THE AUDIENCE FOR OLD ENGLISH TEXTS:
ÆLFRIC, RHETORIC AND 'THE EDIFICATION OF THE SIMPLE'

Helen Gittos

Abstract

There is a persistent view that Old English texts were mostly written to be read or heard by people with no knowledge of Latin, or little understanding of it, especially the laity. This is not surprising because it is what the texts themselves tend to say. In this article I argue that these statements about audience reflect two rhetorical devices and should not be understood literally. This has implications for our understanding of the reasons why writers chose to use Old English and their attitudes towards translation of various kinds into the vernacular.

Mechthild Gretsch and others have encouraged us to be more open-minded than has traditionally been the case about the purposes for which Old English was used. In her Northcote Toller Memorial Lecture in 2000, Gretsch stated her position very clearly:

> It is not that the Anglo-Saxons glossed, translated and composed in English because they were too lazy and too incompetent to apply themselves to a wide-ranging study of Latin texts. What made them do it was rather an astonishing confidence in the potential of the vernacular to be developed as a medium for scholarly and religious discourse on a par with Latin.[1]

---

[1] M. Gretsch, 'Winchester Vocabulary and Standard Old English: The Vernacular in Late Anglo-Saxon England', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 83.1 (2001), 41-87, at 87. Other examples of works that consider English texts to have been intended for a wide range of audiences include M. McC. Gatch, *Preaching and Theology in Anglo-Saxon England: Aelfric and Wulfstan* (Toronto, 1977); S. Kelly, 'Anglo-Saxon Lay

One of the reasons why Gretsch emphasised this point is that there is a persistent view that in Anglo-Saxon England the written vernacular was used when one needed to communicate with people whose knowledge of Latin was nonexistant or inadequate. In other words, that Old English texts were ultimately intended for the laity or those members of the clergy who did not know much Latin. For example, Malcolm Godden thinks Ælfric's homilies were 'intended primarily for the use of priests … presumably because they were not able to work directly from the Latin homiliaries drawn on by Ælfric', Jonathan Wilcox says that in the case of Ælfric's *Lives of the Saints* '[t]he choice of language excludes their use in a monastery where the lives would have been read in Latin', Susan Kelly talks about the 'toleration and encouragement of vernacular literacy as a necessary if regrettable substitute for latinity', and Barbara Raw thought illuminated manuscripts containing Old English texts were probably 'intended for use by educated lay men or women' whereas Latin ones were for display in church.[2] These statements are all based on the assumption that written English

---

Society and the Written Word', *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 36-62; H. Gittos, 'Is There Any Evidence for the Liturgy of Parish Churches in Late Anglo-Saxon England? The Red Book of Darley and the Status of Old English', *Pastoral Care in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. F. Tinti, Anglo-Saxon Studies 6 (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 63-82, at 70-82; B. Holsinger, 'Liturgy', *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. P. Strohm (Oxford, 2007), pp. 295-314; C. A. Jones, 'Performing Christianity: Liturgical and Devotional Writing', *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. C. A. Lees (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 427-50.

[2] M. R. Godden, 'Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England', *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 1 C. 400-1100*, ed. R. Gameson (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 580-90, at 583; *Ælfric's Prefaces*, ed. J. Wilcox, Durham medieval texts 9 (Durham, 1994), 50; Kelly, 'Anglo-Saxon Lay Society and the Written Word', 52; B. Raw, 'Pictures: The Books of the Unlearned', *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, ed. P. Cavill (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 103-119, at 105 discussed on

tended to be used only because Latin could not be. One reason why this idea has such currency is that this is exactly what the Old English texts say: that they were intended either for a specific lay person or people who could not manage Latin. In this article I shall examine contemporary statements about intended audiences and explain why I think there are good reasons for thinking they are misleading and examples of widely used rhetorical conventions. This has implications for our understanding of the intended audiences for Old English texts, the purposes for which they were written, and the relative status of Latin and Old English in the early Middle Ages. It also helps to clarify our understanding about the attitudes of Old English authors towards the use of the vernacular, especially Ælfric (c. 950-c. 1010), abbot of Eynsham, and prolific writer in Old English.

Whom were Old English texts produced for?

If one wants to understand whom Old English authors were writing for, it seems reasonable to pay close attention to what the texts themselves say about this. Although few Old English

---

p. <> below. Other similar statements occur in: C. L. Wrenn, *A Study of Old English Literature* (London, 1967), pp. 213-14; A. C. Partridge, *English Biblical Translation* (London, 1973), pp. 20-1; P. Lendinara, 'The World of Anglo-Saxon Learning', *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. M. Godden and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 264-81, at 268-9; J. Wilcox, 'The Audience of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* and the Face of Cotton Caligula A.Xiv, Fols. 93-130', *Beatus Vir: Studies in Early English and Norse Manuscripts in Memory of Phillip Pulsiano*, ed. A. N. Doane and K. Wolf (Tempe, AZ, 2006), pp. 229-63; J. Burrow, 'The Languages of Medieval England', *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English Volume 1: To 1550*, ed. R. Ellis (Oxford, 2008), pp. 7-28, at 10. For a comparable assumption – that later medieval vernacular prayers were for lay use – see E. Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers 1240-1570* (New Haven, Conn., 2006), p. 59-60.

works contain explicit statements about the nature of their intended audience, those that do tend to say they are either for:

> a) a specific, usually lay, person who had commissioned them

or b) for monolingual people who know no, or almost no, Latin, specifically:

>> b1) lay people
>>
>> b2) the young
>>
>> b3) adult novices
>>
>> b4) uneducated clergy with poor Latin
>>
>> b5) bishops with poor Latin

It is not therefore surprising that many people continue to think that Old English was used because peoples' Latin was so bad. Before going on to examine the rhetorical conventions to which I think these statements belong it is necessary to look at some examples of them.

The earliest instance I know of is in Bede's Letter to Ecgbert, bishop of York, written in 734. There, Bede advocates the use of English translations of the Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed by 'idiotas, hoc est eos qui propriae tantum linguae notitiam habent', who are principally 'laicis' but also 'clericis siue monachis qui Latinae sunt linguae expertes'.[3] So, in this case the intended audience for the vernacular texts are categories 'b1' and 'b4' in the list above.

---

[3] 'the ignorant, that is, those who are acquainted only with their own tongue', 'lay people', 'clergy or monks who do not know the Latin tongue': Bede, 'Letter to Bishop Ecgbert', *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, ed. C. Grocock and I. N. a. t. Wood (Oxford, 2013), pp. 123-61, at 130-3 (c. 5).

Probably the most famous declaration that Old English was being used in a text because it was intended for lay people is the prose preface to the vernacular version of Gregory the Great's *Regula Pastoralis* (*Pastoral Care*), written c. 890. This implicitly states that it is for use in the education of the young who are learning to read English and do not yet know Latin ('b2'):

> Forðy me ðyncð betre, gif iow swæ ðyncð, ðæt we eac sumæ bec, ða ðe niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne, ðæt we ða on ðæt geðiode wenden ðe we ealle gecnawan mægen, & ge don ... ðæt[te] eall sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angelcynne friora monna, ðara ðe ða speda hæbben ðæt hie ðæm befeolan mægen, sien to liornunga oðfæste, ... oð ðone first ðe hie wel cunnen Englisc gewrit arædan: lære mon siððan furður on Lædengeðiode ða ðe mon furðor læran wille & to hieran hade don wille. Ða ic ða gemunde hu sio lar Lædengeðiodes ær ðissum afeallen wæs giond Angelcynn, & ðeah monige cuðon Englisc gewrit arædan, ða ongan ic ... ða boc wendan ...[4]

---

[4] *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. H. Sweet, Early English Text Society os 45, 50, 2 vols (London, 1871), I, 7, lines 6-18. 'Therefore it seems better to me − if it seems so to you − that we too should turn into the language that we can all understand certain books which are the most necessary for all men to know, ... so that all the free-born young men now in England who have the means to apply themselves to it, may be set to learning ... until the time that they can read English writings properly. Thereafter one may instruct in Latin those whom one wishes to teach further and wishes to advance to holy orders. When I recalled how knowledge of Latin had previously decayed throughout England, and yet many could still read things written in English, I then began, ... to translate into English [this] ... book', S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, ed., *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, <Trans. Not Ed.> (London, 1983), p. 126.

The verse preface, though, says that copies of the translation were made so that Alfred 'his biscepum/ sendan meahte, forðæm hi his sume ðorfton,/ ða ðe lædenspræce læste cuðon' (b5).[5] Another text associated with Alfred addresses an even more restricted audience. The preface to the translation of Gregory the Great's *Dialogorum libri iv* (*Dialogues*), written a little earlier than the *Pastoral Care*, stated that it was for the personal use of the king: 'Ic Ælfred ... wilnade to minum getreowum freondum, þæt hi me ... awriten ... , þæt ic þurh þa mynegunge and lufe gescyrped on minum mode betwih þas eorðlican gedrefednesse hwilum gehicge þa heofonlican' (a).[6] So, amongst the Alfredian period works there are examples where the intended audience is said to be either a specific individual or certain categories of people who knew no, or little, Latin.

Most of the examples of Old English writings that say who they were written for were produced by Ælfric. This is at least partly because of the number of his prefaces that survive. Some of Ælfric's works were addressed only to the patrons who had commissioned them: the Old English version of the beginning of Genesis, written in the 990s, to Ealdorman Æthelweard (a); the *Libellus de ueteri testamento et nouo* (also known as the Letter to

---

[5] *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. E. V. K. Dobbie, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: a Collective Edition 6 (New York, 1942), 110 ('could send them to his bishops, because some of them – those who knew Latin least well – needed it', trans. in M. Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues in the Old English *Pastoral Care*, and Their Carolingian Models', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110.4 (2011), 441-73, at 462).

[6] *Bischofs Wærferth Von Worcester Übersetzung Der Dialoge Gregors Des Grossen*, ed. H. Hecht (Leipzig, 1900), p. 1. 'I Alfred, ... asked my loyal friends to write for me, ..., so that I, strengthened through the exhortation and love amid these earthly tribulations, might from time to time think of heavenly things', trans. in M. Godden, 'The Alfredian Project and Its Aftermath: Rethinking the Literary History of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries', *PBA* 162 (2009), 93-122, at 95 (complete translation in Keynes and Lapidge, ed., *Alfred the Great, Trans. Keynes and Lapidge*, p. 123).

Sigeweard), which has been called 'Ælfric's catechism' and was written in or after 1005, for

Sigeweard, another lay patron (a).[7] More often, Ælfric presented his work as being for people

who do not know Latin. So, for example, Ælfric's prefaces to his first collection of Catholic

Homilies, completed in the period 990 to 994/5, say it is 'ob ędificationem simplicium qui

hanc norunt tantummodo locutionem. Siue legendo. siue audiendo. ... ad utilitatem idiotarum

istius gentis; ... simplicibus', for 'ungelærede menn' who know no Latin and do not have

access to the Alfredian translations.[8] The Latin preface specifies that it is for 'seculares'

---

[7] Genesis: *The Old English Heptateuch and Ælfric's Libellus De Veteri Testamento Et Novo: Volume 1, Introduction and Text*, ed. R. Marsden, Early English Text Society os 330 (Oxford, 2008), line 1 (p. 3). *Libellus de ueteri testamento et nouo*, lines 4-5, 14-21, 497-504: *Old English Heptateuch, Ed. Marsden*, pp. 201, 218 and L. J. Swain, 'Ælfric of Eynsham's Letter to Sigeweard: An Edition, Translation and Commentary' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2009), pp. 346, 347, 365 (translation), 34 (for the quote). M. Swan, 'Identity and Ideology in Ælfric's Prefaces', *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. H. Magennis and M. Swan, A Companion to Ælfric 18 (Leiden, 2009), pp. 247-69 is a study of Ælfric's 'references to himself and his addressees' (p. 247) and see also M. Griffith, 'Ælfric's Preface to Genesis: Genre, Rhetoric and the Origins of the *Ars Dictaminis*', *ASE* 29 (2000), 215-34, esp. 229-30. For the dates see P. A. M. Clemoes, 'The Chronology of Ælfric's Works', *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in Some Aspects of Their History and Culture Presented to Bruce Dickens*, ed. P. Clemoes (London, 1959), pp. 212-47, S. Keynes, *Anglo-Saxon England: A Bibliographical Handbook for Students of Anglo-Saxon History*, 7th ed., Department of Anglo-Saxon Norse and Celtic Guides, Texts and Studies 1 (Cambridge, 2006), 151 and J. Hill, 'Ælfric: His Life and Works', *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. H. Magennis and M. Swan, A Companion to Ælfric 18 (Leiden, 2009), pp. 35-65. C. Cubitt, 'Ælfric's Lay Patrons', *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. H. Magennis and M. Swan, A Companion to Ælfric 18 (Leiden, 2009), pp. 165-92 for discussion about these patrons.

[8] *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series: Text*, ed. P. Clemoes, EETS ss 17 (Oxford, 1997), 173, 174 ('for the edification of the simple who know only this language, either through reading or hearing it read; ... for the benefit of the uneducated... for the simple', for 'unlearned men', trans. from the Latin in *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 127). M. Godden,

('laymen') (b1).[9] The Old English preface to Ælfric's second series of homilies, also written between 990 and 994/5, says that it was written for 'þam mannum to rædenne þe þæt leden ne cunnon'.[10] The Latin preface says that Ælfric was sending it to Sigeric, archbishop of Canterbury, and that it was for 'the catholic faithful' ('fidelibus catholicis') (a, b1).[11] The Lives of the Saints, another collection of sermons, written before c. 998, was addressed to 'fidelibus' ('the faithful') and implies that it was for 'gens ista' ('this people), 'laicis' ('the laity') (b1) and particularly his lay patrons Ealdorman Æthelweard and his son Æthelmær (a).[12] Ælfric's guide to Latin grammar was presented as being in English because it was

---

Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary, EETS S.S. 18 (Oxford, 2000), pp. xxix-xxxvi and Hill, 'Ælfric: His Life and Works'p. 56 for the date.

[9] 'nec tamen omnia euangelia tangimus per circulum anni. sed illa tantummodo quibus speramus sufficere posse simplicibus ad animarum emendationem; Quia seculares omnia nequeunt capere. quamuis ex ore doctorum audiant', *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Ed. Clemoes*, p. 173. ('Nevertheless, we have not touched upon all the gospels in the yearly cycle, but only those which we hope to be sufficient for the simple for the improvement of their souls, because lay people are not able to take in all they hear, even from the mouths of the learned.' *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 127 slightly adapted).

[10] *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series: Text*, ed. M. Godden, Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series 5 (Oxford, 1979), p. 1 (lines 30-31) ('those men to read who know not Latin': B. Thorpe, *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part, Containing the Sermones Catholici, or Homilies of Ælfric*, 2 vols (London, 1844-1846), II, 3). For the date see the references in p. <> above, n. 8.

[11] *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series: Text, Ed. Godden*, p. 1 (lines 1-2, 25). Translation: *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 129.

[12] Latin preface: *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, Early English Text Society Original Series 76, 82, 94, 114, 2 vols. in 4 parts (Oxford, 1881-1900), I, 2-4 (text); *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, pp. 131-2 (translation). Old English preface: *Ælfric's Lives of Saints, Ed. Skeat*, I, 4-6.

intended for schoolroom use with young boys who had not yet mastered the language: 'uobis puerulis tenellis ... inscientibus puerulis, non senibus ... paruulis prodesse posse' (b2).[13] On some occasions, Ælfric also wrote in English expressly for secular clergy. In the covering note to the pastoral letter for Bishop Wulfsige, c. 992, he says: 'Nos vero scriptitamus hanc epistolam, quę anglice sequitur, quasi ex tuo ore dictata sit et locutus esses ad clericos tibi subditos' (b2, b4).[14] The first Old English letter for Wulfstan, written in Wulfstan's voice, was addressed 'eow preostum ... on engliscum gereorde; forþon þe ge ealle ne cunnon þæt leden understandan' (b4).[15] So, Ælfric frequently presented his work as being for specific people, usually laymen, or for those who knew little or no Latin, usually the laity, but also young boys and poorly-educated clergy.

The Old English translation of the Benedictine Rule, written by Ælfric's teacher, Bishop Æthelwold, in the mid-tenth century, was similarly presented to a patron and also to an audience who had a reason for not being literate in Latin. The text known as 'Edgar's

---

[13] *Ælfric's Grammatik Und Glossar: Text Und Varianten*, ed. J. Zupitza, 4th ed., with introduction by Helmut Gneuss (Hildesheim, 2003), pp. 1 (lines 2, 12), 2 (line 4-5). Translation: *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 130: 'for you tender little boys... for ignorant boys, not for their elders. ... to be useful as a beginning for children'. The Old English preface also says that 'ic þohte, þæt ðeos boc mihte fremian iungum cildum to anginne þæs cræftes' ('I thought that this book might help young children to begin the craft'), *Ælfric's Grammatik Und Glossar, Ed. Zupitza*, p. 2 (lines 17-18). Translation: Swan, 'Identity and Ideology in Ælfric's Prefaces'p. 257, n. 20.

[14] 'this letter, which follows in English, I am writing as if dictated from your own mouth and as if you were speaking it to the clerics ('clericos') under your charge', *Councils & Synods with Other Documents Relating to the English Church I.I: 871-1066*, ed. D. Whitelock, M. Brett and C. N. L. Brooke (Oxford, 1981), pp. 191-226, at 196 (no. 40).

[15] 'to you clerics ... in the English language; for not all of you can understand the Latin', Ibid. pp. 260-1 (no. 46, translation amended).

Establishment of Monasteries' which accompanies the translation in one manuscript says that King Edgar commissioned the translation of the Benedictine Rule because he was eager to know more about the monastic rule (a). Then, making a contrast with the 'scearpþanclan witan' ('keen-witted scholars') who do not need the translation, it says that 'ungelæredum woroldmonnum' ('unlearned laymen') who 'þone halgan þeowdom þises regules geceosaþ' ('choose the holy service of this rule') *do* need it: 'Hæbben forþi þa ungelæreden inlendisce þæs halgan regules cyþþe þurh agenes gereordes anwrigenesse, þæt hy þe geornlicor Gode þeowien and nane tale næbben þæt hy þurh nytennesse misfon þurfen.'[16] This appears to refer to novice monks and it has been suggested that the text was intended specifically for adult novices – who needed it because they had missed out on the education given to a child oblate (b3).[17] Another instance related to Winchester is in the collection of diplomas put together in the late tenth or early eleventh century confirming the endowments of the Old Minster by King Edgar. Amidst them is a vernacular version of a Latin diploma which is introduced by saying that it has been written 'ne quis secularium de ignorantia se excusare possit . quia Latinam sermocinationem forte non didicit' (b3).[18]

---

[16] 'Therefore let the unlearned natives have the knowledge of this holy rule by the exposition of their own language, that they may the more zealously serve God and have no excuse that they were driven by ignorance to err.' Ibid. i, 142-54, at 151-2 (no. 33). On its authorship and date see M. Gretsch, *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 25 (Cambridge, 1999), 226-60 and D. Pratt, 'The Voice of the King in 'King Edgar's Establishment of Monasteries'', *ASE* 41 (2013), 145-204.

[17] Gretsch, *Intellectual Foundations*, p. 237, n. 32.

[18] 'lest any secular person might be able to excuse himself by lack of knowledge because by chance he has not learnt the Latin language': A. R. Rumble, *Property and Piety in Early Medieval Winchester: Documents Relating to the Topography of the Anglo-Saxon and Norman City and Its Minsters*, Winchester Studies 4.Iii. The Anglo-Saxon Minsters of

Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*, written c. 1010-12, is another work, like Ælfric's *Grammar*, that was presented as being for schoolroom use. It is couched as being the script that Byrhtferth used as schoolmaster at the monastery at Ramsey, and the Latin expositions of various subjects are interspersed with Old English passages, often recapitulations of what has been said. Byrhtferth frequently addresses the Latin sections to monks and the Old English ones to secular clergy, about whom he is unremittingly disparaging: they are ignorant, idle, lazy, and do not understand Latin.[19] Although Byhrtferth principally addresses the Old English sections to secular clergy (b4) at one point he also directs a long vernacular section to 'þam iungum munecum' ('young monks') (b2).[20] So, Byrhtferth explains that when he uses

Winchester (Oxford, 2002), no. V.ii (p. 112 with discussion on 99-104); P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, R. Hist. Soc. Guides and Handbooks 8 (London, 1968), no. 817.

[19] *Byrhtferth's Enchiridion*, ed. P. S. Baker and M. Lapidge, Early English Text Society S.S. 15 (Oxford, 1995), I.i.115-16, 172-5, I.iv.1, II.i.392-4, 420-3, IV.2.13-14, 26-28 (pp. 12-13, 18-19, 52-3, 82-3, 86-7, 232-3). For Byrhtferth as schoolmaster and the date of the text ibid. esp. xxvi-xxviii, xxxiii-xxxiv.

[20] 'Manega þing we mihton of þeodwitena gesetnysse herto geican, ac forþan þe we witon þæt þas þing þincað clericum and uplendiscum preostum genoh mænigfealde, nu wille we ure spræce awendan to þam iungum munecum þe heora cildhad habbað abisgod on cræftigum bocum ... We byddað þa boceras and þa getydde weras þe þas þing fulfremedlice cunnon þæt heom hefelice ne þince þas þing þe we medomlice iungum cnihtum gesettað and sendað.' ('We could add many things from the writings of learned men, but because we know that these things seem complicated enough to clerks and rustic priests, we will now turn our speech to the young monks who have occupied their childhoods with learned books. ... We pray the scholars and learned men who know these things perfectly that these things, which we imperfectly write and deliver to young men, not seem to them tedious.') Ibid. II.3.237-41, 258-60 (pp. 120-1). This is commented on by R. Stephenson, 'Scapegoating the Secular Clergy: The Hermeneutic Style as a Form of Monastic Self-Definition', *ASE* 38 (2010), 101-35, esp. 113 and R. Stephenson, 'Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*: The Effectiveness of Hermeneutic

the vernacular it is because the people to whom he is talking do not have good enough Latin to understand him otherwise, either because they have not yet completed their education or because their education was inadequate.

To summarize: relatively few Old English texts explicitly refer to their intended audience. Those that do tend to be prose works that derive their authority from Latin, either because they are translations or adaptations of Latin texts or commentaries on them, such as Ælfric's sermon collections and Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*. These present themselves as being written either for a particular person who commissioned them, often a layman, or for people who do not know Latin, or do not know it well enough. The question is: are these statements about intended audience true?

Rhetoric about authorship and audience

There has been a great deal of recent work on the texts in which many of these references to audience are made. This has demonstrated the extent to which we should be cautious about reading them literally.

In a series of articles, Malcolm Godden has swung a wrecking-ball through established ideas about the Alfredian authorship of the books traditionally associated with that king.[21] As part of this, Godden has disputed several of the claims made in the prose

---

Latin', *Conceptualizing Multilingualism in Medieval England, C. 800-C. 1250*, ed. E. M. Tyler (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 121-143, at 137-41.

[21] M. R. Godden, 'Did King Alfred Write Anything?', *Medium Ævum* 76.1 (2007), 1-23; Godden, 'Alfredian Project'; *The Old English Boethius: An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. M. Godden and S. Irvine, 2 vols (Oxford, 2009), i. 8, 140-51; Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues'. J. Bately, 'Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything? The Integrity of the Alfredian Canon Revisited', *Medium*

preface to the Old English version of the Pastoral Care, including its identification of the translator as Alfred. Godden draws on an extensive historiography showing that 'prefaces are not the most reliable of early medieval documents, and their functions are often rhetorical or diplomatic rather than documentary'.[22] For example, in the English kingdoms as on the continent, 'claims of personal authorship by kings and nobles... [were a] literary trope'.[23] They were a rhetorical device intended to lend authority to a text: just because we are told Alfred wrote something does not mean that we should believe this to be true.

Malcolm Godden and others have also argued that there are good reasons for doubting many of the claims made about the intended audiences for writings in the vernacular. He thinks, for example, that the primary audience for the *Pastoral Care* was not the youth of Wessex but Alfred's bishops. This conclusion is based on the nature of the work itself, the recipients and provenance of the surviving manuscripts, as well as the testimony of the verse preface.[24] There were Carolingian precedents for this because in the late 860s Hincmar,

---

Ævum 78.2 (2009), 189-215 criticizes some aspects of Godden's arguments but does not engage with the elements of them that concern me here.

[22] Godden, 'Alfredian Project', p. 97; Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues', esp. pp. 459-60. For earlier discussion of the rhetorical structure of the Pastoral Care's preface, see B. F. Huppé, 'Alfred and Aelfric: A Study of Two Prefaces', *The Old English Homily & Its Backgrounds*, ed. P. E. Szarmach and B. F. Huppé (Albany, NY, 1978), pp. 119-37. On the conventions of prefaces that were inherited from classical literature by Anglo-Saxon authors see especially Griffith, 'Ælfric's Preface to Genesis' and the references cited there, A. E. Nichols, 'Ælfric's Prefaces: Rhetoric and Genre', *English Studies* 49 (1968), 215-23 and R. Stanton, 'Rhetoric and Translation in Ælfric's Prefaces', *Translation and Literature* 6.2 (1997), 135-48.

[23] Godden, 'Alfredian Project', p. 102; Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues', pp. 442-5, 449-53.

[24] Godden, 'Alfredian Project', esp. 102-7; Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues', pp. 459-61, 471-2. K. Dekker, 'King Alfred's Translation of Gregory's *Dialogi*: Tales for the Unlearned?', *Rome and the North: The Early Reception of Gregory the Great in Germanic Europe*, ed. R.

Archbishop of Rheims gave a chapter of the *Pastoral Care* to one of his newly ordained bishops.[25] So, whilst a secondary lay audience might have been considered as an ideal, it was the bishops that were really being targetted despite the prose preface's emphasis on a lay audience.

As we have seen, many vernacular authors claim to have been writing for a particular king or nobleman. This was another common rhetorical strategy that was widely deployed in the Middle Ages, following the conventions of classical Latin, and it was a way of trying to give a text authority.[26] So we should be cautious about the statement that the Old English Benedictine Rule was intended to be read by King Edgar, who was probably an infant when it was written: this is better seen as an authorization for a translation that was intended for monks and nuns. It seems to have been produced as a bilingual text, and there is good evidence for its use in monasteries and nunneries and specifically for adult lay female religious who wished to join benedictine houses.[27] Similarly, although Ælfric's *Libellus de*

H. Bremmer, K. Dekker and D. F. Johnson, Mediaevalia Groningana New Ser. 4 (Leuven, 2001), pp. 27-50 for the view that the Old English version of the *Dialogues* was written not for Alfred but 'primarily for an audience of secular clergy' (p. 48).

[25] M. Andrieu, 'Le Sacre Épiscopal D'après Hincmar De Reims', *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 48 (1953), 22-73, at 33. I am grateful to Jinty Nelson (through the agency of Sarah Hamilton) for this reference. Malcolm Godden ends his 2011 article by asking who was the equivalent of Charlemagne's ghost-writers: Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues'. Might it have been Plegmund, the archbishop of Canterbury who is the first person named in the preface as having helped Alfred? Was this one element in his efforts to reform the episcopate?

[26] Godden, 'Alfredian Project', p. 97; Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues', p. 449.

[27] R. Jayatilaka, 'The Old English Benedictine Rule: Writing for Women and Men', *ASE* 32 (2003), 147-87; Godden, 'Alfredian Project', pp. 97-8; Pratt, 'The Voice of the King in 'King Edgar's Establishment of Monasteries''. There are parallels here with several Middle English versions including Richard Fox' translation of the Rule in 1517 which is presented as being for nuns: J. B. Severs et al., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500: Volume 2* (Hamden, CT, 1970), pp. 460-2; J. Wogan-Browne, N. Watson, A. Taylor and R. Evans, ed., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (Exeter, 1999), pp. 114-15, 162-5. For other vernacular texts apparently directed towards

ueteri testamento et nouo is couched as a personal letter to Sigeweard, with a coda denouncing his addressee's drinking habits, Ælfric intended it to have a wider circulation not least because he envisaged that it would be copied.[28] This was certainly how it was being understood soon afterwards because in one of the surviving manuscripts, which dates from the second half of the eleventh century, it was prefaced by the sentence, 'Ðis gewrit wæs to anum men gediht ac hit mæg swa ðeah manegum fremian.'[29] It has also been proposed that one of the surviving manuscripts was designed for devotional reading within a monastery.[30] Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* was similarly intended for a wider audience of monks and clergy than just the two named lay patrons: it includes saints who were celebrated in monasteries rather than elsewhere and one of the surviving eleventh-century copies was later owned and used at

nuns see Wilcox, 'Audience of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*', p. 253. Note also that the surviving manuscripts of the West Saxon Gospels 'do not seem to have been in the hands of laymen but were part of monastic and cathedral libraries', they did not offer unmediated access for the laity, 'their history is firmly within the walls of the Church': R. M. Liuzza, 'Who Read the Gospels in Old English?', *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, ed. P. S. Baker and N. Howe (Toronto, 1998), pp. 3-24, at pp. 11, 15.

[28] *Old English Heptateuch, Ed. Marsden*, pp. 229-30 (lines 924-933); H. Magennis, 'Ælfric of Eynsham's *Letter to Sigeweard* (*Treatise on the Old and New Testaments*)', *Metaphrastes, or, Gained in Translation: Essays and Translations in Honour of Robert H. Jordan*, ed. M. Mullett (Belfast, 2004), pp. 210-35, at 211. There is a comparable statement in the Letter to Wulfgeat: Wilcox, 'Audience of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*', p. 250.

[29] 'This text was written to one man, but it may nonetheless benefit many.' *Old English Heptateuch, Ed. Marsden*, p. 201 and see pp. xxxiv-xlv for the manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 509). Swain, 'Letter to Sigeweard', p. 346 for the translation and pp. 8 and 346, n. 2 for discussion.

[30] Swain, 'Letter to Sigeweard', pp. 82, 88 (referring to Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 343, written in the West Midlands in the second half of the twelfth century).

Bury St Edmunds.[31] Although Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* are presented as being for the laity, there is much in them that 'reflects the specialist concerns of monks, the clergy and the more learned' and '[T]he level of discussion often seems more appropriate to advanced understandings of theology than the ordinary laity'.[32] Perhaps one of the most emphatic examples of a misleading description of an intended audience is Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*. Although Byrhtferth repeatedly says that the Old English parts are for secular clerics and backwoods priests, not monks or learned clergy, in fact the majority of it is in English, some of which is directed towards a monastic audience. Rebecca Stephenson argues that English was the primary language for instruction in the manual and sees this framing device as an example of epideictic rhetoric which served two purposes:

> The figure of the lazy secular cleric throughout the *Enchiridion* is something of a bogeyman, a scapegoat. The presence of this insufficiently educated audience permitted Byrhtferth to translate the text into English. Once translated this text could be read even by those monks, who should be fully literate in Latin. Thus by frequently reiterating the need for a vernacular translation specifically for the secular clergy, Byrhtferth authorized a translation for his monastic students, while reminding them of the importance of Latinity in monastic identification.[33]

---

[31] Godden, 'Alfredian Project', pp. 98-9 (London, British Library, Cotton Julius E. vii). For an exploration of the possible audiences see Wilcox, 'Audience of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*'.

[32] Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, p. xxvi.

[33] Stephenson, 'Scapegoating the Secular Clergy', p. 134 (for the quote) and Stephenson, 'Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*'. C. A. Jones, 'Ælfric and the Limits of "Benedictine Reform"', *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. H. Magennis and M. Swan (Leiden, 2009), pp. 67-108, at 97 reads the text in a similar way. Godden, 'Alfredian Project', pp. 99 for the implausibility of Byrhtferth's statements.

This is part of her evidence for the use of hermeneutic Latin by Benedictine monks at this time as a means of self-definition. Their proclaimed proficiency in Latin marked them out from other members of the Church – even if, in practice, monks used English too.

The combined weight of all this evidence is persuasive. We should be wary of the claims made by early medieval writers about the identities of their intended readers and listeners, whether it be Ælfric's uneducated and simple, Æthelwold's unlearned natives, or Byrhtferth's lazy clerics. Although authors and translators frequently presented their vernacular prose as being for those who knew no Latin, particularly the laity, we should be cautious about accepting such statements unquestioningly. And I think there are even more reasons than this for being careful about how to interpret these passages. In particular, they need to be understood in the context of two well-established conventions.

Arguments for translation 1: Jerome

In 395 Jerome wrote a letter to Pammachius defending one of his translations from various criticisms that had been made of them. This letter has been described as 'the founding document of Christian translation theory' and it is useful for understanding some of the framing devices that Ælfric in particular used in his prefaces.[34] In this letter, Jerome defended his translations in three ways:

1) Eusebius of Cremona asked him to translate it for him:

---

[34] D. Robinson, *Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche*, 2nd ed. (Manchester, 2002), p. 23 for the quote.

'siquidem et hoc, ut sibi soli facerem, oppido flagitarat – postulauique ab eo mutuo, ut domi haberet exemplar nec facile in uulgus proderet. ... Ac primum, antequam de translatione respondeam, uolo interrogare eos, ... unde apud uos exemplar epistulae? quis dedit? qua fronte profertis, quod scelere redemistis? ... Uolo in chartulis meis quaslibet ineptias scribere, commentari de scripturis, ... quamdiu non profero cogitata, et maledicta non crimina sunt ...'[35]

2) That he translates 'non uerbum e uerbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu'.[36] He labours this point at enormous length and produces an extraordinary array of precedents for this approach to translation ranging from Cicero to the Bible including detailed textual criticism of passages from the Gospels, I Corinthians, Romans and the Septuagint.

---

[35] 'The point is that Eusebius asked me to translate a copy only for himself; and in return I requested that he keep the copy private and not circulate it publicly. ... At the very beginning, before I defend my translation, I wish to interrogate those men ... 'Where did you obtain your copy of my translation? Who gave it to you? How dare you display something obtained by your fraud? ... If I happen to write in my notebook this or that absurd remark, or to comment on Scripture ... so long as I do not publish my thoughts, they are hardly malicious or criminal....': *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Opera 1.I: Epistulae*, ed. I. Hilberg, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum 54, 55, 56, 3 vols, 2nd ed. (Vienna, 1996), ep. 57 (vol. I, pp. 503-26, at 505-7). Translation: Robinson, *Western Translation Theory*, pp. 22-30, at 24-5.

[36] 'not word for word, but sense for sense': *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Opera 1.I: Epistulae, Ed. Hilberg*, vol. I, p. 508. Translation: Robinson, *Western Translation Theory*, p. 25.

3) He ends by saying that he admires – and aims to emulate – the 'holy simplicity' ('sancta simplicitas') of the literary style of the Apostles, the 'plainness in their speech' ('in loquendo simplicitatem').[37]

When one compares this with some of the points made by Ælfric in his prefaces the results are striking. For example, in Ælfric's prefaces to the *Lives of Saints* he says:

1) That Æthelweard and Æthelmer begged him for the translation.[38]

2) That his translation is sense for sense not word for word: 'Nec potuimus in ista translatione semper uerbum ex uerbo transferre, sed tamen sensum ex sensu, sicut inuenimus in sancta scriptura, diligenter'.[39]

---

[37] *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Opera 1.I: Epistulae, Ed. Hilberg*, vol. I, pp. 525, 526. Translation: Robinson, *Western Translation Theory*, p. 30.

[38] 'Non mihi inputetur quod diuinam scripturam nostrae lingue infero, quia arguet me praecatus multorum fidelium et maxime æþelwerdi ducis et æðelmeri nostri, qui ardentissime nostras interpretationes amplectuntur lectitando'. ('Let it not be charged against me alone that I turn divine scripture into our language because the entreaty of many of the faithful clears me and especially that of ealdorman Æthelweard and of our friend Æthelmer, who most ardently favour our translations by often reading them...'.) 'Ælfric gret eadmodlice Æðelwerd ealdorman and ic secge þe leof. þæt ic hæbbe nu gegaderod on þyssere bec þæra halgena þrowunga þe me to onhagode on englisc to awendene. for þan þe ðu leof swiðost and æðelmær swylcera gewrita me bædon' ('Ælfric humbly greets ealdorman Æthelweard and I say to you, beloved, that I have now gathered in this book the passions of the saints which it was appropriate for me to translate into English, because you, beloved, and Æthelmær fervently requested such writings of me'). *Ælfric's Lives of Saints, Ed. Skeat*, I, 4. Translations: *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, pp. 131-2 (from the Latin); Swan, 'Identity and Ideology in Ælfric's Prefaces'p. 255, n. 17 (from the Old English). For other examples see above, pp. <>.

3) That he favours a simple style: 'diligenter curauimus uertere simplici et aperta locutione quatinus proficiat audientibus.'[40]

I think the similarities in the points made by Jerome and Ælfric are very interesting. In the letter to Pammachius, Jerome deploys the very well-established literary convention of declaring the presentation of the text to a patron who had asked for it as a way of lending the text authority and sharing responsibility for it. He also makes a distinction between texts written for private and public consumption as an extra layer of protection from criticism.[41] Jerome also lays out very clearly the other two points – about sense for sense translation and a simple style – ideas which he helped to popularize.[42]

Ælfric's defence of sense for sense rather than word for word translation and his favouring of a simple style demonstrate the extent to which Ælfric was influenced by Jerome's attitudes towards translation. Whilst it is not possible to *prove* that Ælfric knew this

---

[39] 'We have not been able in this translation always to translate word for word but, rather, we have taken care to translate diligently according to the sense, as we find it in Holy Scripture.' *Ælfric's Lives of Saints, Ed. Skeat*, I, 4. Translation: *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 131. For the other places where Ælfric expresses the same sentiment see *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 64.

[40] 'we have taken care to translate... in such simple and clear phrases as will profit our listeners.' *Ælfric's Lives of Saints, Ed. Skeat*, I, 4. Translation *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 131 and discussion at 60-1. For discussion of this in the wider context of Jerome and others favouring a simple style see R. Stanton, *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 145-53.

[41] On these conventions see T. Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces: Studies in Literary Conventions*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis: Studia Latina Stockholmiensia 13 (Stockholm, 1964), pp. 116-24, 148-9.
[42] Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, pp. 110-11, 151-3.

letter specifically, I think the correspondences suggest it is likely.[43] There are also indications in Ælfric's Preface to Genesis that he knew Jerome's epistle to Pammachius because both say that whilst it is not possible for translators to retain the word order of the original text it is desirable to do so when translating from the Bible. This has convinced Robert Stanton, Richard Marsden and Mark Griffith that Ælfric knew Jerome's letter to Pammachius.[44] This is not at all improbable. The letter was widely known throughout the Middle Ages.[45] There is good evidence for the availability of Jerome's Letters in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: there are several manuscripts containing copies of his letters, others are listed in inventories, and many of Jerome's letters were cited by Ælfric and other authors.[46] Ælfric was also clearly influenced by other writings by Jerome on translation, such as his Letter to Paulinus.[47]

---

[43] R. Marsden, 'Ælfric as Translator: The Old English Prose *Genesis*', *Anglia* 109 (1991), 319-58, p. 324; *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 64; and Liuzza, 'Who Read the Gospels in Old English?'p. 10 think the discussion of sense by sense translation was a reference to Jerome's idea. Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, pp. 151-3 for the suggestion that the idea about simple language might have come from Jerome.

[44] Marsden, 'Ælfric as Translator', p. 324; M. Griffith, 'Ælfric's Use of His Sources in the Preface to Genesis, Together with a Conspectus of Biblical and Patristic Sources and Analogues', *Florilegium* 17 (2000), 127-54, at 128-9, 148-9 and see Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, pp. 135-7.

[45] Marsden, 'Ælfric as Translator', pp. 327-8; Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, pp. 76-7, 110-11; R. Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 11 (Cambridge, 1991), 50-55, 222.

[46] M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 148 (listed in eighth-century inventory), 217 (letters cited by Bede including the letter to Pammachius, Epistle 57), 271 (Jerome's letters cited by Byrhtferth), 315 (index to listings for Jerome's Letters). Given Bede's apparent knowledge of the letter to Pammachius, it is interesting that a copy of just that letter is found in a manuscript containing other work by Jerome and Ambrose which was

The key point is that the naming in early medieval prefaces of the patrons who commissioned a translation was inherited from the conventions of classical Latin literature.[48] It was common to write prefaces in the form of a private letter to works that were intended for a wider readership. This served to transfer 'responsibility for the work from its writer to the person commissioning it' and to assert their authorisation of it.[49] And, especially in the

written in eighth-century Northumbria (Kassel, Gesamthochschulbibliothek 2° MS.theol.21): H. Gneuss, *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A List of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 241 (Tempe, Ariz., 2001), no. 832. For knowledge of Jerome's letters in Anglo-Saxon England see also the comments in J. D. A. Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English, 597-1066* (Cambridge MA, 1967), pp. 171-2, 173-6. For Ælfric's citations from Jerome's letters see Fontes Anglo-Saxonici Project, ed., *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: World Wide Web Register*, http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk/, accessed May 2013 and Swain, 'Letter to Sigeweard', pp. 111-13. For manuscripts containing Jerome's letters written or owned in early medieval England see Gneuss, *Handlist*, nos. 2.5, 229, 230, 264, 832, 845; H. Gneuss, 'Addenda and Corrigenda to the *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*', *ASE* 32 (2003), 293-305, nos. 173, 179.4. For knowledge of Jerome's letters and his attitudes towards Bible translation as evident in the biblical commentaries from the Canterbury school of Theodore and Hadrian see B. Bischoff and M. Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 10 (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 203-4 and n. 40, 299, 388-9 and Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, p. 77.

[47] Griffith, 'Ælfric's Preface to Genesis', esp. pp. 217-21; for the influence of this and other letters by Jerome as well as Jerome's prefaces to his translations of the Old Testament, see Griffith, 'Ælfric's Use of His Sources', esp. pp. 127-9, 144, 147, 148, 149; and T. Major, 'Rebuilding the Tower of Babel: Ælfric and Bible Translation', *Florilegium* 23.2 (2006), 47-60, at 52-3.

[48] Griffith, 'Ælfric's Preface to Genesis', esp. pp. 221-2 and references.

[49] Ibid., p. 221-2 (quote on 222); Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces: Studies in Literary Conventions*, pp. 148-9.

context of a work that claimed to be a translation, it could also allude to Jerome's defence: I made this for x, I did not publish it for general consumption, so what business is it of yours? The point of addressing vernacular books to lay patrons was not only, if at all, because they were intended for a lay audience.

Arguments for translation 2: Gregory the Great

What Jerome's letter did not provide a precedent for was the idea that translation was done for the unlearned, the simple, the illiterate, the laity. But there was an exceptionally well-known analogous argument. This was made by Gregory the Great in two letters that he wrote to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles in 599 and 600. In these letters he was trying to persuade Serenus to stop destroying images on church walls because, he said 'Idcirco enim pictura in ecclesiis adhibetur, ut hi qui litteras nesciunt saltem in parietibus uidendo legant, quae legere in codicibus non ualent.'[50] 'Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus, quia in ipsa ignorantes uident quod sequi debeant, in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt; unde praecipue gentibus pro lectione pictura est.'[51] It was widely believed in the

---

[50] 'a picture is provided in churches for the reason that those who are illiterate may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books.' *S. Gregorii Magni Registrum Epistularum*, ed. D. Norberg, 2 vols., S. Gregorii Magni Opera, Ccsl 140-140a (Turnhout, 1982), IX, 209 (vol. II, p. 768). Translation, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, trans. J. R. C. Martyn, Mediaeval sources in translation 40, 3 vols (Toronto, 2004), II, 674.

[51] 'For what writing provides for readers, this a picture provides for uneduated people looking at it, for in it the ignorant see what they should follow and the illiterate read the same from it. Thus a pictures serves as a text, especially for pagans.' *S. Gregorii Magni Registrum Epistularum, Ed. Norberg* XI, 10 (vol. 2, pp. 873-6, at 874). Translation, *Letters of Gregory the Great, Trans. Martyn*, III, 745. For discussion see C. M. Chazelle, 'Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate: Pope Gregory I's Letters to Serenus of Marseilles', *Word & Image* 6.2 (1990), 138-53.

Middle Ages that in these letters Gregory had justified religious images as being especially useful for the illiterate and the laity.[52]

These letters by Gregory were known throughout the medieval period.[53] Their central idea become so familiar and widespread that the very many restatements of it tend not to cite these passages directly.[54] Bede, for example, made use of the idea of images as being for the illiterate at least three times in ways which suggest that he knew one or both of the letters to Serenus of Marseilles although he does not quote from them:[55]

1. In his homily for the feast of Benedict Biscop: 'adportauit nunc pincturas sanctarum historiarum quae non ad ornamentum solummodo ecclesiae uerum et ad instructionem intuentium proponerentur aduexit uidelicet ut qui litterarum lectionem non possent opera domini et saluatoris nostri per ipsarum contuitum discerent imaginum.'[56]

---

[52] This was, however, a misinterpretation of what Gregory had said: Chazelle, 'Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate'; R. Gameson, 'Aelfric and the Perception of Script and Picture in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History 5*, ed. W. Filmer-Sankey, S. C. Hawkes, J. Campbell and D. Brown (Oxford, 1992), pp. 85-101, at 90-1.

[53] L. G. Duggan, 'Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?', *Word & Image* 5.3 (1989), 227-51.

[54] This is clear from the examples given in Duggan, 'Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?'.

[55] Duggan, 'Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?' 229-30. For evidence that Bede knew other letters by Gregory than those he quotes directly, see P. Meyvaert, *Bede and Gregory the Great*, Jarrow Lecture 1964 (Jarrow, Durham, 1964), p. 10 and p. 24, n. 38.

[56] 'Another time he transported pictures of the holy histories which were put up, not only for the ornamentation of the church, but also for the instruction of those who looked at them, namely so that those who could not read might learn of the works of our Lord and Saviour

2. He says that Benedict Biscop adorned the walls of St Peter's, Monkwearmouth with Biblical images so that: 'intrantes ecclesiam omnes etiam litterarum ignari, quaquauersum intenderent, uel semper amabilem Christi sanctorumque eius, ... uel dominicae incarnationis gratiam uigilantiore mente recolerent, uel ... se ipsi examinare meminissent'.[57]

3. In his *De Templo*, Bede argues that it should be permissable to display images of Christ's crucifixion and miracles because:

'cum horum aspectus multum saepe compunctionis soleat praestare contuentibus et eis quoque qui litteras ignorant quasi uiuam dominicae historiae pandere lectionem? Nam et pictura Graece ζωγραφία, id est uiua scriptura, uocatur.'[58]

---

through gazing on images of these [works]'. Bede, *Bedae Venerabilis Opera Iii/ Iv: Opera Homiletica, Opera Rhythmica*, ed. D. Hurst, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 122 (Turnhout, 1955), book i, homily 13, lines 180-85 (p. 93). Trans. Bede the Venerable, *Homilies on the Gospels*, trans. L. T. Martin and D. Hurst, Cistercian Studies 110, 111, 2 vols (Kalamazoo, MI, 1991), vol. I, p. 131.

[57] 'all who came into the church, even those who did not know how to read, should always gaze on the lovely sight of Christ and his saints ... they should either recall with a keener mind the grace of the Lord's incarnation, or remember to examine themselves more closely.' Bede, 'Historia abbatum', *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow, Ed. And Trans. Grocock and Wood*, pp. 21-75, at 36-7 (c. 6).

[58] 'since the sight of these things often tends to elicit great compunction in the beholders and also to make available to those who are illiterate a living narrative of the story of the Lord. For in Greek too a painting is called ζωγραφία i.e. "living writing"'. Bede, *De Templo*, ed. D. Hurst, Bedae venerabilis opera 2a, CCSL 119A (Turnhout, 1969), ii.19.10, lines 829-833 (pp. 212-13). Translation: Bede, *On the Temple*, trans. S. Connolly, with intro. by Jennifer O'Reilly, Translated Texts for Historians 21 (Liverpool, 1995), 91. It is worth noting that 80 lines later he stresses the unity of peoples despite their linguistic diversity: 'uenimus ... qui ex

There are also many examples of Gregory's letters to Serenus being cited in the late eighth and ninth century by Carolingian and other authors in relation to the debates about iconoclasm.[59] Walahfrid Strabo, writing in the early ninth century, for example, called paintings 'a kind of literature for the illiterate' ('quaedam litteratura inlitterato').[60] The idea continued to be repeated right the way through the early Middle Ages, such as at the 1025 synod of Arras where it was claimed that religious pictures were useful for the simple and illiterate.[61] As these examples show, the idea that religious images were books for the unlettered and layfolk became commonplace in the medieval period, in the English kingdoms as well as on the continent.

I contend that it was this idea that inspired the convention of presenting vernacular texts as if for an unlatinate, lay audience. Gregory's defence of images on the grounds that

---

gentibus uariis quidem linguis pro diuersitate nationum sed unum eundemque Deum patrem propter unius donum spiritus inuocantes.' Bede, *Bede, De Templo, Ed. Hurst*, ii.19.10, lines 924-927 (p. 215) ('we who come from the gentiles, with different languages, it is true, according to the diversity of nations, but invoking one and the same God the Father because of the gift of the one Spirit.' Bede, *On the Temple*, p. 94). This passage is discussed in L. Kendrick, 'Visual Texts in Post-Conquest England', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Culture*, ed. A. Galloway (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 149-71, at 152-3: 'What Bede seems to have meant by calling pictorial representations of Scripture a "living" reading or writing is that pictures translate and transfigure the Latin text, gloss it to make it understandable, and bring it by sensory means into the life of the viewer.' (p. 153).

[59] Duggan, 'Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?', p. 230.

[60] *Walahfrid Strabo's Libellus De Exordiis Et Incrementis Quarundam in Observationibus Ecclesiasticis Rerum: A Translation and Liturgical Commentary*, ed. A. L. Harting-Correa, Mittellateinische Studien und Texte 19 (Leiden, 1996), c. 8, lines 6-7 (pp. 80-1). Discussed in Duggan, 'Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?', p. 230.

[61] Ibid. p. 231; Gameson, 'Aelfric and the Perception of Script and Picture'p. 97.

they were useful for the instruction of those who could not read provided an ideal analogy for a defence of translation into the vernacular for the pastoral care of those who could not read Latin. Both, after all, are forms of translation. As the quotations from Bede and others that I have cited illustrate, religious images were being presented as literature for the laity, as translations into an alternative, in this case visual, language. It is not therefore difficult to see why the convention was transferred to a different medium. The analogy between translation into images and into English is especially apt because in the early medieval period to be illiterate – the class of people for whom pictures were considered to be especially useful – usually meant that one could not read and write Latin.[62] It is notable that in the second letter Gregory says pictures are especially useful for 'gentibus' which here probably means non-Romans – those peoples who are not native speakers of Latin and therefore cannot read the scriptures.[63]

It has already been shown that Bede seems to have known Gregory's letters to Serenus and talked about vernacular versions of Latin texts as being for the laity.[64] There is also good evidence that Ælfric was familiar with the ideas expressed in Gregory's Letters. He seems to refer directly to them in his homily for mid Lent Sunday where he talks about the differences between words and images in a way that 'relates quite closely' to Gregory's

---

[62] B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), pp. 26-7; Chazelle, 'Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate', p. 142; M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, 2013), p. 229.

[63] Chazelle, 'Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate', pp. 142 and 151-2, n. 20. *Letters of Gregory the Great, Trans. Martyn*, iii, 745 n. 59 suggests it could be translated as 'foreigners'.

[64] See above, pp. <>.

letters to Serenus.[65] There are particularly close lexical echoes of Gregory's letters to Serenus in Ælfric's preface to the First Series of Catholic Homilies:

> Licet temere uel presumptuose tamen transtulimus hunc codicem ex libris latinorum. Scilicet sancte scripture in nostram consuetam sermocinationem ob ędificationem simplicium qui hanc norunt tantummodo locutionem. Siue legendo. siue audiendo. ... ad utilitatem idiotarum istius gentis; ... seculares ...[66]

The phrase 'ad utilitatem idiotarum istius gentis' in particular recalls the 'idiotis' and 'gentibus' of Gregory's letter. Although Ælfric is deploying the idea in a different context − that of translation into the vernacular rather than into images − he is actually rather closer to Gregory's wording than the Bedan examples I gave. This may suggest that Ælfric had access to the second letter. Copies of some of Gregory's Letters had been available in the English kingdoms since at least the eighth century and we have seen some examples of the use made

---

[65] 'on oðre wisan we scawiað metinge. □ on oðre wisan stafas. ne gæð na mare to metinge buton □ ðu hit geseo. □ herige; Nis na genoh □ ðu stafas scawie. buton þu hi eac ræde.' ('we look at pictures in one way, at letters in another. It is enough to see and praise a picture; but it is not enough to look at letters without at the same time reading them'.) *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series*, ed. P. Clemoes, EETS ss 17 (Oxford, 1997), XII.67-70 (p. 277); Gameson, 'Aelfric and the Perception of Script and Picture' pp. 90-8, the translation and quote are on p. 90.

[66] 'Even if rashly or presumptuously, we have, nevertheless, translated this book from Latin works, namely from Holy Scripture, into the language to which we are accustomed for the edification of the simple who know only this language, either through reading or hearing it read; ... for the benefit of the uneducated among this people. ... for the simple for the improvement of their souls, ... laymen...'. *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Ed. Clemoes*, p. 173. Translation, *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 127.

of them by Bede.[67] There is also some evidence for an interest in Gregory's letters in England when Ælfric was writing because parts of a letter were added into Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 223 (a late ninth/ tenth century northern French manuscript primarily of Prudentius) in England in the late tenth or eleventh century.[68] One contemporary who certainly had access to Gregory's letter collection and made extensive use of it was Abbo, abbot of Fleury 988-1004, friend of Byrhtferth and Archbishop Dunstan, and a man who was described by

---

[67] These two letters are found in the large letter collection created in the late eighth century as well as other manuscript families: *S. Gregorii Magni Registrum Epistularum, Ed. Norberg*, vol. I, p. v, vol. II, pp. 768, 873. For knowledge of Gregory's letters see Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, pp. 77-8 (copies of letters sent abroad), 306 (manuscripts containing Gregory's Letters) drawing on Gneuss, *Handlist*, nos. 17, 70, 240, 272, 469.5, 556, and in addition see also H. Gneuss, 'Second Addenda and Corrigenda to the *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*', *ASE* 40 (2011), 293-306 no. 714.8 and C. A. Jones, *Ælfric's Letter to the Monks of Eynsham*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 24 (Cambridge, 1998), 75 n. 17. See also the comments in M. Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 34 (Cambridge, 2005), 46-9. For identified citations from Gregory's letters, so far almost all from Bede, see *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici* and F. Wallis, trans., *Bede: The Reckoning of Time*, Translated Texts for Historians 29 (Liverpool, repr. with corrections 2004), 453 and for further evidence of the availability of Gregory's letters in eighth-century Northumbria see D. A. Bullough, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation* (Leiden, 2004), p. 231 and n. 308 (and pp. 192, 296 and n. 138 for their influence on Alcuin).

[68] Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 223, pp. 346-7 (a letter to the ex-consul Leontius, *Registrum,* book IX, no. 4); N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), p. 92 (no. 52); Gneuss, *Handlist*, no. 70; M. Budny, *Insular, Anglo-Saxon, and Early Anglo-Norman Manuscript Art at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge: An Illustrated Catalogue*, 2 vols (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1997), I, 147, but see Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints* , p. 48, n. 111.

Ælfric as a 'highly learned monk'.[69] However, as I have shown, the ideas conveyed in the letters were so well-known that Ælfric and others could just as easily have learnt about them from other sources than directly from Gregory's *Registrum*. For instance, there is evidence that Ælfric made use of Bede's Homily on Benedict, which I mentioned earlier, for one of his own sermons.[70]

It is also clear that the convention of presenting vernacular texts as being for an unlatinate audience was being deployed by writers in the East Frankish kingdom from the late ninth century. These are some examples that appear to be analogous to the Anglo-Saxon ones we have been looking at:

- Otfrid's Evangelienbuch

  This was written between 863 and 871 in the monastery of Wissembourg (France).[71] It is an Old High German Gospel harmony in verse, blending narrative with commentary, probably based on a Gospel lectionary – the book that contains those parts of the Bible assigned for reading during the mass.[72] It contains a number of prefatory texts. In a Latin letter addressed to Liutbert, archbishop of Mainz, Otfrid (c.

---

[69] M. Mostert, *The Political Theology of Abbo of Fleury: A Study of the Ideas About Society and Law of the Tenth-Century Monastic Reform Movement* (Hilversum, 1987), esp. pp. 66, 71-5; R. W. Pfaff, 'Abbo of Fleury [St Abbo of Fleury] (945x50-1004)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004) (and for the quote).

[70] *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Ed. Clemoes*, i.27, lines 176-7 (p. 406); Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, p. 227.

[71] L. Archibald, 'Otfrid of Weissenburg', *German Literature of the Early Middle Ages*

ed. B. Murdoch (Rochester, NY, 2004), pp. 139-56, at 139.

[72] D. A. McKenzie, *Otfrid Von Weissenburg: Narrator or Commentator? A Comparative Study* (London, 1946), pp. 8, 12, 74.

800-c.867) says that it is for certain monks and the reverend lady Judith who had asked him for it as an alternative to the 'laicorum cantus ... obscenus', and also for 'qui in illis alienae linguae difficultatem horrescit'.[73] In the first chapter, which explains why Otfrid translated it, he implies that it is intended for those with no Latin at all.[74] However, D. A. Mckenzie has shown in a detailed study that the text was meant to be read in tandem with the Latin, indeed could often only be understood if it were: Otfrid frequently urges the reader to consult the Latin text, he provided Latin marginalia to help find one's place in the original, he sometimes omitted peoples' proper names so you already need to know them to comprehend what he was saying and he uses pronouns to refer to people he has not mentioned in his own text: it is a commentary on the parts of the Bible that were read in the Mass, rather than a translation of them. Mckenzie showed that the intended reader was 'not a half-literate layman, but a fellow-cleric with sufficient theological background to understand and appreciate the technical interpretation in which Otfrid delighted.'[75] So, this looks like a very similar example of a text that is misleadingly presented as being for the unlatinate.

- 'Præfatio in librum antiquum lingua Saxonica conscriptum'

---

[73] 'obscene songs of the laity', 'those who are deterred by the difficulty of a foreign language': *Otfrids Evangelienbuch*, ed. O. Erdmann, Altdeutsche Textbibliothek 49, 6th rev. ed. (Tübingen, 1973), 4 (lines 6-7, 26).

[74] Ibid. p. 14 (lines 119-122); McKenzie, *Otfrid Von Weissenburg*, p. 16. <I really need to see a translation of the vernacular prefatory texts and the first chapter so I can quote the text.>

[75] McKenzie, *Otfrid Von Weissenburg*, quotation on p. 75.

In 1562 two prefatory texts were printed that appear to date from the ninth century. One of these is a Latin prose introduction to a poetic treatment of the Old and New Testaments in German.[76] It is not known from what manuscript it was printed nor what poem it once introduced: there is nothing to support the long-standing association with the *Heliand*. It is, however, further evidence for Carolingian vernacular literature being presented as for an illiterate audience because it states that it is for the people 'so that not only the literate but also the illiterate' ('non solum literatis, verum etiam illiteratis') can have access to this biblical knowledge.[77]

- Notker Labeo's letter to Bishop Hugo

Notker Labeo (c. 950-1022) was monk and schoolmaster at the monastery of St Gall (Switzerland).[78] A contemporary of Ælfric and Byrhtferth, his many works make an interesting comparison to theirs. For example, the works of Notker and Ælfric constitute a significant percentage of the surviving corpus of Old High German and Old English respectively.[79] In a letter that Notker wrote c. 1020 to Bishop Hugo of Sion (Switzerland) he lists his writings, which included commentaries and works on

---

[76] J. K. Bostock, *A Handbook on Old High German Literature*, 2nd ed. rev. by K. C. King and D. R. McLintock (Oxford, 1976), pp. 181-83; *Heliand Und Genesis*, ed. O. Behaghel and B. Taeger, Altdeutsche Textbibliothek 4, 10th ed. (Tübingen, 1996), 1-2.

[77] *Heliand Und Genesis, Ed. Behaghel & Taeger*, p. 1.

[78] J. West, 'Late Old High German Prose', *German Literature of the Early Middle Ages*, ed. B. Murdoch (Rochester, NY, 2004), pp. 227-45, at 227-31.

[79] A. A. Grotans, *Reading in Medieval St Gall* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 117 (more than 50%); J. Wilcox, 'The Use of Ælfric's Homilies: Mss Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 85 and 86 in the Field ', *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. H. Magennis and M. Swan (Leiden, 2009), pp. 345-368, at 345 (c. 15%).

computus, rhetoric and logic.[80] He says that he wrote them in order for his 'students to have an introduction to these texts' ('Ad quos ... accessvm habere nostros uellem scolasticos') and that 'quam [s]cito capiuntur per patriam linguam. quę aut uix aut non integre capienda forent in lingua non propria'.[81] A. A. Grotans has shown how his work was designed so that intermediate and advanced students could improve their knowledge of these texts, of rhetorical composition, and so they could practise their grammar and ability to read Latin aloud.[82] She thinks they were for use in the monastic schoolroom and needed to be studied alongside the Latin originals.[83] Furthermore, as Rita Copeland argues, although they purport to be vernacular gateways to a proper appreciation of the Latin originals, these are works of commentary meant to take their place alongside their Latin counterparts.[84]

So, by the time that Aelfric was using it, the convention of presenting vernacular writing as being for unlatinate audiences of various kinds that bore some or little relation to their actual intended readers was well-established amongst German writers. It is interesting that the

[80] West, 'Late Old High German Prose' pp. 228-33. This is an interesting comparison with Aelfric's listing of his works in the *Libellus de ueteri testamento et nouo*, on which see Swain, 'Letter to Sigeweard', pp. 48-50. Whilst there is some overlap in the nature of their works there are very significant differences too.

[81] 'Things which are understood only partially and with difficulty in a language that is not one's own are quickly grasped in one's native tongue.' *Notker Der Deutsche: Die Kleineren Schriften*, ed. J. C. King and P. W. Tax, Die Werke Notkers des Deutschen 7 (Tübingen, 1996), pp. 348, 349. Trans. Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, p. 98.

[82] Grotans, *Reading in Medieval St Gall*, with a useful summary on pp. 93-4.

[83] Ibid. p. 103.

[84] Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, pp. 99-107; Grotans, *Reading in Medieval St Gall*, pp. 41-2, 106-8.

earliest surviving appearances of the convention that I have found in prefaces from England and the continent both date from the late ninth century: the Old English version of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* and Otfrid's *Evangelienbuch*. This may well reflect the interconnectedness of the intellectual elites of Wessex and East Frankia at that time.[85] The existence of the *Heliand* in a manuscript written in England, an English translation of part of the Old Saxon *Genesis*, and a transposition of Bede's story about Caedmon into the context of German biblical verse attest to the mutual interest of Anglo-Saxons and Germans in the vernacular writings of both regions.[86] It is therefore likely that the use of the convention in both languages at much the same time is no coincidence.

The presentation of vernacular texts as being for a lay audience not literate in Latin became a convention that was used in the presentation of vernacular texts throughout the Middle Ages.[87] Robert Mannyng introduced his *Chronicle* of 1338 as being 'Not for the lerid bot for the lewed/ ... / That the Latyn no Frankys con' (Not for the learned but for the

---

[85] Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues' argues that 'Alfred's' works were inspired by Carolingian models.

[86] For these texts see R. H. Bremmer Jr, 'Across Borders: Anglo-Saxon England and the Germanic World', *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature* ed. C. A. Lees (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 185-208.

[87] H. Phillips, 'Nation, Region, Class, and Gender', *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English Volume 1: To 1550*, ed. R. Ellis (Oxford, 2008), pp. 45-69, at 48-9 for the persistence of this tradition after the Conquest. Wogan-Browne, Watson, Taylor and Evans, ed., *Idea of the Vernacular*, esp. pp. 19-20, 109-20, 321-5, 336-8 for a more extended discussion of the presentation of audiences in late medieval texts which prints many examples of prologues. I am grateful to Ryan Perry for urging me to read the latter.

unlearned ... who know neither Latin nor French).[88] The Northern Homily Cycle of c. 1315 was also presented on four occasions in its prologue as being for laymen ('laued men') including those who could not understand Latin and French.[89] By this date the idea had become bound up with appeals to universality: that English was a language that could be understood by all and so whilst the emphasis in the Northern Homily Cycle is on the laity rather than clerics and the educated, on one occasion the text is referred to as being something that may instruct both learned and laymen ('That mai ken lered and laued bathe').[90] This point is made explicitly in John Trevisa's *Dialogue between the lord and the clerk on translation*, written in 1387. Again, the emphasis throughout is on access for the monolingual laity but the point is also made that material such as this is useful for those who do know Latin too – because English is easier to read than Latin for native English speakers.[91] Indeed, Jeremy Catto argues that Chaucer and his contemporaries 'did *not* believe they were writing for a body of readers who could read an English text but not a Latin text'.[92] He suggests that in the fourteenth century there were no monoglot readers: those who could read were taught Latin first and so could read both Latin and English.[93] The large numbers of Middle English texts being written from the 1380s appear to have been read by people who

---

[88] Wogan-Browne, Watson, Taylor and Evans, ed., *Idea of the Vernacular*, pp. 20-1 (lines 8, 10) and pp. 19-20 for a summary of why this is unlikely to be an accurate representation of the intended and actual audience.

[89] Ibid. pp. 125-30 (lines 65-68, 99-114, 119-20).

[90] Ibid. p. 128 (line 77).

[91] Ibid. pp. 130-4 (esp. lines 35-44).

[92] J. Catto, 'Written English: The Making of the Language 1370-1400', *Past and Present* 179 (2003), 24-59, at 48.

[93] Ibid. p. 48.

did know Latin. For example, 'The earliest manuscripts of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* were equipped with brief Latin summaries of each section and also with substantial marginal glosses in Latin which appear to be authorial. It is as if Gower expected his English to be made more comprehensible with Latin explanations.'[94] The earliest surviving copies of this and other contemporary texts such as the *Canterbury Tales* and *Gawain* appear to have belonged to people who must, given their roles and status, have known Latin.[95] The parallels between Jeremy Catto's arguments about late fourteenth-century texts and my own for eighth-eleventh century ones are striking especially as the former did not inform the development of the latter.[96]

There is another pertinent parallel to be drawn here too. It is pretty safe to assume that Ælfric's homilies were intended for at least two audiences: those who would hear them and those who would read and speak them. One can make a case for the primary audience being the latter – the literate clerics to whom his texts were available – and that the main intention was to discourage improvisation.[97] In the late fourteenth century, John Trevisa, in his Dialogue between a Lord and a Clerk, defended Bible translations as being for this purpose: the unlatinate could be taught the meaning of the Bible but it was better to have a written

---

[94] Ibid. p. 49. For authorial Latin marginal notes in some manuscripts of Ælfric's homilies see Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, p. xxiii.

[95] Catto, 'Written English', pp. 48-9.

[96] Perhaps an even closer parallel is between his characterisation of the late fourteenth century Middle English texts as 'a series of essays in a new and difficult medium, a form of English which had to be created, and whose first readers more naturally read Latin.' Ibid. 54-5. This seems very similar to the flourishing of Old English in the mid-late tenth century which was bound up with the use of a specific vocabulary, on which see, Gretsch, 'Winchester Vocabulary'.

[97] Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, pp. xxii-xxiii suggests the Second Series homilies were intended for unlearned priests to read.

translation for the purpose, implying that he imagined Bible translations as being for preachers.[98] Written texts such as this helped 'to create a stable theological language in English in which sound doctrine ... could be purveyed accurately and without deviation.'[99] Of course this is also analogous to Ælfric's use of the so-called Winchester Vocabulary.

To summarize: in the eighth-century in Northumbria, and the ninth century in Wessex and the Carolingian world, writers in the vernacular borrowed the by-then familiar Gregorian argument that images were useful for the laity as a justificatory frame for writing in Old English and Old High German, presenting them as being written for those who were not literate in Latin, especially the laity. This became a commonplace in later medieval literature.

At this point, I should make some clarifcations. I am not arguing that some Old English texts were intended for lay audiences, either for them to read or to hear. I am simply making the case that we should not assume this was the primary audience, and that we cannot use statements about lay audiences as evidence about whom they were meant for. I am also arguing that the Gregorian idea influenced the way in which vernacular writing was presented – not that it played any role in fostering the florescence of vernacular writing itself. And finally I am not suggesting a precise parallel between the situation in the Anglo-Saxon period and the fourteenth century. There were people in late Anglo-Saxon England who were literate only in Old English. The similarity is that in the late fourteenth century, as in the early medeval period, some English texts were being presented as being for the unlearned laity that were actually meant for a learned, Latin-literate audience.

---

[98] Wogan-Browne, Watson, Taylor and Evans, ed., *Idea of the Vernacular*, p. 133 (lines 87-90); Catto, 'Written English', pp. 47-8, 57.

[99] Catto, 'Written English', p. 52. Gretsch, 'Winchester Vocabulary', p. 57 makes a similar point.

Images and the illiterate

Now, it is absolutely clear that pictures cannot be read in the same way that words can and that religious images were rarely designed primarily to instruct the uneducated. As Avril Henry so memorably put it:

> It is not a bit of good staring at a picture of a man carrying two large doors on the outskirts of a city and expecting it to suggest the risen Christ. You are likely to take him for a builders' merchant or a removal man unless you already know that this is always Samson with the gates of Gaza and that, like Christ, he has, as it were, broken gaol.[100]

And yet, the topos persisted. Images were routinely defended as being for the instruction of the illiterate. Indeed, Ælfric himself seems to have believed this.[101] One of the most incongruous examples of a defence of images along these lines is in the twelfth-century St Albans Psalter, created in the second quarter of that century for the recluse Christina of Markgate by Geoffrey de Gorham, abbot of St Albans. This is lavishly illustrated throughout and has towards the beginning a remarkable cycle of forty full-page miniatures.[102] These contain no texts at all and the viewer 'is obliged to make sense of leaps in chronology and a changing cast of characters, and also to consider the relationships among images within the

---

[100] A. Henry, *Biblia Pauperum: A Facsimile and Edition* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), pp. 17-18; this point is also made in Duggan, 'Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?', pp. 241-51 and in relation to Anglo-Saxon art in Gameson, 'Aelfric and the Perception of Script and Picture'pp. 91-6.

[101] See above, p. <>, n. 66.

[102] J. Geddes, *The St Albans Psalter: A Book for Christina of Markyate* (London, 2005), esp. 19-66 and *The St Albans Psalter* website, coordinated by Jane Geddes http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/index.shtml (accessed June 2013).

cycle'.[103] They demand from the viewer 'a certain fluency in identifying the gospel locations', are based on 'creative thinking about the gospels ... weaving the reader between each of the four versions', and contain some iconographical innovations.[104] In other words, in order to be interpretable, these illustrations demand from their viewers substantial textual knowledge and a sophisticated, intellectual engagement with them. As if to defend such lavish use of imagery, the makers of the manuscript included in it the extract from the second of Gregory's letters to Serenus which I quoted above, first in Latin and then in French.[105] Given the complexity of the images in the St Alban Psalter, the letter is, as Alixe Bovey says, 'strangely inapplicable to the manuscript and its intended audience'.[106] In the context of the argument presented in this article, it is interesting that the letter was presented in Anglo-Norman French as well as Latin – and that it follows immediately after the Old French *Vie de saint Alexis* which is one of the oldest surviving texts in French.[107] It has been argued that this

---

[103] A. Bovey, 'Translating the Bible into Images: English Picture Bibles and their Audiences', unpub. lecture delivered at *The Bible in English from the Early Middle Ages to 1611*, a colloquium organized by the Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, University of Kent at Canterbury Cathedral, 12 November 2012.

[104] Geddes, *St Albans Psalter*, p. 19.

[105] Dombibliothek Hildesheim, MS St Godehard 1, p. 68; Geddes, *St Albans Psalter*, fig. 57, pp. 73, 114-15, 124.

[106] A. Bovey, 'Translating the Bible into Images'. For the addition of this letter as an apologia for the images see also M. Camille, 'Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy', *Art History* 8.1 (1985), 26-49, at 26 and Geddes, *St Albans Psalter*, pp. 73, 114-15, 124.

[107] M. Jubb, 'The Old French Life of St Alexis', *The St Albans Psalter* website: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/essays/oldfrenchlife.shtml.

poem was intended to be sung in a liturgical setting.[108] The juxtaposition of the letter – in French as well as Latin – with this vernacular text may indicate an awareness of the applicability of Gregory's remarks to translation into a different form of words as well as into images.[109] Even though pictures and translations such as those in the Saint Albans Psalter were not intended for the illiterate masses, people continued to say that they were because it had become a commonplace justification for the use of Christian imagery and – I contend – for the use of the vernacular too.

I think that the topos that vernacular texts were for the instruction of those who did not know Latin was inspired by the Gregorian idea that images were for the unlettered. Moreover, I think that we should read the statements that vernacular texts were intended for the laity as literally as we should the idea that later medieval illuminated manuscripts were Bibles for the poor.

Implications

We cannot use such statements about audience as evidence for what that intended audience was. It cannot be assumed that the English passages in Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion* were intended for poorly-Latinate lay clerics, or the Old English translation of the Benedictine rule for 'unlearned laymen', or Ælfric's *Lives of the Saints* for the laity, or his version of the beginning of Genesis for the layman Ealdorman Æthelweard – and so on. In each case they *may* have been amongst the intended audience but statements to this effect are insufficient evidence to demonstrate that, and in some cases they are demonstrably misleading, such as

---

[108] R. Bullington, *The Alexis in the Saint Albans Psalter: A Look into the Heart of the Matter*, Garland Studies in Medieval Literature 4 (New York, 1991), 107-27, 205-9; Jubb, 'Old French Life of St Alexis'.

[109] Bullington, *Alexis in the Saint Albans Psalter*, p. 211.

with the *Enchiridion*, and Otfrid's *Evangelienbuch*. Understanding that the presentation of Old English works as being for an unlatinate lay audience was a rhetorical convention has implications for three other commonly-held ideas.[110] I am not saying these are universally held beliefs, but one can find examples of them all in recent scholarly work.

First, the notion that vernacular texts are indicative of lay use is a persistent one despite the challenges to it by Mechthild Gretsch and others.[111] Here, for example, is Barbara Raw talking about illustrated Bibles:

> two late Anglo-Saxon manuscripts (the Junius manuscript of Old English poetry and the Old English Hexateuch) contain extensive sets of narrative pictures. In both cases, the text accompanied by these pictures is in Old English, not Latin, and it seems likely that both manuscripts were intended for use by educated lay men or women. Most Anglo-Saxon illuminated manuscripts, however, are in Latin and, with few exceptions, they are books intended for display in the church, rather than library

---

[110] It may also have implications for similar statements made in other contexts such as the ritual associated with the holy sepulchre in the *Regularis concordia* which is introduced as being 'usum ... imitabilem ad fidem indocti uulgi ac neophytorum corroborandam' ('a practice worthy to be imitated for the strengthening of the faith of unlearned common persons and neophytes'), *Regularis Concordia Anglicae Nationis Monachorum Sanctimonialiumque: The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation*, trans. T. Symons (London, 1953), c. 46 (p. 44). This may not after all be evidence for a desire for lay participation as I myself have previously read it: H. Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 13-14.

[111] See above, pp. <>.

books for private reading; ... their decoration served a different function from that of the vernacular versions of the Old Testament.[112]

Any such neat correlation between lay and vernacular/ ecclesiastical and Latin has long since ceased to be credible.[113] The arguments presented here add to this by showing that the references to a lay audience in vernacular texts are part of an established convention and cannot be used as evidence for who they were actually meant for. The presentation of Old English texts as being for the illiterate laity was often a way of presenting them for use to the ecclesiastical and educated. There is no reason to assume a lay audience for a vernacular Bible – or any other vernacular text – solely on the grounds of its language.

To give another example, the notion that Old English was primarily intended for the laity also lingers on in the curious reluctance to consider that the texts that have traditionally been called charms, which tend to be substantially in Old English, are better classified as prayers, blessings and liturgical *ordines*.[114] This is despite the fact that they are often found in liturgical books, and sometimes refer to their being performed in churches, by priests, making use of liturgical vessels.[115] There are many reasons why 'charms' have been treated in this way but one is that it is widely believed that in the Middle Ages Latin was the only language

---

[112] Raw, 'Pictures: The Books of the Unlearned'p. 105.

[113] Gretsch, 'Winchester Vocabulary', esp. 85-7 and see the references in n. 1.

[114] <Liuzza, Prayers & or charms in Cross & Culture ed Jolly>; Jones, 'Performing Christianity'pp. 441-3; C. Arthur, 'The Power of Words in Anglo-Saxon England ' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis [working title], University of Kent, in progress).

[115] Arthur, 'Power of Words'.

used in the liturgy and therefore English texts are not likely to be liturgical.[116] However, the vernacular was used in certain contexts in the liturgy in England and elsewhere in western Europe throughout the medieval period.[117] My point is simply that the contexts in which the vernacular was deployed are more various than is sometimes thought, and that one cannot make assumptions about the audiences for texts on the basis of language alone. This is the case even if medieval writers appear to do just that.

Second, there is an enduring idea that the use of Old English is indicative of poor latinity. For example, Malcolm Godden has suggested that Ælfric's translation of pastoral letters from Latin into Old English for Archbishop Wulfstan 'reflects not only on the capacities of the clergy but also on those of Wulfstan'.[118] One of the results of realizing that vernacular texts presented as being for a lay readership were sometimes actually intended for an educated, ecclesiastical one is that it means one cannot assume that English was used

---

[116] For example, 'In the lands of the Catholic Church of Rome ..., all rituals were spoken in Latin.' J. Nelson, 'Coronation Rituals and Related Materials', *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover Medieval Europe*, ed. J. T. Rosenthal (Abingdon, 2012), pp. 114-30, at 115.

[117] McC. Gatch, *Preaching and Theology*, esp. pp. 51-9; D. N. Dumville, *Liturgy and the Ecclesiastical History of Late Anglo-Saxon England: Four Studies*, Studies in Anglo-Saxon History 5 (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 127-32; Gittos, 'Liturgy of Parish Churches' pp. 78-82; Grotans, *Reading in Medieval St Gall*, p. 129; Holsinger, 'Liturgy'; Jones, 'Performing Christianity'; B. Holsinger, *The Work of God: Liturgical Culture and Vernacular Writing in Britain, 550-1550* (Chicago, IL, forthcoming). This is the subject of my next book.

[118] Godden, 'Alfredian Project', p. 103. For other examples see Dumville, *Liturgy*, pp. 131-2; Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, p. xxvii.

because people's Latin was so bad that they needed a translation.[119] That may be so but it is not necessarily the case. Surely we can be as certain as we can of anything in the Anglo-Saxon period, that Wulfstan had good enough Latin not to need someone else to translate for him?[120] The claim that Wulfstan asked for a translation of the Pastoral Letters makes more sense as an archiepiscopal authorization of what looks rather like a Carolingian capitulary.[121] It was a convention to present vernacular texts as being needed for use by those who did not understand Latin; statements to that effect are not evidence for why it was actually used.

Third, it is common to find people saying that several Old English writers, notably Ælfric, were reluctant, nervous translators. Although Malcolm Godden has done so much in recent years to demonstrate how dangerous it is to read early medieval prefaces literally even he still sometimes does this, such as when he writes about Alfred's advisers having to justify their use of the vernacular because of their 'embarrassment' about it.[122] He also claims that 'For Ælfric the whole process of writing in the vernacular was full of risks, and his own involvement in it was justified only by the view that the alternatives were worse'.[123]

---

[119] Gretsch, 'Winchester Vocabulary'; Gittos, 'Liturgy of Parish Churches', pp. 80-2; Jones, 'Performing Christianity'esp. pp. 433-4, 438, 445.

[120] See, for example, T. N. Hall, 'Wulfstan's Latin Sermons', *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York: The Proceedings of the Second Alcuin Conference*, ed. M. Townend (Turnhout, 2004), pp. 93-139.

[121] On the likely circumstances of the translation see J. Hill, 'Archbishop Wulfstan: Reformer?', *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York: The Proceedings of the Second Alcuin Conference*, ed. M. Townend (Turnhout, 2004), pp. 309-24, at 313-14.

[122] Godden, 'Alfredian Project', p. 105.

[123] M. R. Godden, 'Ælfric and the Alfredian Precedents', *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. H. Magennis and M. Swan (Leiden, 2009), pp. 139-63, at 142-7 where he explores what he sees

Historians have long struggled to reconcile Ælfric's boldness, his vernacular precocity, with his own professed statements about his reluctance to translate.[124] After all, this was a man who repeatedly resolved to stop translating texts, and persistently broke his own resolutions. For example, Peter Clemoes says Ælfric had 'repeated misgivings' about writing the homilies, Jonathan Wilcox talks about Ælfric's 'uneasiness' with biblical translation, and awareness of the 'danger' of it, Joyce Hill that he had an 'underlying anxiety about the appropriateness of engaging in such translation at all', and Robert Stanton thinks Ælfric had 'serious concerns' about using English which reflect his '[D]iscomfort about written English competing with the higher-status Latin'.[125]

It is obviously the case that translators of sacred texts are likely to be concerned about accuracy and nervous of being accused of errors.[126] It also seems clear that Ælfric was most concerned by unmediated translation rather than excerpts included in sermons where he could

as a contrast between Alfred's wholly positive attitude to translation with Ælfric's apparent reluctance to do it (quote on p. 144).

[124] Nichols, 'Ælfric's Prefaces'; J. Wilcox, 'A Reluctant Translator in Late Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Maccabees', *Proceedings of the Medieval Association of the Midwest* 2 (1993), 1-18; *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, esp. pp. 37-44; Hill, 'Ælfric: His Life and Works', p. 56; Liuzza, 'Who Read the Gospels in Old English?', p. 9 (although he says 'These protests are somewhat disingenuous, one suspects.'); Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, pp. 106-7, 139-40, 145-6, 156-60. For a discussion of Ælfric's work in relation to the 'modesty topos' in epistolatory prefaces see Griffith, 'Ælfric's Preface to Genesis', esp. pp. 230-1.

[125] Clemoes, 'Chronology of Ælfric's Works', p. 245; *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 65; J. Hill, 'Translating the Tradition: Manuscripts, Models and Methodologies in the Composition of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*', *Textual and Material Culture in Anglo-Saxon England: Thomas Northcote Toller and the Toller Memorial Lectures*, ed. D. Scragg (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 241-59, at 258; Stanton, 'Rhetoric and Translation', p. 141.

[126] Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, pp. 102-3, 105-7.

explain how he thought the passages should be understood.[127] Nevertheless, by reading the prefaces discussed at the beginning of this article in the context of Jerome's Letter it is clear they are best read as arguments of various kinds in *favour* of translation rather than defensive apologies for it. By making allusions to Jerome's arguments, and analogies with Gregory the Great's position on images, Ælfric was deploying a considerable armoury. Kees Dekker and Tristan Major have both shown how Ælfric emphasizes the Pentecost miracle and the idea that the Apostles 'taught the Gospel in all the languages of the world'.[128] Far from being apologetic, I think Major is right to say that Ælfric saw various forms of Bible translation as part of his Christian duty.[129]

Ælfric also had a succession of powerful homegrown precedents in those who had advocated translation of Latin texts into English.[130] As has already been mentioned, Bede encouraged the use of vernacular translations of the Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed. These were to be used by laity and clergy and in what appears to have been liturgical contexts:

> idiotas ... haec ipsa sua lingua discere ac sedulo decantare facito. ... ipse multis saepe
>
> sacerdotibus idiotis haec utraque, et symbolum uidelicet et dominicam orationem, in

---

[127] Wilcox, 'Reluctant Translator'.

[128] K. Dekker, ' Pentecost and Linguistic Self-Consciousness in Ase', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104.3 (2005), 345-72; T. G. Major, 'Literary Developments of the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel in Anglo-Saxon England'unpub. D.Phil. thesis, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, 2010), 225-6 (for the quote).

[129] Major, 'Rebuilding the Tower of Babel', pp. 58-9. For the Pentecost miracle as sanctioning Biblical translation see A. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. pp. 194-5: 'Christianity never had a sacred language' and it had 'the use of the world's vernaculars inscribed in its origins'.

[130] For a brief summary see Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, pp. 103-5.

linguam Anglorum translatam optuli. Nam sanctus antistes Ambrosius hoc de fide

loquens ammonet, ut uerba symboli matutinis semper horis fideles quique

decantent[131]

A congregation harmoniously singing the Creed together in both Latin and Old English

would have embodied Bede's beliefs about ecclesiastical unity amidst linguistic diversity. For

Bede, Latin was not sacred: all languages were a gift from the Holy Spirit.[132] He expressed

this idea in his story about Cædmon's divinely inspired translation of substantial parts of the

Bible into Old English verse.[133] In explaining why he does not include a literal translation of

Cædmon's first song, Bede pays it the highest complement; echoing Jerome he says he can

give only 'sensus, non autem ordo ipse uerborum'.[134] In other words he speaks of Cædmon's

English as Jerome had spoken of Latin. Bede's interest in English is also clear in Cuthbert's

'Epistola de obitu Bedæ' which mentions that on his death bed Bede was translating the

beginning of John's gospel into English and reciting English verse along with Latin psalms

---

[131] 'the ignorant ... [should] learn these things in their own tongue and regularly chant them; ... I myself have often set out both of these, that is, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, translated into the English tongue, for many ignorant priests. For the holy bishop Ambrose, speaking about the faith, insists that every one of the faithful should always chant the words of the Creed at matins ...': Bede, 'Letter to Bishop Ecgbert', *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow, Ed. And Trans. Grocock and Wood* , c. 5 (pp. 130-3).

[132] L. T. Martin, 'Bede as a Linguistic Scholar', *American Benedictine Review* 35.2 (1984), 204-17, at 217; Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, pp. 68-70; Major, 'Literary Developments of the Table of Nations', 175-87.

[133] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), iv. 24 (pp. 414-21); B. Holsinger, 'The Parable of Caedmon's *Hymn*: Liturgical Invention and Literary Tradition', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106 (2007), 149-75.

[134] 'the sense, but not the order of the words', *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Ed. Colgrave & Mynors*, iv. 24 (pp. 416-17).

and antiphons.[135] Had that translation survived – or some of Aldhelm's (c. 640-709/10) Old English poetry – traditional views about the relative status of Latin and Old English in the pre-Alfredian period would be rather different.[136]

The preface to the vernacular version of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* is also an argument in favour of translation as powerful and confident as Jerome's. Indeed, to point out, as it does, that the books of the Bible themselves were not originally written in Latin, is to deploy another of the arguments that Jerome makes in his letter to Pammachius.[137] I struggle to see how anyone can think that 'Alfred' or his advisors were embarrassed about their translation project.

Finally, Ælfric's own teacher Æthelwold could not have been clearer – or less apologetic – in saying in the introduction to his translation of the Benedictine Rule, 'Ic þ[onne] geþeode to micclan gesceade telede. Wel mæg dug[an hit naht] mid hwylcan gereorde mon sy gestryned □ to þan soþan geleafan gewæmed, butan þæt an sy þæt he Gode gegange.'[138] (Interestingly, this statement echoes one made by Otfrid in the epistolatory preface to the *Evangelienbuch*.[139])

---

[135] Cuthbert, 'Epistola de obitu Bedae', in Ibid., pp. 580-7, at 580-3.

[136] For Aldhelm's poetry and its likely influence, see Gretsch, 'Winchester Vocabulary', pp. 67-8.

[137] *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care, Ed. Sweet*, p. 5, line 25-p. 7, line 5. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, ed., *Alfred the Great, Trans. Keynes and Lapidge*, pp. 125-6. For Jerome's letter see above, p. <>, n. 38.

[138] 'I therefore consider translation a very sensible thing. It certainly cannot matter by what language a man is acquired and drawn to the true faith, as long only as he comes to God.', *Councils & Synods 1.I, Ed. Whitelock, Brett & Brooke*, pp. 151-2. On Æthelwold's compositions in Old English, interest in the use of the vernacular and the likely influence of this on Ælfric, see Gretsch, *Intellectual Foundations*, esp. 3-5, 426-7; M. Gretsch, 'Ælfric,

Ælfric knew at least some of these precedents. He made use of parts of the preface to the Old English *Pastoral Care* for his own introduction to his vernacular Latin Grammar.[140] He also mentions the Alfredian translations approvingly in the Old English preface to the First Series of Catholic Homilies.[141] It is very likely that Ælfric knew Æthelwold's translation

---

Language and Winchester', *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. H. Magennis and M. Swan, A Companion to Ælfric 18 (Leiden, 2009), pp. 109-37, esp. 125; Hill, 'Ælfric: His Life and Works'p. 49. For Latin not being considered a sacred language see Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, pp. 66-70.

[139] 'Est tamen conveniens, ut qualicumque modo, sive corrupta seu lingua integrae artis, humanum genus auctorem omnium laudent, qui plectrum eis dederat linguae verbum in eis suae laudis sonare; qui non verborum adulationem politorum, sed quaerit in nobis pium cogitationis affectum operumque pio labore congeriem, non labrorum inanem servitiem.' ('It is fitting that the human race should praise the Creator of all things, since he gave them speech in order that they might sing his praises. And they should indeed do this in any way possible, however imperfect their language, for what matters to God is not the smooth flattery of a polished style, nor mere lip service, but the piety of individual thoughts and the effort each has made.') *Otfrids Evangelienbuch, Ed. Erdmann*, p. 7 (lines 117-123). Trans: W. Haug, *Vernacular Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: The German Tradition, 800-1300, in Its European Context* Originally Published as *Literaturtheorie Im Deutschen Mittelalter*, 2nd Ed. 1992 (Cambridge, 1997), p. 33.

[140] Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues', p. 449. Ælfric also explicitly refers to Jerome's translations into Latin: *Ælfric's Lives of Saints, Ed. Skeat*, I, 326-9, lines 106-110.

[141] '☐ me ofhreow ☐ hí ne cuðon ne næfdon ða godspellícan lare on heora gewritum. buton ðam mannum anum ðe ☐ leden cuðon. ☐ buton þam bocum ðe ælfred cyning snoterlice awende of ledene on englisc.' ('I was sorry that they [the English] did not know or possess the Gospel teaching in their writings, apart from those people who knew Latin and apart from the books which King Alfred wisely translated from Latin to English'.) *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Ed. Clemoes*, p. 174. Translation: Godden, 'Ælfric and the Alfredian Precedents', p. 139, n. 1. For other evidence for Ælfric's knowledge of the translation of the Pastoral Care and other texts which he considered to be Alfredian

of the Benedictine Rule and in his mid-Lent sermon he repeated Æthelwold's sentiment: 'Se man mot hine gebiddan swa swa he mæg and cann. forðan þe se ælmihtiga god cann ælc gereord tocnawan.'[142] Given these examples, together with the rhetorical conventions I have outlined, and the testimony of Ælfric's persistence in a variety of forms of Bible translation, surely it would be rather surprising if Ælfric really did think the things that he claimed to do?[143] He clearly was worried that people should interpret the Bible correctly, and more nervous about unmediated Bible translations than passages contained within commentaries, but nonetheless I think he and other Anglo-Saxon writers had a clear view of their duty to transmit Christ's teachings and the fundamental role translation played in that process.

In short: Old English had a far more prestigious status, and was deployed for a wider range of contexts and audiences than has often been thought the case. This is despite the association that some of these writers themselves made between Old English and the

---

translations see M. Godden, 'Aelfric and the Vernacular Prose Tradition', *The Old English Homily & Its Backgrounds*, ed. P. E. Szarmach and B. F. Huppé (Albany, NY, 1978), pp. 99-117, at 102-8, and the references cited in N. G. Discenza, '"Wise Wealhstodas": The Prologue to Sirach as a Model for Alfred's Preface to the *Pastoral Care*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 97 (1998), 488-99, at 488, n. 1, and Godden, 'Ælfric and the Alfredian Precedents', pp. 139-42. Because Æthelweard's *Chronicon* also praises the Alfredian translations, Gretsch, 'Ælfric, Language and Winchester', p. 134 wonders whether Æthelweard, Ælfric's patron, 'perceived Ælfric's works as a continuation of the Alfredian programme' (though of course the statement about Æthelweard's authorship need not be read literally).

[142] 'A man must pray even as he may and can, because Almighty God can understand all speech': *Ælfric's Lives of Saints, Ed. Skeat*, vol. I, pt 1, pp. 288-9 (lines 64-5).

[143] Note also the argument that Ælfric not only *read* Old English biblically inspired literature but was also influenced by it in Swain, 'Letter to Sigeweard', esp. 151-62.

unlatinate. We ought, I think, to be open-minded about the intended audiences of all Old English texts.

Reasons for using this convention

Why, then, did these writers present their work in this way? There is no single, simple explanation for this, just as there isn't for the deployment of Gregory's letters in the context of sanctioning images. I suspect these conventions were used for a range of reasons. One of these was as protection against the kind of quibbling – or charge of heresy – to which any translator of, or commentator on, a sacred text lays himself open. To say that something was done under duress for a specific person, or to address it only to a named person, authorizes it, shares out responsibility for it, and is also very like Jerome's defence that it was done in private not for wider dissemination. Another reason was that making use of these conventions further served to authorize the endeavour by appeal to earlier precedents. I also wonder if it is a development of the long-established modesty topos: that this little work may be of some use to those of limited intellectual nous.[144]

Finally, there was another, more positive reason for doing it. Many early medieval texts were placed by their writers, both on the continent and in the English kingdoms, in the context of an apostolic and patristic tradition of teaching. This emphasized the transmission of texts and the vital role that translation of various kinds played in this process.[145] Alcuin's preface to the pseudo-Augustinian *Categoriae decem*, which was addressed to Charlemagne, is an early example:

---

[144] On the modesty topos see Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces: Studies in Literary Conventions*, pp. 113-49, 159.

[145] Major, 'Rebuilding the Tower of Babel'; Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues'.

Hunc Augustino placuit transferre magistro

De veterum gazis Grecorum clave latino.

Quem tibi, rex, magnus sophiae sectator, amator,

Munera qui tali gaudes, modo mitto legendum.[146]

Otfrid associated his later ninth-century *Evangelienbuch* with the Latin writings of Juvencus, Arator and Prudentius.[147] Notker Labeo placed his work in the context of that of Cicero, Aristotle and Augustine.[148] The English *Pastoral Care* is presented as being one stage in a long process of transmission involving Gregory, Augustine, Alfred, and the West Saxon bishops who will be responsible for its further dissemination.[149] The long translated passages from Exodus 20-3 and Acts 15:23-9 at the beginning of Alfred's lawcode were doing something similar – they located West Saxon law in the context of the Mosaic tradition, and

---

[146] 'It pleased Augustine the teacher to transmit this book from the treasure-houses of the ancient Greeks using his Latin key. And now I send it to you, O king, great pursuer of wisdom, and lover, you who rejoice in such gifts, for you to read.' *Alcuini Carmina*, ed. E. Dümmler, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini 1 (Berlin, 1881), Carmen 73, lines 7-10 (p. 295). Translated and discussed in Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues', pp. 463-4 where he suggests it may be a model for the verse preface to the English *Pastoral Care*.

[147] *Otfrids Evangelienbuch, Ed. Erdmann*, p. 4 (lines 5-21); the prefaces are translated in F. P. Magoun, 'Otfrid's Ad Liutbertum', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 58.4 (1943), 869-90, and discussed in the context of Alfredian literature in Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues', pp. 456-7.

[148] 'Notkers Brief', *Notker Der Deutsche: Die Kleineren Schriften, Ed. King & Tax*, pp. 348-9; West, 'Late Old High German Prose'p. 228.

[149] Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues', pp. 461-4.

presented Alfred and his court as successors to all those who have taught – and translated – God's law.[150] Ælfric, in the *Libellus de ueteri testamento et nouo* stresses linguistic diversity by explaining that Matthew's gospel was written in Hebrew (so he thought), Luke's and John's in Greek, and that Jerome translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin.[151] At the end of his homily on the Passion of SS Simon and Jude, he says that: 'Þas race awrát se biscop Abdías. se ðe þam apostolum folgode fram Iudea lande; He awrat hí on ebreiscum gereorde. and his leorningcniht eutropus hí awende eft on greciscum gereorde. and africanus hí awrát eft on tyn bocum. ac ús genihtsumað on urum gereorde þas scortan race to getrymminge urum geleafan.'[152] Ælfric saw himself as participating in this apostolic and patristic tradition by presenting Christian knowledge and biblical texts *in* English *for* the English. As Tristan Major says 'the translator fulfils the task of the disciple by proclaiming

---

[150] *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, ed. F. Liebermann, 3 vols (Halle, 1903-16), I, 26-46. For a translation see B. Griffiths, *An Introduction to Early English Law* (Swaffham, Norfolk, 1995), pp. 44-56. For discussion see P. Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century Volume I: Legislation and Its Limits* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 416-29, esp. 421-3, 426-7. E. Treharne, 'The Authority of English, 900-1150', *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. C. A. Lees (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 554-78, at 555-7 makes a comparable reading of the association made by Aldred, the tenth-century glossator of the Lindisfarne Gospels, with St John.

[151] *Old English Heptateuch, Ed. Marsden*, pp. 219, 223. Translation: Magennis, 'Ælfric of Eynsham's *Letter to Sigeweard*', pp. 225-6, 229. On his mistaken ideas about the language of Matthew's gospel see Major, 'Rebuilding the Tower of Babel', pp. 52-3.

[152] 'The bishop Abdias, who followed the apostles from the land of Judea, wrote this narrative. He wrote it in the Hebrew language and his disciple Eutropus afterwards translated it into the Greek language, and Africanus wrote it afterwards in ten books, but this short narrative is sufficient for us in our language for supporting our faith.' *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series: Text, Ed. Godden*, p. 287, lines 275-80. Translated and discussed in Major, 'Rebuilding the Tower of Babel', pp. 56-7.

the gospel to a new nation in that nation's language'.[153] Byrhtferth seems to be doing something very similar when he introduces his computus: 'Incipit compotus Latinorum ac Grecorum Hebreorumque et Egiptiorum, necnon et Anglorum.'[154] He says this first in Latin and then repeats it in Old English. Rebecca Stephenson asks why Byrhtferth should have used Latin at all when English was clearly the language he used in the monastic school at Ramsey. She interprets Byrhtferth as being apologetic about it, as needing the Latin in order to permit himself to write in English.[155] I wonder, though, if this is better thought of as another example of emphasizing transmission in a very unapologetic way – that the English are now heirs to this knowledge about time, and Byrthtferth's computus can take its place in a long chain of handed-down wisdom. Presenting these texts as being in the language of the people to help them know about God was to claim to be fulfilling the apostolic mission – even if, in practice, only a very restricted group of these people -- who often will have known some Latin as well – could actually have had access to the knowledge presented in them. This suggests that the writers and commissioners of these works had great confidence in what they were doing.

It is hard to know how much, if any, resistance there was to the use of the vernacular and therefore the extent to which these stock conventions simply served to place these works within an established tradition, or were being deployed in ongoing arguments about whether

---

[153] Major, 'Rebuilding the Tower of Babel', p. 55.

[154] 'Here begins the computus of the Romans and the Greeks and the Hebrews and Egyptians, as well as of the English.' *Byrhtferth's Enchiridion, Ed. Baker & Lapidge*, p. 2 discussed in Stephenson, 'Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*'pp. 127-30, 141-2.

[155] Stephenson, 'Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*'pp. 141-3.

or not it was appropriate to use the language of the laity in these genres of writing.[156] I think the evidence could support very different interpretations: either that these language choices were uncontroversial given the available precedents, or that the appeal to such potent precursors indicates that it was necessary to make such arguments. What I think the evidence does not support, as I have tried to show in this paper, is that men such as Ælfric were reluctant to use English for genres of texts that had traditionally been in Latin.

Conclusions

I am not trying to deny that Latin was used as a scholarly and ecclesiastical language in late Anglo-Saxon England, that Old English texts were sometimes written for lay audiences, and that writers often used the vernacular because peoples' Latin wasn't up to much.[157] Ralph Hanna has talked about the 'varying adequacies' of languages, which I think is a helpful way

---

[156] Roy Liuzza suggests there may have been such disagreement, that Ælfric's 'protests are ... a public acknowledgement of the air of impropriety or scandal surrounding his task': Liuzza, 'Who Read the Gospels in Old English?'p. 9. Swan, 'Identity and Ideology in Ælfric's Prefaces', p. 265 and n. 32 considers the interesting fact that the Letters to Sigefyrth, Wulfgeat and Sigeweard do not contain justifications for translation. She suggests this may be because of differing attitudes towards translation by those with authority within 'Winchester reformed circles' and men like these who did not. One problem with trying to explain these differences is knowing so little about the chronology of Ælfric's works. The ostensibly defensive tone of the introductory parts of Otfrid's later-ninth-century Evangelienbuch has been interpreted as relating to controversy surrounding the translations associated with the missions to the Slavs: McKenzie, *Otfrid Von Weissenburg*, pp. 12-13; Archibald, 'Otfrid of Weissenburg'p. 148.

[157] Jayatilaka, 'Old English Benedictine Rule', p. 186 for evidence of the poor latinity of the users of manuscripts of the Old English benedictine rule.

of thinking about language choice in the early Middle Ages.[158] People *were* worried about the state of latinity of the clergy, Benedictine monks *did* prize their schoolroom education, the mass *was* still sung in Latin. But written Old English was being written with great confidence by the educated elite. Although it was a convention to do this under the cover of addressing the lay and ill-educated, we should not be taken in by this. Ælfric and others were not at all uneasy about using English in place of Latin in some contexts, however much they ostensibly claimed to be so. In the context of Jerome's Letter to Pammachius, what is remarkable about Ælfric's preface to the Lives of the Saints is his explicit address to a wider audience beyond his patrons and dedicatees: 'Hunc quoque codicem transtulimus de latinitate ad usitatam Anglicam sermocinationem, studentes aliis ... placuerit huic operi operam dare, siue legendo seu audiendo'.[159] By comparison with Jerome, Ælfric's preface looks especially bold. This fits well with the innovative ambition of his output which has been characterized as being exceptional because Ælfric considered it 'to provide an authoritative body of doctrine' in the vernacular.[160] Even Byrhtferth, that master of florid, difficult hermeneutic Latin was willing to write computus in Old English. It is time that we set aside the idea that Bede and Alfred and Æthelwold and Ælfric and the anonymous translators of the West Saxon Gospels,

---

[158] Unpublished seminar paper, Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, University of Kent, 18 October 2012.

[159] 'We have also translated this book from Latin into the ordinary English language, ... to profit any others whom it pleases to give their attention to this work either by reading or listening, for I do not reckon it to be disagreeable to the faithful.' *Ælfric's Lives of Saints, Ed. Skeat*, vol. I, p. 2, lines 1-4. Translation, *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 131.

[160] *Ælfric's Prefaces, Ed. Wilcox*, p. 1.

prayers, and other liturgical texts, were anything other than as confident in their use of Old

English as Jerome had been in his use of Latin.[161]