

The Princess Saves the Cakes

Cast, in Order of Appearance

The play has a flexible number of performers and speaking roles. There are 26 speaking parts, with some roles shared so no player has too much to memorize. This, of course, is optional and you may choose to combine speaking roles. Gender assignment is also optional. After all, there have been all-female productions of Shakespeare.

Narrator 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

West Saxons:

Alfred 1, 2, King of the West Saxons

West Saxon Thaness (or *followers*, sometimes spelled *thegns*; pronounced THANES, rhymes with *lanes*) 1, 2, 3, 4 (others as chorus)

Princess Aethelflaed 1, 2, 3, King Alfred's daughter

Ealhswith 1, 2, Wife of Alfred

Edward, King Alfred's son

Vikings:

Guthrum 1, 2, King of the Danish Vikings

Viking Warriors 1, 2, 3, 4 (add warrior roles as needed for chorus)

Villagers of Athelney in the Somerset Swamps:

Swineherder Parent A

Swineherder Parent B

Swineherders' Child

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Aethelflaed [Eth-el-fled]

Athelney village [Ath-el-knee]

Ealhswith [Eels-with]

Guthrum [Goo-thrum]

TIME: JANUARY 6, 878

SCENE 1

King Alfred's hunting lodge in Wessex

(King Alfred and the Wessex cast are assembled onstage holding hands and dancing in a circle; the instrumental version of "Scarborough Fair" could be played at this time. Narrator 1 steps onstage in front of the revelers. The Wessex cast continues to circle behind Narrator 1.)

Narrator 1: Happy Twelfth Night!

It's January sixth, the last night of holiday festivities. King Alfred and his followers are making merry at his

hunting lodge. They've feasted on bread, vegetables, and wild boar. YUM! Now they're dancing and singing.

But, alas, the year 878 will not have a happy start for the Saxons of Wessex.

Aethelflaed 1: *(Comes out of the circle and goes to the side of the stage as if stepping outside. Dancers move toward the back of the stage area.)* I'm so warm from dancing. The cold night air feels good. How dark it is without a moon!

But what's that light? It looks like a flickering torch. Who can it be? All our friends are here. Maybe a traveler is lost. I'll listen for cries of help. *(Tiptoes a few more steps and cups one ear to listen.)*

I don't hear voices. But I *do* hear the sound of boots crunching on the snow. I must tell my father, King Alfred! *(Aethelflaed darts inside and pulls on her father's arm.)*

King Alfred 1: What's wrong, Aethelflaed? Are you ill from dancing?

Aethelflaed 1: Father, come outside quickly! *(She leads him to the edge of the stage.)*

King Alfred 1: What is it, Daughter?

Aethelflaed 1: It's dark now, but I saw a torch flicker for a minute. Listen!

King Alfred 1: (*Listening.*) Marchers! This can mean only one thing.

King Alfred 1 and Aethelflaed 1 together: Viking invaders!

King Alfred 1: It's Guthrum, king of the Danish Vikings. He and his warriors mean to take us by surprise while we're having fun.

We're outnumbered and not prepared for battle. Tell me, Daughter, what would you do?

Aethelflaed 1: (*Thinking.*) We should flee now and hide all winter. Then you can gather your followers and prepare to fight next spring.

King Alfred 1: A wise choice. According to our customs, your little brother Edward will inherit my throne someday. But you have the makings of a leader too.

Aethelflaed 1: Of course I do. And someday, I vow to defy those old customs and prove it. But for now, let's warn the others.

(They step inside. King Alfred claps his hands to get attention. People stop dancing and gather in a half circle.)

King Alfred 1: Gather round, friends and followers.

West Saxon Thane 1: What is it, King Alfred? We don't want to go to bed yet, do we, fellow Saxons?

West Saxon Followers: *(All together.)* No! We're having too much fun. Let's keep making merry!

King Alfred 1: *(Raising his hand for quiet.)* Quiet, friends. Our keen-eyed princess has spotted marchers in the distance. The king of Denmark and his Vikings are launching a surprise attack.

West Saxon Thane 2: But we're not ready! My spear isn't sharpened. It's duller than ditchwater.

West Saxon Thane 3: *(Scratching head.)* I'm not ready either. I can't decide what wood to use for my new shield.

(Turns to West Saxon Thane 4.) What do you think, my friend? Should it be ash or alder? Or would maple or oak be better?

West Saxon Thane 4: Never mind that, my iron helmet is only half done. I don't want to end up with half a head!

(West Saxons talk and argue among themselves excitedly.)

King Alfred 1: Silence, please, my good thanes. We all agree: This is not the time for battle. Instead, we must escape. We'll walk through the night to the village of Athelney. It's in some marshy wetlands.

West Saxon Thane 1: Will the people of the marshlands hide us and give us food and shelter?

West Saxon Thane 2: I hope so. If I don't eat, I get grumpy as a bear.

West Saxon Thane 3: Me too. We'd better get there by breakfast.

King Alfred 1: Don't worry. The people there are generous and kind. Are you ready, Queen Ealhswith?

Queen Ealhswith 1: Yes, let's make haste. Put on your warm cloaks, everyone. Alfred, my husband, take this simple cape—not your royal one. If we're surrounded by Vikings, it will disguise you.

King Alfred 1: You are wise, Ealhswith. I think Aethelflaed gets her good sense from you.

Queen Ealhswith 1: Oh, I'm sure of it.

Now, everyone, grab bread and apples from the table for our children. We cannot yield to the Vikings. We must be strong!

West Saxon Thane 4: (*Grabbing.*) I'll take that last boar drumstick for the road.

West Saxons: (*All together, grabbing food from a pretend table, pretending to put on capes.*) Tonight we escape and hide. But we'll live to fight the Vikings another day!

(*West Saxons exit, stage right. When a performer is in the center facing the audience, that is called center stage. Stage right is to the performer's right; stage left to their left.*)

SCENE 2

King Guthrum and Vikings at the hunting lodge

Narrator 2: (*Steps onto empty stage.*)

Here comes King Guthrum of Denmark and his Viking warriors. Guthrum and other Viking leaders want to conquer all the regions of Saxon England. Most of all, the

Danish king wants to defeat Alfred, who rules the area called Wessex.

He won't be pleased to find Alfred and his friends have fled. Not only that, there's not much left to eat.

King Guthrum 1: (*Storming across the stage from stage left, wielding a spear—prop, or pretend—chanting as he enters.*)

Hear my fighting chant:

My spear is sharp. Strong is my shield.

King Alfred of Wessex: Yield, yield, yield!

(*Viking warriors enter stage left behind King Guthrum 1, also chanting.*)

Viking Warriors All:

My spear is sharp. Strong is my shield.

King Alfred of Wessex: Yield, yield, yield!

Yield, yield, yield! (*Stomp feet on last three yields.*)

King Guthrum 1: (*Holds up his spear calling for silence.*)

Silence, brave warriors! We're too late. The lodge is deserted. King Alfred and his followers have fled. They must have seen us coming.

(*Turns to Viking Warrior 1.*) I told you not to light that torch.

Viking Warrior 1: Sorry, my lord, it was just for a few minutes. I had a rock in my boot.

Viking Warrior 2: (*Pointing to the table.*) But look! They were here not long ago. This is the remains of their feast.

Viking Warrior 3: (*Going over to look at the table.*) Aye, but they ate all the good stuff. All that's left are turnips, cabbage, and parsnips. The wild boar is all gone!

Viking Warrior 4: UGH—turnips, cabbage, and parsnips! I knew I should've speared that fat squirrel and eaten it raw.

King Guthrum 1: Now, warriors, haven't I told you it's important to eat your vegetables? Finish this feast quickly. Then we'll track King Alfred and his followers through the night, the way a fox chases a rabbit.

They say he loves books more than battle. We'll see about that.

Vikings: (*All together, drinking and eating.*) Let's gobble up these turnips! Then we'll have the energy to chase down that book-loving king.

SCENE 3

In the woods and fields

(Narrator steps to the front of the stage. Behind the narrator, King Alfred and the Wessex cast trudge across the stage, entering stage left. Queen Ealhswith, Edward, and Aethelflaed are at the rear.)

Narrator 3: The people of Wessex escaped just in time. Now they must flee to the marshlands on this cold, moonless night. Young and old, they stumble through the snowy fields and the thick, dark woods.

But do they dare light their torches? No, they do not. They must not! They can't risk being spotted by the Vikings.

It's a long, hard walk, especially for young children like Prince Edward.

(Narrator exits. Other Wessex cast exit stage right, leaving the queen, the prince, and the princess. Prince Edward trips and falls.)

Prince Edward: The snow is so slippery. I can't keep up, Sister.

(Aethelflaed 2 holds out a hand to help him up.)

Aethelflaed 2: Here, take my hand, little brother. You can do it. *(They get up and walk toward Queen Ealhswith.)*

Prince Edward: How far is it, Mother?

Queen Ealhswith 2: We must walk all night, my brave children.

Prince Edward: But we've *already* been walking for hours, Mother! I'm tired and hungry. Is there anything to eat?

Queen Ealhswith 2: (*Takes pretend bread out of a pretend bag.*) Have some bread, Edward. Then you'll feel stronger.

Princess Aethelflaed 2: (*Looking ahead.*) Mother, may I run to catch up with the others and find Father?

Queen Ealhswith 2: You may, Daughter. But be careful. Watch out for wild boars and wolves.

(*Aethelflaed runs off stage right.*)

Prince Edward: (*Looking around frantically.*) Mother, did you say wild boars and wolves? I'm ready to run too. Let's go!

(*They exit stage right. King Guthrum and the Vikings enter from stage left.*)

King Guthrum 2: Viking warriors, keep up! This is no time for lagging. We haven't caught up to the Saxons yet.

Remember our fighting chant? All together now!

King Guthrum 2 and Vikings:

My spear is sharp. Strong is my shield.

King Alfred of Wessex: Yield, yield, yield!

Yield, yield, yield! (*Stomp feet on last three yields.*)

Viking Warrior 1: I wonder where King Alfred is headed.

Viking Warrior 2: I bet King Alfred wants to hide in the marshlands where it will be hard for us to find them.

Viking Warrior 3: You have to admit, that's a pretty smart strategy.

Viking Warrior 4: Hmm, I wonder if King Alfred read about it in a book.

King Guthrum 2: Silence, Vikings! I think it's about time for our marching chant. Do you remember how it goes?

Viking Warriors All: Less talking and more walking. Let's go! Stomp! Stomp! (*Stomp feet with the words stomp, stomp.*)
(*They march off stage right.*)

SCENE 4

Village of Athelney, in the swamplands

[OPTIONAL SONG]

(King Alfred 2 enters from stage left and moves slowly to center stage, where he eventually stumbles to one knee. West Saxons gather in a semi-circle at stage left and sing lyrics to the tune of “Scarborough Fair.”)

What king is this
so brave and bold
who won't give up
despite the cold.

He leads his friends through this long night
and gives them hope for peace and light.

Narrator 4: *(Steps onto empty stage.)* What a long, cold night! King Alfred has been leading his thanes hour after hour. He is worn down with worry. He has urged his friends on and given his last apples away to others.

Now Alfred is scouting ahead for the best place to hide. At dawn, he reaches the hilltop village of Athelney. Most people here keep sheep and swine and live in simple huts with thatched roofs. At last, Alfred spies a hut.

(Narrator 4 exits. Swineherd family enters and comes center stage. Parent A gets busy mixing ingredients at a table. Parent B helps child on with shoes and cloak.)

Swineherd Parent A: You must dress warm, my child. It looks to be another day of wet, cold snow.

Swineherd Child: Do we *have* to go out to the pen to feed the pigs? It's way too yucky outside.

Swineherd Parent B: Our pigs need us, and we need our pigs. We cannot let them go hungry just because we don't like the weather, now, can we?

Swineherd Child: I guess not. All right, piggies, here I come!

Swineherd Parent A: That's the spirit. And I'll have some nice hot oatcakes ready when you get back.

Swineherd Child: Yum! I love nice hot oatcakes.

(Parent B and child exit stage right. Parent A shapes the small cakes. King Alfred enters stage left and stumbles with exhaustion outside the hut.)

Swineherd Parent A: Who's there? Oh, a young warrior. You look tired and cold. Come in and sit by my fire to warm your bones. Here, have a cup of hot cider.

King Alfred 2: Thank you. I am a bit tired. I've been walking all night.

Swineherd Parent A: You're more than welcome to rest here, on the floor of our hut. But I wonder, since you're here . . .

King Alfred 2: *(Moving to sit down on the floor.)* Do you need my help with something?

Swineherd Parent A: Oh yes, if you wouldn't mind. I need to take my basket and go out to find firewood. Can you watch my oatcakes and take them off the fire before they burn?

King Alfred 2: I'd be happy to do that. Leave it to me.
(Swineherd Parent A exits stage right, carrying a basket and picking up firewood along the way. King Alfred falls right asleep. Enter Aethelflaed 3 stage left.)

Princess Aethelflaed 3: Where could Father be? Our friends stopped to rest. They said Father had gone ahead to find the village where we can hide.

(Stops to look and notices hut.) Oh, here's a small cottage. Should I knock? I hope they'll be friendly.

(Comes closer and sniffs.) It smells delicious. I think someone's baking oatcakes.

(Knocks on door.) Hmm, that's strange. No one is answering.

(Sniffs again.) But those cakes smell done. I wonder if someone forgot about them. I'll take a chance and go in. There's nothing worse than burnt oatcakes!

(Princess Aethelflaed 3 walks into the hut.)

Princess Aethelflaed 3: *(Looks around, then whispers.)* Oh, what's this? It's Father, fast asleep. Poor Father! He's all tired out with worry and walking.

It's not easy being a king. He needs his rest. And I bet he gave all his extra food to others.

But these oatcakes are definitely done! I'd better take them off the fire before they burn. Here's a mitten. And I can use this long-handled griddle to remove them from the heat. *(Pretends to take pan out of the fire and put it on the table.)*

Swineherd Parent A: *(Walks into the hut.)* Hello there. Who are you? And what are you doing?

Princess Aethelflaed 3: Oh, good morning! I'm just taking your cakes off the fire before they burn.

Swineherd Parent A: I asked that warrior to watch my cakes. Seems he didn't do a good job.

Princess Aethelflaed 3: (*Makes a little bow and puts her finger to her lips.*) Please don't wake the king. My father is so tired. I am sure he didn't mean to let you down.

Swineherd Parent A: The king? The king is in my hut? The man I asked to watch my cakes is Alfred, King of Wessex?

Princess Aethelflaed 3: Yes. We've been walking all night to escape the Vikings. My father brought us here to hide. He said the people of Athelney are good and kind. Now I see that is true with my own eyes.

Swineherd Parent A: Then you must be Princess Aethelflaed, the oldest child of Alfred and Ealhswith. Thank you for saving my cakes. Your parents must be proud of your good sense and quick wits. Would you like to eat one now?

Princess Aethelflaed 3: Oh, no thank you. My mother and little brother will be here soon. Edward is small and I'm sure he's very hungry by now. I'd rather you gave the cake to him.

Swineherd Parent A: Well, I'm impressed! You give food to your brother and you saved your father from a scolding by me. That wouldn't be the way he wants to be remembered.

King Alfred 2: (*Waking up and stretching.*) Oh, I'm sorry! I must have dozed off.

Swineherd Parent A: Luckily, your daughter saved you from a scolding.

King Alfred 2: Thank you, Princess. And I certainly wouldn't want the story of King Alfred burning the cakes to be the way I go down in history. (*King and princess hug.*)

EPILOGUE

(All cast onstage in semicircle behind Guthrum, King Alfred, Ealhswith, Edward, and Aethelflaed. Guthrum and Alfred step out and bow to each other. Wessex and Viking warriors lay down shields, spears, and helmets, real or pretend.)

(Narrator 5 enters from stage right or left.)

Narrator 5: Spring has come. It's May 878. The great battle is over. King Alfred's plan worked. During the winter he gathered his warriors. The good people of Wessex came to King Alfred's aid and defeated the Vikings.

The kings signed a peace treaty called the Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum. Believe it or not, a copy still exists! Guthrum agreed to leave Wessex and mind his own business in East Anglia. From now on, King Alfred can devote himself to making laws, bringing books to Britain, and encouraging people to learn to read.

(Princess Aethelflaed steps forward to front center stage.)

Narrator 5: As for Aethelflaed, she grew up and married the Lord of the Mercians. When he died, she ruled in his stead, fighting off new Viking invasions.

The princess who saved the cakes became a warrior queen, Lady of the Mercians. Aethelflaed lived more than a thousand years ago. But we believe her message for us today would be clear.

All cast together: Be kind. Be generous. And most of all:
SAVE THE CAKES!

(All bow.)

The End