

I've been asked to give an appreciation of Ælfric's writings in Old English, as someone who studies and teaches Ælfric's works regularly. I'm delighted to be doing this, because I think Ælfric is perhaps the most important English medieval author whom most people have never heard of – and it's a pity he's not better known, because his influence is such an important thread in the history and development of English literature.

Over the course of his long career, Ælfric was a very prolific author, so I'll briefly try and give you a sense of the scope of his work and its significance. He was so prolific that it's estimated that around 15 per cent of the entire corpus of English literature surviving from the Anglo-Saxon period is Ælfric's work – that's four or five centuries of literature, and 15 per cent of it is by Ælfric alone. That's not because there isn't much other surviving OE literature – it's because Ælfric wrote so much.

Ælfric is best known for his two great cycles of homilies in English (the 'Catholic Homilies', as they're called), as well as another large collection of lives of saints. Between them these collections were intended to provide sermons for every significant feast and commemoration in the church year. It adds up to well over a hundred homilies in total, and what's notable about these collections is just how much varied material they incorporate. They display the full range of Ælfric's talents as an interpreter, translator and communicator. In these sermons, he's not just preaching about a topic or a feast-day; he's also translating parts of the Bible into English (whatever the reading for the day might be, he starts by translating it), and then explaining these passages, usually with reference to other kinds of source material as well – whether that's other commentators, the history of the church calendar and the liturgy, or any other kind of theological and historical context which will help his listeners understand the point of the biblical text he's explaining. He draws freely on all these different sources, adapting them out of Latin into English. To communicate this material, he developed a beautifully lucid and clear prose style – you wouldn't think, perhaps, that sermons could be very readable, but Ælfric's are a joy to read, because he writes with such clarity and directness. He's never unnecessarily obscure, and he never chooses a difficult word where a straightforward one will do. As of course sermons were meant to be read aloud, there's a real attention to the aural quality of the language, to make the text pleasant to listen to.

His Catholic Homilies were a very ambitious project, not previously equalled by any author in the English language, and not to be equalled after him in English for centuries to come. But that was only one part of Ælfric's body of work. He also wrote a translation of parts of the Old Testament, a real landmark in English translations of the Bible. He also wrote letters of pastoral guidance and explanation, as well as works for use in the monastic classroom, on the kind of topics young monks needed to learn, including a textbook in English on Latin grammar and one on science. His work explaining Latin grammar is said to

be the first textbook ever written in English and the first grammar of Latin written in any vernacular language, and it shows his interest in language and how it works (that's why he's sometimes called 'Ælfric Grammaticus'). His little work on medieval science is a fascinating insight into medieval thinking about questions like the calculation of time, the nature of the sun, moon, and stars, or the operation of the winds and the weather.

The one thing that almost all Ælfric's writing has in common is that it's educational or pastoral in its aims; he was a teacher in everything he did, constantly thinking about the question of how best to explain complex and challenging ideas to his audiences in their own language. It was that which made his work incredibly popular and very influential, not just in his own time but over many centuries. Many of his texts survive in multiple manuscript copies, and that's an indication of how widely they were read; his first series of Catholic Homilies, for instance, survives in 34 manuscripts or fragments and there were probably more that have been lost. By contrast most Old English texts, and certainly poems like *Beowulf*, survive in only a single copy. That suggests how popular and how influential Ælfric's writings were; people wanted to copy them because they found them valuable and useful. That endured even after the Norman Conquest, when Anglo-Saxon literature and the English language changed rapidly and many Old English texts stopped being copied and read – but Ælfric's didn't. His writing was still useful for many people engaged in preaching, teaching and pastoral work, so it continued to be copied, adapted and reused well into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In the later Middle Ages he did stop being read for a while, because his language was now too unfamiliar, but at the time of the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century Ælfric's works were rediscovered as part of the beginnings of modern scholarly study of Anglo-Saxon history and literature. In this period, Ælfric's works were some of the first Old English works to be printed and were highly prized as evidence for the practices of the early English church, such as the role of the vernacular in preaching and biblical translation, obviously an important issue at the time of the Reformation. Since then, Ælfric's works have never stopped being studied as a significant part of the history of writing in English.

I'll close by telling you a bit about one of his most beloved works, probably my favourite: his Colloquy (Dialogue). It's a short text which many people encounter very early on in their study of Old English. This is a lovely example of Ælfric's skill as a teacher: it's a lively dialogue in which schoolboy monks, to practise their Latin, roleplay being workers in different trades – ploughmen, shepherds, hunters, fishermen, bakers, and so on. Their teacher questions them each about their jobs, and they have to describe what they do. Mostly they complain about how hard their jobs are; the ploughman, for instance, says his life is tough because he has to go out at dawn with the oxen, and it's very cold in the winter, and even when it's cold he has to go out because he's afraid of his lord. Then the shepherd complains

because he has to get up so early in the morning, and has to protect his sheep from wolves. And so on.

This is a wonderful text partly because it teaches us a lot about Anglo-Saxon work and daily life, the kind of thing we don't often get elsewhere in Old English literature. That might have been part of the point for the students – to teach them about all the different trades and how they function in society. You can imagine the students having fun acting it out, and the different roles have their own personalities (some are very talkative, some are more taciturn). The teacher teases the students as he questions them, and they're quite cheeky in their responses to him. It's a very playful and friendly relationship being imagined between students and teacher.

As well as teaching Latin grammar, it teaches another important lesson. After each character has described their work, they argue about whose trade is most valuable to society. But the lesson they learn at the end is that all are valuable, because all are dependent on each other: the baker can't bake unless the ploughman grows the crops, the ploughman can't plough without tools made by the blacksmith, and so on with every trade; society needs all of them, and they need each other. What the boys are learning is how society is interconnected, and we should value all kinds of work and labour.

In this dialogue, we see Ælfric's attitude to his own work, too – his life's work, which was teaching, both in the classroom and through his writings. If this playful conversation was how he imagined the dynamic between teachers and pupils, if that was how he ran his classroom, it suggests he was the kind of teacher that many of us who are teachers would aspire to be – someone who creates an environment in which students can learn through exploration, imagination, and delight in the material.

The dialogue was written in Latin, but one manuscript has an English translation, and that means that 1000 years later it's still very often used as a tool for learning Old English. I teach it to my students their very first week learning Old English, in their first week of university, and I like to think Ælfric would have been pleased by that; he was a very practical person and he cared so deeply about teaching, about communicating what he believed to be true and important. I think more than anything else he would have been glad to know his work was still useful to students and teachers today. And I'm sure he would have been very glad to know that he's remembered here in Eynsham, too.

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