiling, seething with gore.

And the bravo hero nailed the arm of Grendel,
Shoulder to fingertip, under the high roof
Of the mead hall he'd saved.

Beowulf *[To Sophie.]* Grendel is finished. Gone, forever.