

ÆLFRIC

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Abstract: Ælfric (c.950-c.1010), Old English prosodist, grammarian, and abbot of Eynesham.

Ælfric was the greatest vernacular prose stylist of the Anglo-Saxon period. He is known especially for his sermons, which enjoyed wide circulation. Ælfric employed a style that, he says, does “not use obscure words, just plain English, by which it may more easily reach to the heart of the readers or listeners to the benefit of the souls, because they are unable to be instructed in a language other than the one to which they were born” (Wilcox, 127). His aim was to keep the interest of his readers and hearers. Ælfric sometimes encouraged listeners to weather tedious passages. In his preface to his *Lives of Saints*, he writes that he “abbreviated the longer passions, not so much in the sense as in the words, in order that boredom may not be inflicted on those hard to please” (Wilcox, 131). Sometimes boredom was preferable: he occasionally omitted lurid spectacle—a particularly gruesome torture in a saint’s life, for example—when translating his sources so as not to distract from an underlying message. Ælfric kept his clauses brief, and his style plain. Contemporary Anglo-Latin writers enjoyed obscure words and convoluted syntax, and contemporary Old English writers peppered their prose with tropes. But Ælfric stressed the spiritual needs of his audience rather than literary conceit. He was rewarded with patronage and an appreciative audience. His were among the most copied texts of the period. And his language has become the standard by which scholars and critics assess all Old English prose.

BACKGROUND

Ælfric was first and foremost a churchman. His works all conducted to bring Christians to a better understanding of their faith. As an author, he was highly conscious of his pastoral duty. Ælfric wrote textbooks to teach his students Latin, so that they could pray and read the Bible along with its commentary tradition. He wrote sermons, homilies, and saints’ lives to teach his community about Christian doctrine and Christian history. And he wrote letters to instruct English Christians (some of them high-ranking ecclesiastics) in their duties. To ensure that his writings were orthodox, Ælfric had at hand an impressive library. In its shelves could be found Latin books by the fathers of the Catholic Church—Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Gregory the Great (540-604), Jerome (c.347-420), and Ambrose of Milan (c.333-397). Other important sources for Ælfric were his countryman Bede (c.673-735), Smaragdus of St. Mihiel, Haymo of Auxerre, and Paul the Deacon (720-c.799). Paul, a monk of Monte Cassino, compiled a homiliary at the request of Charlemagne which was a major source for Ælfric’s sermons. Throughout his life, Ælfric also kept a commonplace book. In all of Ælfric’s works, these orthodox sources are seamlessly integrated with local color, clear expression, and formal elegance. Ælfric was aware that Latin, not Old English, was the language of the Church. He was therefore circumspect in his program of translation, writing between 993 and 998, “I promise not to write more in this language [OE], lest, perhaps, the pearls of Christ be held in disrespect” (Wilcox, 131). But this he weighed against a general need for vernacular translations. Due to spotty education and widespread laxity in ecclesiastical government, many monks and almost all of the laity in Britain were illiterate.

The English Church in the time of Ælfric was undergoing a transformation. It had suffered depredations by Vikings for generations. Norse immigration especially in the ninth century profoundly affected Church government in the east of England. Vikings, who were

eventually held in check by King Alfred the Great, destroyed monasteries and books throughout the eastern portions of the island. Elsewhere in England, regular monastic life deteriorated severely. In the early tenth century at Cluny in France, a reformation was under way. By the mid-tenth century, this reform was imported into England by Æthelwold of Winchester (c.904-984), Oswald of Worcester (d. 992), and Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury (c.909-988). At its heart was the Rule of St. Benedict, a set of ideals and regulations for an orderly monastic life, translated into OE by Æthelwold. Ælfric was educated by Æthelwold at Winchester at the outset of this Benedictine Reform. His education was directed at monastic observance and a sound command of Latin. These aims would govern his literary production for the rest of his life.

WORKS

In 987, Ælfric was sent to Cernel (Cerne Abbey) in Dorset. His patron, Æthelmær, had founded the abbey, and brought in Ælfric to teach its students, monks, and laymen. It was here that Ælfric began to write prodigiously. Ælfric's major works are contained in two series: the Catholic Homilies (CH, although Ælfric called them sermons) and the Lives of Saints (LS). Both were composed in the closing decade of the first millennium. The CH are divided into two series of forty sermons for the ecclesiastical year. They were meant to be preached on alternating years, and intended chiefly for the edification of the laity. Each series of sermons instructed the laity in Christian history and in Christian doctrine. Typically, the day's lection or gospel reading is introduced, then explained, and then applied to daily life. The LS, although similar in style, were likely written for the private devotion of monks. Ælfric included a number of English saints' lives in this collection, including those of Alban, Swithun, and Æthelthryth. Saints' lives are highly conventional, and meant to inspire Christian devotion and good works. They are not biographies, but tell of the common faith and suffering of virgins, martyrs, and confessors. Saints were portrayed as conduits of divine power, and their lives blended together into an evocation of the eternal. Ælfric is conservative in his adoption of the form and restrained in his retelling. His lives appear to be arranged according to the themes of the liturgical year. Liturgical time also governed the order of his sermons, and provided the context in which the cyclical time of the church calendar met the linear time of history. In this complex world of repeating patterns and individual will, Scripture offered a means of navigation. Ælfric reminds his audience that the normal, the everyday, is as miraculous as the unusual. To a Benedictine monk like Ælfric, it is in the constancy and repetition of an ordered life that spiritual fulfillment can be found. This love of order and simplicity carries over into his prose.

If the CH were directed at the laity, and the LS at monks and nuns, then Ælfric's letters were directed at the hierarchy of church government. In his Letter for Wulfsgige, Ælfric writes as if Wulfsgige himself were speaking the text. Like his sermons, this letter is a type of dramatic performance in which the identity of the work's author is subsumed under the identity of the speaker. Here we see a principle evident in saints' lives: orthodoxy and convention obviate the need for individuality—itself a sign of deviance from the norm. The ideal monk, like the saint (and presumably the ideal monastic writer), empty themselves of themselves and become true Christians, as Bede and Ælfric both say of St. Alban. Only through harmony between humanity and the divine can earthly peace and prosperity come. Another work which takes advantage of dramatic performance and one of Ælfric's most famous texts is his Colloquy. It was designed for classroom use among children (pueri) in order to introduce them to vocabulary relevant to monastic life. In it, a monk competes with

a shepherd, a baker, a hunter, a fisherman, and others to determine who works hardest and who is most necessary to the life of the community. Although a highly conventional piece, it suggests some of the liveliness of the Anglo-Saxon classroom. To his students, he dedicated a grammar and a glossary. The Latin grammar is the first in any vernacular language. Both have become extremely useful to modern scholars learning Old English. The full extent of Ælfric's work can be discovered in Hurt's introduction, and its chronology from Clemoes.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Ælfric's works were largely ignored after the Norman Conquest. In 1567, John Day printed Ælfric's homily on Easter, and inaugurated a revival in antique testaments of English ecclesiastical practice. It was the first Old English book printed. Like much Old English literature, the works of Ælfric required significant collation and editing. In the intervening centuries, sound editions were produced, principally by Walter Skeat, Malcolm Godden, and Peter Clemoes. Only more recently have scholars been able to turn to the sources of Ælfric's work. Sources have proved the most compelling aspect of Ælfric studies. Most recently, Ælfric has also generated studies of his theology and of his language. Given his status as a stylist, it is strange that so few studies have been dedicated to Ælfric's so-called rhythmical style. But because his writing comprises so large a percentage of surviving Old English, Ælfric provides a means to assess the transmission of Latin ideas, language, and images into the English vernacular. One can see what was added, what was excised, and what was transformed. In this way, one can come to tentative conclusions about the limits and distinctions of Old English literary culture at its apex. What is becoming clearer is that Ælfric cobbled his style not only from the verse and prose of his Anglo-Saxon antecedents, but also from Latin poetry and prose. Authentic Old English, in other words, seems to be as indebted to Rome as it is to the primeval forests of Germany.

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