

SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ MEMORIAL LECTURE

The Alfredian Project and its Aftermath: Rethinking the Literary History of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries

MALCOLM GODDEN

University of Oxford

SOME TIME IN THE 890s King Alfred sent a letter to his bishops apparently announcing two major new government initiatives: a programme of mass education, to deliver near-universal literacy in English; and a matching programme of translation and book production, to make all the key Latin texts available to everyone in English versions.¹ To launch the programme he attached his own translation of one of those essential texts, Gregory the Great's guide for bishops, the *Pastoral Care*.

The letter was to become one of the best-known of all Anglo-Saxon texts. A century later we find Ælfric echoing it in the preface to his *Grammar*, and referring approvingly to King Alfred's translations, and Archbishop Wulfstan annotating the copy which the king had sent to the earlier bishop of Worcester.² Another century or so on we have William of Malmesbury citing the letter and summarising its contents, and adding

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¹ *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. Henry Sweet, Early English Text Society, Original Series 45, 50 (London, 1871–2; repr. 1988), pp. 3–9.

² *Aelfrics Grammatik und Glossar*, ed. Julius Zupitza (Berlin, 1880), p. 3; *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: the First Series, Text*, ed. P. Clemoes, Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series, 17 (Oxford, 1997), p. 174. For the annotations in Wulfstan's hand on the copy of the *Pastoral Care* in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 20 see Richard Dance, 'Sound, fury and signifiers; or Wulfstan's language', in *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York: the Proceedings of the Second Alcuin Conference*, ed. Matthew Townend (Turnhout, 2004), pp. 29–61, esp. 37–43.

a detailed list of the king's translations, and in the sixteenth century we find John Joscelyn, secretary to the archbishop of Canterbury, transcribing and collating different copies of the letter.³ When Henry Sweet included it in his *Anglo-Saxon Reader* in 1876 he ensured that it would be read for the next hundred years by many thousands of students and many scores if not hundreds of teachers.⁴ It is in many ways a founding document for the modern narrative of Anglo-Saxon cultural history, at both scholarly and popular levels, leading to stories of educational reform in Latin and English, a renaissance in the history of the book, the founding of English prose, the creation of English national identity and of course the literary and intellectual achievements of King Alfred himself. Yet there is still much about the letter which is puzzling and arguably misleading, and I want to take up some of the issues that it raises and then focus on two of the major Anglo-Saxon works which have traditionally been understood as part of the Alfredian project, the versions of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Augustine's *Soliloquies*. Much of what is said here has been said by others before in various places and contexts, but I hope my justification will be that by pulling all these points together we may reach some useful new conclusions.

Perhaps the key question is, is the document in question really a letter announcing government proposals, with a book attached to give preliminary effect to them, or is it rather an epistolary preface introducing the Old English *Pastoral Care*? It matters hugely, because prefaces are literary creations in this period, with a long history of using their own conventions and tropes and not always a close regard for fact, whereas government letters on policy are documents—writs as they were called in this period.⁵ For the first fourteen editions of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, from 1876 down to 1962, the text was always headed 'from King Alfred's Preface . . .'. But then in the fifteenth edition, in 1967, Dorothy Whitelock dropped the word 'preface' and wrote an introductory note

³ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols., Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1998–9), ii. 123 (I. 192–4); Timothy Graham, 'The Opening of King Alfred's Preface to the Old English Pastoral Care: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 20', *Old English Newsletter* 38.1 (Fall, 2004), pp. 43–50.

⁴ Henry Sweet, *An Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse* (Oxford, 1876).

⁵ On the rhetoric of prefaces in Anglo-Saxon England, see e.g. Mark Griffith, 'Ælfric's Preface to Genesis: genre, rhetoric and the origins of the *Ars dictaminis*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 29 (2000), 215–34. On the element of rhetoric rather than literal meaning in the Alfredian prefaces, see Alfred Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995), p. 563.

instead, beginning ‘This is a *letter* by King Alfred, prefixed to his version of the *Cura Pastoralis* of Gregory’;⁶ and she underlined the point with a note drawing parallels between the style of the ‘letter’ and that of a contemporary royal writ.⁷ As will become clear, I prefer to see this and similar writings as prefaces, literary texts with many functions of which contributing to the historical record was perhaps rather low on the list.

The Old English *Dialogues*

Despite the fanfare surrounding the publication of the *Pastoral Care*, and the king’s lengthy justification for translation and the use of English, and his emphasis on initiating something that had never been done before, this was not in fact Alfred’s first engagement with translation and vernacular book-production and publication. Just a few years earlier he had issued a translation of another of Gregory the Great’s works, the *Dialogues*, but the stories surrounding that were very different. In the prose preface which introduces this Old English version of the *Dialogues* the king claims that he had commissioned this translation for his own use and edification:

I Alfred, honoured by the gift of Christ with the glory of kingship, have clearly perceived . . . through the testimony of holy books, that for those of us to whom God has granted such heights of worldly distinction there is the greatest need that amid these earthly anxieties we should bend . . . our minds to the divine and spiritual duties. And therefore I . . . asked my loyal friends to write for me, out of God’s books, the following teachings concerning the virtues and miracles of holy people, so that I, strengthened through the exhortation and love amid these earthly tribulations, might from time to time think of heavenly things.⁸

⁶ *Sweet’s Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, revised throughout by Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford, 1967), p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 224. Cf. too Jennifer Morrish, ‘King Alfred’s letter as a source on learning in England in the Ninth Century’, in *Studies in Early English Prose*, ed. P. Szarmach (Albany, 1986), pp. 87–107, at 87: ‘The prose text . . . is not a “preface” . . . it is an independent letter.’ But there is not the slightest evidence that the text was ever circulated independently of the *Pastoral Care*, or ever intended to be, and the epistolary form was extremely common for prefaces.

⁸ *Bischof Warferth von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen*, ed. H. Hecht, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa 5 (Leipzig and Hamburg, 1900–7; repr. 1965), p. 1 [all translations are my own unless specified].

Asser, writing his life of the king in 893, tells a similar story, though with a different theory about the translator, and implies that it was done soon after 885:

King Alfred used to complain and sigh continually because God had created him ignorant of divine wisdom and the liberal arts. . . . But then God sent some luminaries as a comfort for the royal desires: namely Wærferth, bishop of Worcester, erudite in divine writings, who at the king's command translated the book of Dialogues of Gregory from Latin into English for the first time. . . .⁹

But this cannot be the whole story and may not be true at all. The function of the preface is to introduce the translation to a wider public, and although it is in the voice and name of the king it is in the language and style of the translator and almost certainly written by him.¹⁰ It shows that the work was not just a private venture, if it was that at all, but was put into formal public circulation for the use of others from the outset. That is corroborated by another preface, this time in verse and in the voice of the book itself, which appears in another copy:

The bishop who procured this book, which you now have in your hand . . . , requests that you should pray these holy men whose memories are inscribed in it to help him, and ask Almighty God to forgive the sins which he has committed and grant him rest with Him . . . , and also [to grant rest] to his treasure-giver who gave him [the book's] exemplar, that is Alfred of the English, the best treasure-giver of all the kings that he has ever heard of, or of earthly rulers that he has known of.¹¹

⁹ Asser's *Life of King Alfred, together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904), reissued with an introduction by Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford, 1959), pp. 60–2 (ch. 76).

¹⁰ Malcolm Godden, 'Wærferth and King Alfred: the fate of the Old English *Dialogues*', in *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of her Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Jane Roberts and Janet L. Nelson with Malcolm Godden (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 35–51. Janet Bately's counter-argument that, because the preface includes a word (*gearolice*) that does not appear in the body of the translation, the preface must have been written by a different author whose usage matched the translator's closely in all other respects, seems to me deeply implausible: it assumes an unparalleled and unlikely consistency of language in the work of an author, and puts entirely undue weight on a word which is used only once in the preface and may well be a scribal variant for *geornlice*, which appears frequently in the Old English *Dialogues* in the same contexts; see Bately, 'The Alfredian Canon revisited', in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 107–20, at 116–17.

¹¹ Hecht, *Dialogue*, p. 2. Keynes and Lapidge (*Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 187–8) render the last part rather differently: 'that he may come to rest with Him and likewise with his ring-giver'. This would imply that King Alfred was already dead at the time the preface was composed, but the Old English use of the dative without *mid* would here suggest 'to his ring-giver', suggesting Alfred was still alive, and that is indeed implied by the introductory note in Keynes and Lapidge ('Wulfsgise begs the reader's prayers both for himself and for Alfred').

It is generally accepted that the bishop in question is Wulfsgie, who was bishop of Sherborne in Alfred's time. The preface is then claiming that the bishop received a copy of the Old English *Dialogues* from Alfred and had a copy or more made and circulated to others. It would appear, as indeed the prose preface implies, that copies of the Old English *Dialogues* were being circulated in the king's name.

Both stories about the Old English *Dialogues* could of course be true. It is possible that the king heard of the Latin *Dialogues* from a spiritual advisor and asked for a translation to be made so that he could read it, or have it read to him, for his own spiritual improvement, and then when that was done he or his advisors realised its potentially wider interest and organised its circulation. But prefaces are not the most reliable of early medieval documents, and their functions are often rhetorical or diplomatic rather than documentary. No one really thinks that Chaucer wrote the *Legend of Good Women* because he got up early one morning in May and went out to pick daisies but met the God of Love and his court in the meadows and was asked by Cupid's queen to write something in favour of women to make up for his past abuse of them; or even that Gower wrote the monumental *Confessio Amantis* because he went boating on the Thames one day and happened to meet King Richard who asked him to write something in a lighter vein than his usual work. Prefaces in the early Middle Ages could be just as imaginative, and in tenth-century England it seems to have been routine for vernacular authors to claim that they were writing for the personal use of a king or nobleman, who served both to lend authority to the work and more particularly to justify the use of English, though the actual readership, and probably the intended one, was almost certainly clerical. When Bishop Æthelwold published his translation of the Rule of St Benedict around 970 he claimed that it had been commissioned by King Edgar for his own reading:

With earnest scrutiny the king began to investigate and inquire about the precepts of the holy rule and wished to know the teaching of that same rule. . . . He wished also to know from the rule the wise disposition which is prudently appointed concerning the ordering of unfamiliar matters. Through his desire for wisdom he commanded this rule to be translated from the Latin speech into the English language.¹²

¹² *Councils & Synods, with other Documents Relating to the English Church*, ed. D. Whitelock, M. Brett, and C. N. L. Brooke, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1981), I, no. 33, at pp. 150–1; translation based on this edition.

If this is true, and if Mechthild Gretsch is right in arguing that the translation had actually been done earlier, in the 940s, then Edgar, who was born in 944, was clearly a very precocious infant.¹³ But the story of writing for the king is only a preliminary gesture; Æthelwold goes on immediately to make clear that the translation was being published more widely and to discuss who the translation was really for:

Although keen-witted scholars who know the two-fold wisdom clearly . . . do not need this English version, it is necessary for unlearned seculars who out of fear of hell and love of Christ abandon this wretched life and turn to their Lord and choose the holy service of the rule, lest any such converted secular person should break the precepts of the rule out of ignorance.¹⁴

And he goes on to justify the use of English for such readers—presumably the new adult recruits to the monasteries from the laity or the secular clergy who could not cope with Latin and were too old to learn it.

Similarly, when Ælfric published a collection of saints' lives in English in the 990s, he defended himself from criticism for using English with the claim that they had been done initially at the request of two members of the secular nobility, the ealdorman Æthelweard and his son the thegn Æthelmaer, for their own use.¹⁵ But his collection of them into a volume and provision of prefaces in Latin and English was evidently part of a wider circulation. He does not specify for whom, but as he acknowledges in the prefaces, the saints in question were celebrated by the monks, not by the laity or secular clergy, and the one complete manuscript that survives was owned and used by the monks of Bury St Edmunds.¹⁶ *Perhaps* Anglo-Saxon kings and noblemen (and indeed infant princes) had the remarkably convenient habit of repeatedly commissioning for their own edification and interest translations which then proved coincidentally to be just what was needed for circulation to a larger and more clerical readership, but it does look rather more like a conventional trope of patronage and a justification for the use of the vernacular in translations

¹³ Mechthild Gretsch, *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 25 (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 226–60, esp. 259–60. Professor Gretsch interprets Æthelwold's words as implying the presentation of a copy of an existing translation to the king.

¹⁴ Text from *Councils & Synods*, I, no. 33, at p. 151, but reading their '[un]gecyrred' as 'swa gecyrred' ('such converted'), following the argument of Rohini Jayatilaka, 'The *Regula Sancti Benedicti* in Late Anglo-Saxon England: the Manuscripts and their Readers', D.Phil. thesis (University of Oxford, 1996), pp. 166–7.

¹⁵ *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, Early English Text Society, Original Series, 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881–1900; repr. in 2 vols., 1966), I. 4.

¹⁶ London, British Library, Cotton Julius E. vii.

that were in reality largely intended for the use of monks and other clerics. Some contemporaries at least were well aware that it was a literary trope. At the head of another text by Ælfric addressed to a member of the secular nobility and supposedly written exclusively for him, one contemporary reader added the comment: 'This text or letter was addressed to one person but it can be of use to many.'¹⁷

Another such trope that is common in the period is the claim that vernacular texts were intended for some rawer or younger or less educated readers than the obvious ones. So Æthelwold claims that his version of the Rule was not for established monks but for *woruldmenn*, new adult converts who could not yet be expected to read it in Latin, though the evidence of manuscripts is that the translation was heavily read by monks and nuns right through the rest of the tenth and eleventh centuries and indeed into the twelfth and thirteenth, and his bilingual version, or the English part on its own, seems to have been more common than the Latin rule on its own.¹⁸ Ælfric in the preface to his Latin *Grammar* acknowledges that he is likely to be criticised for writing it in English but insists it was written not for older people but for ignorant small boys (*inscientibus puerulis*).¹⁹ There are many extant manuscripts of the *Grammar* and none shows the characteristic signs of use by ignorant small boys—they show rather the signs of being owned by teachers and scholars, and seem to have supplanted the elementary grammars written in Latin which had been used earlier.²⁰ Again, when Byrhtferth of Ramsey wrote his manual of calculus, rhetoric and number symbolism, in alternating passages of Latin and English like Æthelwold's version of the Rule, he claimed that the English bits were just for the ignorant secular clerics, not the monks.²¹ But Byrhtferth surely did not think that the monks would religiously (!) skip the English passages; surely he knew that his arrangement would enable the less learned of them to read a simplified English version of his manual without having to face the embarrassment of taking the book back to the library and asking the librarian for the English version? The

¹⁷ *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch, Ælfric's Treatise on the Old and New Testament, and his Preface to Genesis*, ed. S. J. Crawford (Early English Text Society, Original Series, 160; London, 1922; repr. with the text of two additional manuscripts transcribed by N. R. Ker, London, 1969), p. 15.

¹⁸ Jayatilaka, 'Regula Sancti Benedicti', and eadem, 'The Old English Benedictine Rule: writing for women and men', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 32 (2003), 147–87.

¹⁹ Zupitza, *Aelfrics Grammatik*, p. 1.

²⁰ Vivien Law, *Grammar and Grammarians in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1997), p. 215.

²¹ *Byrhtferth's Enchiridion*, ed. Peter S. Baker and Michael Lapidge, Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series 15 (Oxford, 1995), esp. p. 120.

trope was to continue through the middle ages and beyond. The author of the first English dictionary, in 1604, claims it was for the use of ‘Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskillfull persons’.²² The use of the vernacular in this period clearly needed a lot of justification, or at least it was felt to, especially in works written for the supposedly educated elite, and claiming to have written the text initially for a king or nobleman or for the less educated were both common strategies.

So, to return to King Alfred and the Old English *Dialogues*, it seems more than possible that, as with the stories of Edgar and Æthelweard, the story of Alfred commissioning the *Dialogues* for his own use is a fiction, a way of both lending his authority to the text and justifying the use of the vernacular, and the real target was always circulation to other readers. Quite who the intended readers were is left tantalisingly unclear and there have been several different guesses, including secular clergy and the sons of the nobility,²³ but the verse preface tells us that one copy was sent to a bishop which suggests the possibility that bishops were a primary readership, as with the *Pastoral Care*. The many accounts of ascetic abbots and virtuous bishops would no doubt have been salutary, as the verse preface suggests.

The Old English *Pastoral Care*

A few years later the exercise was repeated and another work by Gregory the Great, the *Pastoral Care*, was translated into English and published in the king’s name and circulated to the bishops. But now we see on the face of it an extraordinary turnaround. The story with the *Dialogues* was that Bishop Wærferth had translated the text into English so that King Alfred could read it. The story given out with the *Pastoral Care* is that King Alfred translated it into English so that Bishop Wærferth could read it (and the other bishops). The reciprocity is touching but puzzling, and

²² Robert Cawdry, *A Table Alphabeticall* (London, 1604) [in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Arch. A f.141 (2); for a facsimile edition, see *The First English Dictionary, 1604: Robert Cawdrey’s A Table Alphabeticall*, with an introduction by John Simpson (Oxford, Bodleian Library, 2007)].

²³ Kees Dekker, ‘King Alfred’s translation of Gregory’s *Dialogi*: tales for the unlearned?’, in *Rome and the North: The Early Reception of Gregory the Great in Germanic Europe*, ed. Rolf H. Bremmer, Kees Dekker and David Johnson (Paris, 2001), pp. 27–50; David Johnson, ‘Who read Gregory’s *Dialogues* in Old English’, in *The Power of Words: Anglo-Saxon Studies presented to Donald G. Scragg on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Hugh Magennis and Jonathan Wilcox (Morgantown, WV, 2006), pp. 171–204.

needs explanation. Both prefaces to the *Pastoral Care* are remarkably insistent that the king personally translated it in its entirety: ‘I translated it into English’ says the prose preface in the king’s voice; ‘King Alfred translated every single word of me into English’ says the verse preface in the book’s voice.²⁴ According to the official stories then, Alfred had, at a late stage in life, suddenly acquired an impressive grasp of Latin and turned himself, in the space of a few years, from target audience for translation into a scholar capable of producing his own fluent and learned translation, of a quality strikingly superior to that of the Old English *Dialogues*. Again there is a matching story from Asser, who reports that on 11 November 887 the king, with his help, began on one and the same day both to read and interpret texts²⁵—presumably Latin texts. Perhaps he did, but this dual identity, as uneducated layman one day and learned Latinate scholar another, seems to have been something of an early medieval convention with kings and noblemen. Another case was Ælfric’s patron the venerable ealdorman Æthelweard. Up into his old age, in the late 990s, he was still supposedly asking Ælfric for English translations of Latin texts so that he could have them in his own language, but even so he materialises as the putative author of a substantial Latin chronicle, written for his Continental cousin in an excessively learned and esoteric form of Latin, apparently composed back in the 980s.²⁶ Another case of such miraculous erudition may be Charlemagne. According to Einhard Charlemagne could speak Latin quite fluently (though that might well mean Romance) but had great difficulty in writing; but he even so appears as the author of a long and sophisticated Latin treatise against the veneration of images, in opposition to the views of the Eastern Church.²⁷ Earlier still there is Theoderic the Ostrogoth, ruler of Italy for thirty-three years, who according to a contemporary historian could only sign his name with the aid of a golden stencil that he had made for him, but nevertheless figures as the apparent author of a vast number of stylish and learned Latin letters.²⁸ On the Continent, though, it is taken for

²⁴ Sweet, *King Alfred’s Pastoral Care*, pp. 7, 9.

²⁵ Stevenson, *Asser’s Life*, p. 73 (ch. 87–8).

²⁶ Skeat, *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*, I. 4; *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, ed. A. Campbell (London, 1962).

²⁷ *Einhardi Vita Karoli Magni*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum* 25 (Hanover, 1911), ch. 25; see Paul Meyvaert, ‘Medieval Notions of publication: the “Unpublished” *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum* and the Council of Frankfurt (794)’, *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 12 (2002), 78–89, esp. 83 and 88.

²⁸ *Excerpta Valesiana*, ch. 79, ed. and trans. John C. Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, 3 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1939), III. 506–69, at 556–7.

granted that kings used secretaries or ghost-writers for such purposes. It was the learned Visigothic scholar Theodulf of Orleans who wrote Charlemagne's treatise for him, and Cassiodorus who wrote the letters of Theoderic, and indeed subsequently published them as his own work. The general tradition in England has been to resist the notion of ghost-writers and to stick with the story that Alfred and Æthelweard suddenly (and in the latter's case briefly) became accomplished Latin scholars, but it might be more sensible to go with the rest of Europe on this issue and take the claims of personal authorship by kings and nobles as another literary trope. We might recall that Alfred's father King Æthelwulf had a secretary called Felix who wrote his Latin letters. Felix does not figure in any Anglo-Saxon records and is known only because he came from the Continent and had been an acquaintance of Lupus of Ferrières, and therefore figures in the latter's correspondence.²⁹ It would not be surprising if Alfred himself and Æthelweard had Latin secretaries too, who did their Latin writings and translations for them and were too unimportant to merit a mention on the title page.

But a still odder story of transformation is what happened to Bishop Wærferth, who apparently forgot all his Latin in those few years after translating the *Dialogues* and had to be sent an English version of the basic manual on how to be a bishop. The easy explanation is that Asser was wrong about the authorship of the Old English *Dialogues*. But it is worth looking again at the question of the intended readership of the *Pastoral Care*.

The extant copy of the preface in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 20 is clearly addressed to Wærferth, and the verse preface states unambiguously that the English version of the *Pastoral Care* was done for bishops who could not cope with the Latin: the king 'ordered copies to be made so that he could send them to his bishops, because some of them needed it, those who knew very little Latin'.³⁰ This makes very good sense on the face of it, since Gregory wrote the original text for the use of bishops and it was often recommended as episcopal reading. And it seems to tally with the available evidence for the Old English version: all copies of the text that we know of were sent to bishops, all copies of the preface were addressed to bishops, and in it Alfred orders that the book should be sent to every bishopric and should always be kept at the minster unless

²⁹ See *English Historical Documents I, c.500–1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd edn. (London, 1981; repr. 1998), no. 217, pp. 878–9.

³⁰ Sweet, *King Alfred's Pastoral Care*, p. 9.

it is out for copying or on loan or unless the bishop wants to have it with him, presumably to read or consult when travelling. Nor should we be very surprised at the bishops' need for an English translation. Alfred laments the ignorance of Latin among priests in his time and claims it was a recent decline, but it was standard in Anglo-Saxon England: ordinary English priests and clerics generally did not know Latin, beyond the very basics necessary for conducting services which they probably learnt by heart. Bede, writing at a time when knowledge of Latin was at its height in England, urged Egbert, archbishop of York, in 734

... to impress deeply on the memory of all under your rule ... the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer ... all who have studied the Latin language have also learnt these well; but make the ignorant people—that is, those who are acquainted with no language but their own—say them in their own language and repeat them assiduously. This ought to be done not only in the case of laymen ... but also of those clerics or monks who are ignorant of the Latin language. ... I have myself often given to many ignorant priests both of these, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, translated into the English language.³¹

Later, Ælfric reported that there had been a revival of Latin learning in the monasteries under Dunstan and Æthelwold in the tenth century, but said nothing there of the secular clergy (indeed complained elsewhere of clerics who think they know a bit of Latin and so pose as scholars) and wrote much of his vernacular work for them; when he composed some pastoral letters in Latin for Archbishop Wulfstan to deliver to his clerics, Wulfstan promptly sent them back with a request to translate them into English (which reflects not only on the capacities of the clergy but also on those of Wulfstan).³² Wulfstan himself had to instruct his clergy to have the book open in front of them when conducting mass and urge them to use it.³³ Ignorance of Latin among bishops may have been less commonplace than among ordinary clerics but is clearly evident in the ninth century;³⁴ in the absence of monasteries they would mainly have been recruited from the ranks of the secular clergy and there were no doubt always better reasons for appointing bishops than their mere learning.

But the waters have been muddied somewhat by a famous passage in the preface which seems to open up the possibility of a wider audience for

³¹ Whitelock, *English Historical Documents I*, no. 170, p. 801.

³² Whitelock *et al.*, *Councils & Synods*, I, no. 46, at p. 260.

³³ *Wulfstan's Canons of Edgar*, ed. Roger Fowler, Early English Text Society (London, 1972), p. 8.

³⁴ Michael Lapidge, 'Latin learning in Ninth-Century England', in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899* (London, 1996), pp. 409–54, at 434–5 and 438–9.

the work and lies at the heart of the subsequent legend of educational reform and the birth of English prose:

And therefore it seems better to me, if it seems so to you, that we also should translate some books, those that are most necessary for all men to know, into the language that we can all understand, and bring it about . . . that all the children in England . . . should be set to studying until they can read English well. . . . When I remembered how the knowledge of Latin had declined but many people knew how to read English, then I began to translate into English the book which is called *Pastoralis* in Latin. . . .³⁵

As Tom Shippey noted many years ago,³⁶ pronouns are a thorny problem in this text. Who are the ‘you’ whom Alfred addresses here? Not Wærferth, since it is a plural pronoun. Perhaps then all the bishops collectively who will be sent this document. Who then are the ‘we’ who are to do the translating? Not Alfred and Wærferth since that would require the dual pronoun *wit*. Nor Alfred and the bishops collectively (as often assumed) since some or most of them, we are told, know no Latin and are themselves in need of translations. Possibly it is an authorial or royal plural, and means ‘I the king’; the fact that he has just used the singular of himself (‘to me’) would not necessarily rule that out. But most probably it means ‘we the English’, since he has just remarked that the Greeks, Romans and all other Christian nations had translated the Bible and other books into their own language. It might follow that the ‘all men’ for whom the books are said to be necessary are Christians in general, not just the English of Alfred’s time. The passage then means ‘so it seems better to me the king, if it seems so to you bishops, that we English also should translate some books’. (And he is of course addressing them in English so that they can understand.)

The language in this passage points to a programme of vernacular book-production and education for a wide spectrum of society—books most necessary for *all* men to know, teaching *all* children to read, remembering that *many* people knew how to read English. We might then expect

³⁵ Sweet, *King Alfred’s Pastoral Care*, p. 7: ‘Forðy me ðyncð betre, gif iow swæ ðyncð, ðæt we eac sumæ bec, ða ðe niedbēðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne, ðæt we ða on ðæt geðiode wenden ðe we ealle gecnawan mægen, & gedon . . . ðæt eall sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angelcynne . . . sien to liornunga oðfæste . . . oð ðone first ðe hie wel cunnen Englisc gewrit arædan . . . Ða ic ða gemunde hu sio lar Lædengediodes ær ðissum afeallen wæs giond Angelcynn, & ðeah monige cuðon Englisc gewrit arædan, ða ongan ic . . . ða boc wendan on Englisc ðe is genemned on Læden *Pastoralis*.’

³⁶ T. A. Shippey, ‘Wealth and wisdom in King Alfred’s Preface to the Old English *Pastoral Care*’, *English Historical Review*, 94 (1979), 346–55.

the programme to begin with such obviously central texts as the Bible, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, following the precedent of Bede in English and of the other nations that the preface has just cited. But instead it turns out to be a narrowly focused handbook for the use of bishops. Not surprisingly many readers have concluded that the king had a wider audience of administrators and governors in mind for this text, linking it to Asser's story of Alfred compelling his reeves and judges to learn to read English and to have English books read to them day and night.³⁷ But a careful reading of the text of the *Pastoral Care* itself suggests that the translator did indeed have bishops in mind, not present or future judges and secular officials. Consider for instance his statement about the appointment of judges in secular lawcourts:

If you have to deal with legal judgements in secular matters, then take those who are least worthy in the household and appoint them as judges so that those who are not so honoured with spiritual gifts may rule and arrange earthly things.³⁸

Addressed to bishops this makes sense. Their tendency to get involved in secular courts and the trying of criminal cases, in clear breach of canon law, was a matter of constant controversy and complaint, and a century later Ælfric sent a strong reprimand to Archbishop Wulfstan about it, as well as telling a cautionary tale in his life of St Edmund about a bishop who tried, sentenced and executed some would-be burglars and later repented of his sin.³⁹ For a bishop it would be good advice to depute the task of presiding over secular courts of law to some minor official in his household, one in lower orders or not in orders at all. But to tell secular officials to delegate secular jurisdiction to the lowest ranking member of their staff would surely be extraordinary?

It seems clear then that the translation was indeed intended for bishops as the primary readers, as all the other evidence suggests apart from that one passage in the prose preface about universal education and wide publication. Why then did Alfred claim that it was part of a much grander project? Possibly this passage articulates genuine high ideals for the future that were called to mind by the publication of a vernacular work which itself had much more limited aims. Or, more cynically, it reflects an embarrassment about the need for translations for English

³⁷ Stevenson, *Asser's Life*, pp. 92–5 (ch. 106).

³⁸ Sweet, *King Alfred's Pastoral Care*, p. 131.

³⁹ See Whitelock *et al.*, *Councils & Synods*, I, no. 45, at p. 253; Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, II, 330.

bishops and a willingness to muddy the issue by floating arguments for the use of the vernacular in general and implying that the translation of the *Pastoral Care* was part of a general programme for the laity—rather as Æthelwold suggested later that his translation of the Rule was only for new adult converts and befogged the issue with similar general arguments for the vernacular, and as Ælfric claimed his *Grammar* was not for older monks but for small boys and a mere stepping-stone towards advanced Latinity, and as Byrhtferth claimed that the English bits of his manual were for ignorant rural clerics, all insisting almost too much that educated monks did not of course need the translation.

But if it seems clear that the translation was indeed done primarily for bishops who knew no Latin, as the verse preface affirms and as probably most scholars have always believed, what should we make of the closing remark in the prose preface:

I command in God's name that no one remove . . . the book from the minster; it is unknown how long there may be such learned bishops as there are now, thank God, nearly everywhere.⁴⁰

Taken literally, this presents a very odd situation. There were at most only ten bishoprics in Alfred's territories⁴¹ and if most of their current occupants were learned then the some who did not know Latin mentioned in the verse preface were a mere two or three. It seems rather unlikely that so many resources were devoted to the edification of these few, and to the curiously pessimistic notion that future bishops and archbishops might be much less educated than the present collection. The conclusion looks more like a piece of diplomatic tact, allowing each recipient to feel that aspersions were not necessarily being cast on him, and preventing any outsiders from crowing over this evidence of low English standards. We should probably accept the verse preface's assurance that the copies were being sent to bishops who had little or no Latin, and conclude that Wærferth was indeed in need of it; certainly on the evidence of the Old English *Dialogues*, if he wrote it, his Latin was very weak.

There is so much muddying of waters in these prefaces that we are getting close to a swamp, of the kind so eloquently described in the verse epilogue to the *Pastoral Care*, a swamp caused, it explains, when scholars give out too much information.⁴² But if we separate out the rhetoric,

⁴⁰ Sweet, *King Alfred's Pastoral Care*, p. 9.

⁴¹ Kenneth Sisam, 'The publication of Alfred's *Pastoral Care*', in his *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 140–7, at 141.

⁴² Sweet, *King Alfred's Pastoral Care*, pp. 467–9.

about the Old English *Dialogues* being for the king's own use and the Old English *Pastoral Care* being part of a programme of mass education and reform, we might then think of the two works as very similar exercises, mainstream religious texts translated with the king's imprimatur and circulated in his name to the bishops, primarily for their own use and the use of their successors. They may be the sum total of what the translation programme achieved.

The Old English *Boethius*

When we move to the Old English versions of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Augustine's *Soliloquies* we are suddenly in a very different and much more exciting world that is hard to reconcile with the story so far. We are no longer dealing with fairly literal translations of standard pastoral and devotional works, but with bold rewritings of texts known at the time to be difficult, dangerous and distinctly heterodox, texts from well outside the mainstream of Christian traditions, and it is hard to locate them in the familiar cultural narrative. With the Old English *Boethius* there ought really to be no problem. The only surviving copy of the original prose translation⁴³ opens with a preface that firmly asserts King Alfred's authorship:

King Alfred was the translator of this book, and turned it from Latin into English, as it is now done. Sometimes he set it down word for word, sometimes sense for sense, in whatever way he could most clearly and intelligibly explain it, on account of the various and multiple worldly cares which often busied him in mind and body. The troubles which in his time befell the kingdoms which he had received are hard for us to number, and yet when he had learnt this book and turned it from Latin into English prose, he then turned it again into verse, as it is now done.⁴⁴

But there are several reasons to doubt the reliability of this preface: it is written in the voice not of the king but of another unspecified person, looking back on his reign from a distance; it cannot be traced back any earlier than the mid-tenth century, the date of the earlier manuscript;⁴⁵ and as the references to verse indicate, it was not written for this prose

⁴³ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 180.

⁴⁴ *The Old English Boethius: an Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Susan Irvine, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2009), I, B, Preface (p. 239).

⁴⁵ London, British Library, MS Cotton Otho A. vi, containing the prosimetrical version.

version at all but for the prosimetrical version, and *that* seems to have been a subsequent and quite separate initiative.

Boethius wrote his *Consolation of Philosophy* around 525 and the work was then lost to view for some centuries, but from the time of its discovery or rediscovery at the end of the eighth century it had aroused two rather different responses. Alcuin, the first known reader of the *Consolation*, was interested in its arguments, especially its reconciliation of classical philosophy with Christian theology and its justification of liberal arts studies.⁴⁶ But others read it for its poetry. Probably the earliest manuscript witness to the Latin text is an early-ninth-century anthology of Latin poetry containing a selection of metres from the *Consolation*, without the prose;⁴⁷ the earliest treatise on the work is Lupus of Ferrières' short tract on the metrical forms of the metres;⁴⁸ and early references are often to the poetry. The distinction is very clear visually: we can see on the one hand copies of the *Consolation* densely packed with glosses exploring the meanings, on the other copies of the metres alone with no annotation except neums to show how they might be sung.⁴⁹ The same distinction is evident in England. The earliest manuscript evidence here for the *Consolation* is some extracts from the metres on the flyleaves of an Isidore manuscript, scribbled down around 912, perhaps at Canterbury.⁵⁰ This was evidently the work of someone studying the poetry of the *Consolation*. Other later manuscripts show densely packed glosses teasing out the meaning of the text. The Cambridge Songs manuscript of eleventh-century Canterbury shows both traditions:⁵¹ among its remarkable collection of Latin poetry it contains a copy of all the metres from the first three books, annotated only with occasional neums, but it also has a copy of the whole text with heavy glossing.

The Old English versions show the same two distinct traditions. The original translator (or adapter) was interested in the arguments, not the poetry. He turned the whole work into prose, and substantially expanded the argument with new material. Thanks to the remarkable work done on

⁴⁶ Alcuin, *De Vera Philosophia*, Patrologia Latina 101, 849–54.

⁴⁷ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat.13026; for the date see Bernhard Bischoff, *Manuscripts and Libraries in the Age of Charlemagne*, trans. Michael Gorman (Cambridge, 1994), p. 99, n. 35.

⁴⁸ Printed in *Anticij Manlij Severini Boetii Philosophiae consolationis libri quinque*, ed. R. Peiper (Leipzig, 1871), pp. xxiv–xxix.

⁴⁹ Cf. for instance Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 15090 with Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 455.

⁵⁰ London, British Library, MS Cotton Vespasian D.xiv, ff. 170r, 224v.

⁵¹ Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.5.35.

the Latin glosses by Rohini Jayatilaka it is now possible to show that a significant part of this expansion reflects the author's reading of manuscript commentary, and especially of comments and glosses that are preserved in tenth-century English manuscripts of the *Consolation*.⁵² But he also drew on his own impressive education in the classics and natural sciences, and his own imagination and intellect. As a result the whole runs to twice the length of the original. But he was generally not very interested in the verse: he omitted six of the thirty-nine metres altogether and drastically abbreviated others to include just the part that fitted neatly into the argument. It was this prose version that Ælfric was to use a century later. But it would seem that the prose version came into the hands of a reviser who was much more interested in the poetry of the *Consolation*, and decided to adapt the prose version to match the prosimetrical form of the original by turning the relevant parts of the prose into English verse (or, more probably, getting a skilled verse-writer to do so on his behalf). He did not bother to return to the Latin original to supply the missing metres or add anything significant to the arguments, and he, or his metrist, did not always understand the prose original correctly, but otherwise he did a competent revision. Finally, it seems, he added two prefaces claiming Alfredian authorship for the whole thing, prose and verse. It was this version that was known and used by Nicholas Trevet in the late thirteenth century.⁵³ There are some hints in the language that this may have been Kentish work, perhaps reflecting the interest in the *Consolation* evident at Canterbury. And we should perhaps see the attribution to Alfred as reflecting the influence of the *Pastoral Care* preface and as part of a growing tendency to claim the king's authorship and authority for vernacular writings, evident a few decades later in Ælfric's claim that the king wrote the translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and Wulfstan's fraudulent attribution to Alfred of a lawcode that he actually wrote himself, and later in William of Malmesbury's claim that Alfred translated Orosius.⁵⁴

⁵² The work was done for the Alfredian Boethius project 2002–7 and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council; the evidence is set out in detail in Godden and Irvine, *Old English Boethius*.

⁵³ B. Donaghey, 'Nicholas Trevet's use of King Alfred's translation of Boethius, and the dating of his commentary', in *The Medieval Boethius: Studies in the Vernacular Translations of De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 1–31.

⁵⁴ See M. R. Godden, 'Did King Alfred write anything?', *Medium Aevum*, 76.1 (2007), 1–23. Historians especially have pointed to linguistic and stylistic studies in support of their belief that the *Boethius* really was by Alfred (or more precisely, by the translator of the *Pastoral Care*). But

If the original prose translation ever had its own preface it is now lost, supplanted by the prefaces to the prosy-metrical version, and we have no idea what it said about the authorship or indeed readership and purpose, so we have to turn to the work itself. The author of the original prose version was interested not just in the arguments of the *Consolation* but in the whole process of argument. Dialogue was for him not simply a way of making a monologic argument less monotonous, but a way of capturing an imagined debate between different perspectives and world-pictures. The Boethius character responds to Wisdom's arguments with fear, amazement, enthusiasm, puzzlement and plain objection. He complains of Wisdom's repetitions of points already agreed and remarks on the deviousness of his method of proof and the lack of clear direction, while Wisdom acknowledges that the argument involves digression and insists that he is not addressing fools. The element of dramatic debate is fun in itself but also points up for readers the fact that this is challenging material that ought to provoke and puzzle.

Ever since the early nineteenth century, commentators on the Old English *Boethius* have focused on the changes that its apparently illustrious translator made to the original, as indications of the royal agenda or personality or political thought or even his Germanic mindset.⁵⁵ But if we ask how the work presented itself to contemporary Anglo-Saxon readers, less familiar with the Latin original and probably unaware of a connection with Alfred, one answer is perhaps that it appeared to offer an account of classical, pre-Christian thought, on such issues as the true good, the nature of knowledge, providence and fate. The guide and instructor Wisdom is identified as the representative and spokesman of the classical philosophers. The great authority in the Old English work is

as shown in the article just cited, these studies have in fact tended to reveal considerable differences between the two works. How much similarity of usage is sufficient to suggest common authorship has never been subject to proper methodological analysis in these studies, but the general consensus in the case of *later* Old English prose is that lexical similarities are evidence not of common authorship but of a shared educational tradition. (The one study that I am aware of which does address the methodological issues, 'A stylometric analysis of King Alfred's literary works' by Paramjit S. Gill, Tim B. Swartz and Michael Treschow, *Journal of Applied Statistics*, 34 (2007), 1251–8, unfortunately starts from the assumption that the *Pastoral Care*, *Boethius* and *Soliloquies* are all by Alfred and concludes on that basis that the Psalms are not.)

⁵⁵ The earliest example seems to be Sharon Turner's *The History of the Anglo-Saxons, comprising the History of England from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest*, 3rd edn., 3 vols. (London, 1820), vol. II. Later examples include K. Proppe, 'King Alfred's *Consolation of Philosophy*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 74 (1973), 635–48, Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, and D. Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 4th series, 67 (Cambridge, 2007).

Plato, cited six times altogether, by both speakers, with expressions like ‘the wise Plato’, ‘Plato our philosopher’ and affirming comments like ‘it is a very just argument that Plato made’, ‘it was a true saying that Plato offered’. Aristotle is cited twice by Wisdom, as ‘min deorling’, ‘my favourite/beloved’. Cicero is cited twice too, and identified as the philosopher who preceded Boethius in the enquiry into fate, free will and divine justice. Euripides is cited, and described by Wisdom as ‘min magister’, meaning either Wisdom’s own teacher or as a teacher of Wisdom’s philosophy. The Greek poet Parmenides is another authority. Wisdom and Boethius are firmly set in a context of debate going back to Plato and Aristotle.

That the Anglo-Saxon author to a degree Christianises Boethius’s work is a point often made, and there is an element of truth in that. But perhaps what is most striking is how understated that element is in the Old English version. There is just one reference to Christ, one to Christians, one to the heavenly Jerusalem, and just one story from the Christian scriptures (the story of Babel), in contrast to the many references to classical authorities and many more references to classical legend and history. (This is, incidentally, a point of contrast with the Old English verse *Metres*, where references to Christ are much more common.⁵⁶) In his development of the argument the Anglo-Saxon author introduces some six Biblical references or quotations, but none is specifically identified as Biblical—in striking contrast, one might note, with the practice in the Old English *Pastoral Care*, where one of the main contributions of the translator is to *add* Biblical identifiers, naming the book and speaker. Take for instance this comment by Wisdom:

As a certain wise man said long ago, the divine power protects its favourites under the shadow of its wings, shields them as carefully as a man does the pupil of his eye.⁵⁷

Who was this ‘certain wise man’? The answer is King David, the author of the psalms, since this is Psalm 16.8: ‘Guard me o Lord as the pupil of the eye; protect me under the shadow of your wings’ and the translation of the psalms conventionally attributed to King Alfred says that that psalm was first sung by David. If the author of the Old English *Boethius* does not attribute the saying to David or the psalmist, but disguises it, it is presumably because it would not be in character for Wisdom to invoke

⁵⁶ I owe this point to my co-editor Susan Irvine.

⁵⁷ Godden and Irvine, *Old English Boethius*, I, B 39. 264–7.

the psalms. And unlike contemporary commentary on the *Consolation*, the Old English author never refers to Christian writers or saints as illustrations of the argument. Like the *Beowulf* poet, the author of the Old English *Boethius* is careful to hide the influence of the Bible on the arguments in order to sustain the imagined fiction of the text's intellectual world.

There is one point where Wisdom seems to draw a contrast between philosophers and Christians. In his discussion of the knotty problems of fate, free will and providence, he says:

Some philosophers say that fate controls both the good fortune and the bad of every man. I then say, as all Christians say, that divine predestination controls him, not fate, and I know that it judges all things very justly, though it may not seem so to unreasoning men.⁵⁸

Two points need to be made about this. Firstly, though in isolation it might seem that Wisdom is contrasting Christian views with those of philosophy, to the detriment of the latter, he attributes this view of fate to some philosophers, not all, and in context it is clear that he is contrasting the views of some philosophers, the absolute fatalists, with those of other philosophers and Christians alike. Secondly, what he is repudiating is not, as might appear, a belief in fate or *wyrd*. He has just spent several pages explaining the interrelationship of providence and fate and the ways in which providence works through fate, e.g.:

Divine providence restrains all creatures so that they may not slip from their ordering. Fate then delivers to all creatures appearance and places and times and orderings, but fate comes from the intelligence and providence of the almighty God.⁵⁹

What Wisdom is repudiating is the belief of some (perhaps rather hypothetical) philosophers that there is no divine providence, only fate, which controls all things without the supervening design of God, and that is not a view that readers of the Old English *Boethius* would find associated with Plato or Aristotle. He is not driving a wedge between philosophers and Christians, but between fatalist philosophers on the one hand and the teachings of Wisdom on the other, which (he would claim) are common to other classical philosophers and Christians.

The Latin *Consolation* was for the most part consonant with orthodox Christian views of the time, but it is by no means wholly so. Ninth- and

⁵⁸ Godden and Irvine, *Old English Boethius*, I, B 39. 204–9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, I, B 39. 130–5.

tenth-century commentators on the Latin text acknowledged that it was a difficult and problematic work. This was partly a matter of the Boethius figure voicing questionable ideas about fate and providence and justice, and these could be dealt with by explaining, as glossators often do in marginal notes, that Boethius is here speaking in the person of a man confused by his misfortunes or blinded by his experiences, not as an authority. More difficult were the occasions where *Philosophia* herself seems to offer unorthodox views, though irony was a useful excuse—one of the commonest glosses in the manuscripts is the one word *yronia*. Two passages in particular troubled the commentators of the time. The first was the claim that providence worked through fate by the agency of the stars:

The chain of Fate may be knitted together by the world soul, or by the obedience of the whole of nature, *or by the motions of the stars of heaven*, or by the power of angels, or by the diverse skills of demons, or by some or all of these. But what is absolutely clear is that the unmoving, undivided pattern of events as they unfold constitutes Providence.⁶⁰

The commentators note that some unnamed people accuse Boethius of heresy here, claiming that he is following the astrologer, but they warn that it is difficult to tell which propositions are meant to be accepted and which not in this work. Modern translators tend to emphasise the hypothetical aspect in rendering this sentence. The Anglo-Saxon author has no problems about this passage and expresses it in an entirely unprovisional and unconditional form:

[Providence] implements fate either through the good angels or through men's souls or through the lives of other creatures *or through heaven's stars* or through the various wiles of the devils, sometimes through one of them, sometimes through all of them.⁶¹

The other particularly problematic view in the *Consolation* was the recurrent reference to Plato's doctrine of the pre-existence of souls and of the consequent processes of learning and memory, which involve recalling what the soul knew before it was imprisoned in the body. It is particularly explicitly articulated in 3m11, which concludes: 'If Plato's muse expresses the truth, what each man learns he is forgetfully recalling.' The commentators of the time explain the concept and add that it was a view which St Augustine himself had initially accepted, in his pre-Christian

⁶⁰ Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 4p6; translation from Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford, 2000), p. 88.

⁶¹ Godden and Irvine, *Old English Boethius*, I, B 39. 144–7.

days, but later condemned in his *Retractions*. Again, the Anglo-Saxon author uses the concept quite freely with no hint of any doubts, indeed the first reference to it comes before any reference to the idea in the Latin text.

If we stick with the traditional notion that the author was King Alfred then we could imagine that he just did not know how unorthodox the material was, and neither Asser nor Plegmund thought to warn him. But this really looks more like the work of an educated intellectual familiar with the commentary tradition, and hence probably well aware that he was exploring dangerous or at least unorthodox territory. If challenged he could after all always claim that what he was offering was only a record of what Boethius wrote or *Philosophia* said. And he shows his awareness of the difficulty and the danger in the drama that he injects into the dialogue. This was not so much a book ‘most necessary for all people to know’, but rather a book that was quite dangerous for ordinary people to know. And the supposition that because a book was in English it must have been designed for the uneducated is one we should firmly set aside—it is to fall victim to the tropes of contemporary prefaces rather than pay attention to the realities of manuscript use.

The Old English *Soliloquies*

The same could be said, and doubly so, of the Old English rewriting of Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, which seems to be closely related to the *Boethius* and is implausibly claimed as Alfred’s work in a fragmentary explicit. For this text we are dependent on one late twelfth-century manuscript,⁶² the work of a scribe who had little sense of what he was writing and was working from a very mangled copy. The preface begins in mid-sentence but the scribe seems not to have realised this, so marked the first word with a big initial letter. Using an elaborate image of gathering material from the forest, it presents the Old English work as something apparently written for the author’s own use:

I then gathered for myself staves and props . . . and crossbars and beams, and for each of the structures which I knew how to build, the finest timbers I could carry. I never came away with a single load without wishing to bring home the whole of the forest, if I could have carried it all—in every tree I saw something for which I had a need at home.⁶³

⁶² London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv, ff. 4–59v.

⁶³ Translation from Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 138.

Some modern scholars have accepted that implication, but the very fact of the preface introducing the work to others indicates that it was put into circulation, whatever the preface actually says. The solipsistic aspect of the preface may in fact be the author's own ingenious reprise of Augustine's account of the work in his *Retractions*, an account which was often included as a preface to the *Soliloquies* in early manuscripts:

I also wrote two books, because of the enthusiasm I had and the love for seeking out, with the help of reason, the truth about those matters which I most wanted to know. I asked myself questions and I replied to myself, as if we were two, reason and I, whereas I was of course just one. As a result I called the work *Soliloquies*. The work remained unfinished.⁶⁴

The Old English author evidently knew at least part of the *Retractions*, the part relating to the *Soliloquies*, and had some knowledge of Augustine's career and of his other writings. He would then have known that the *Soliloquies* was a very early work, predating his baptism, and abandoned unfinished and unresolved, and perhaps that Augustine made another attempt to tackle the same problems, in his next work, but again abandoned that. For the Old English author to take upon himself the task of rewriting such a work in English, and moreover adding a further book to resolve what Augustine could not resolve, was remarkably bold. And the argument that it was translated because King Alfred was desperate to translate something and it was the only Latin book left in the library after the depredations of the vikings (which has been seriously proposed) cannot be accepted: it is the work of someone who had read quite widely, in late Augustine as well as early and much else (as indeed he makes clear in the preface), and the reading possibly included the rather demanding and outré work of John the Scot.⁶⁵

The *Soliloquies* was not just a notably difficult work, it was also a dangerous and heterodox one. Augustine pointed out in his later *Retractions* that there were several things in the *Soliloquies* that he would now withdraw, with the wisdom of hindsight, because they indicated or might imply views that he would now consider totally unacceptable and unorthodox. Most of these are small points of phrasing, and in the Old English version they are either paraphrased in such a way as to escape the problem that concerned Augustine, whether deliberately or not, or they occur in

⁶⁴ *Saint Augustine, Soliloquies and Immortality of the Soul*, trans. Gerard Watson (Warminster, 1990), p. iv.

⁶⁵ Michael Treschow, 'Echoes of the *Periphyseon* in the Third Book of Alfred's *Soliloquies*', *Notes & Queries*, NS 40 (1993), 281–6.

passages that are not used in the Old English version. But the last point which Augustine retracts is more important. It occurs in a passage towards the end of the Latin *Soliloquies*, very near the point at which he broke off the work, in which he implies his belief in the Platonic theory of memory:

Those who are well trained in the liberal disciplines . . . draw out, one might even say, dig out, in the course of learning such pieces of knowledge which were without doubt buried within them in forgetfulness.⁶⁶

‘I now reject this’, he says in the *Retractions*, ‘because it is more likely that people see the truth because a spark of eternal reason is present in them than because they knew it before and had forgotten it, as Plato thought.’⁶⁷ And he refers the reader to his refutation of the Platonic view in his *De Trinitate*. The Old English author does not translate this particular passage but instead of taking a hint from the *Retractions* and playing its implications down he writes them up in bolder and much more explicit form, making crystal clear his acceptance—or at least Reason’s acceptance—of the Platonic view of memory. Thus at a similar point towards the end of Book 2 Reason says:

Ask your mind why it is so eager to know what existed before you were born, or even your grandfather was born, and ask it too why it knows what is present to it now and it sees and hears each day; or why it wants to know what must happen after us. Then I think it will answer you if it is rational and say that it wants to know what was before our time because it has always existed since God created the first man; and it yearns to be what it was before in order to know what it knew before, though it is now burdened by the weight of the body, so that it cannot know what it knew before.⁶⁸

To put it bluntly, the Old English author knew that the *Soliloquies* was an early, difficult and incomplete work that Augustine himself in later life found fault with, indeed found in places highly ambiguous; nevertheless he took on the task of translating, rewriting and continuing it, and in the process boldly reproduced and developed one of the most important ideas that Augustine had repudiated.

As the passage just quoted shows, the Old English author was fascinated by issues of epistemology—how we know what we know, how we even know what it is that we want to know. And he sets up a debate on

⁶⁶ Watson, *Saint Augustine, Soliloquies*, p. 125.

⁶⁷ *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Retractationum libri II*, ed. A. Mutzenbecher, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 57 (Turnhout, 1984), I.iv, at p. 15.

⁶⁸ *King Alfred’s Version of St. Augustine’s Soliloquies*, ed. T. A. Carnicelli (Cambridge, MA, 1969), pp. 90–1.

the issue, playing off the early Augustine who trusted to the inner light of Platonic memory against the later Augustine who trusted increasingly in revelation. He captures the issue brilliantly in an entirely fictive episode which he creates about Augustine's relation to his emperor Honorius, and then sums it up eloquently with a fine passage in which he uses one of Augustine's own later works to repudiate the position adopted by the early Augustine in the *Soliloquies*.⁶⁹ His dissatisfaction with Augustine's position in the *Soliloquies* is nicely articulated in a complaint which the Augustine figure makes to Reason:

Now the speeches which you took from these two books have finished, and you still haven't answered my last question, about my intelligence. I asked you whether after death it would increase or lessen or remain as in life.⁷⁰

And he then uses his new and wholly independent third book to explore the difficult issues of the continuity and expansion of knowledge after the dissolution of the body.⁷¹

Clearly the Old English versions of Boethius's *Consolation* and Augustine's *Soliloquies* were intellectually ambitious, taking on difficult and dangerous works and using them to challenge and question received ideas and to engage in debates about the nature of knowledge. They do not look at all like the early Alfredian initiatives, the doggedly faithful translations of the *Dialogues* and the *Pastoral Care*, and it is hard to imagine that cultural and intellectual standards and aspirations at Alfred's court moved so fast in the four or five years at most remaining of Alfred's reign after these were written as to make such a shift possible in the Alfredian circle—or at least among those responsible for the early initiatives. And the consistently negative treatment of kings and kingship in the Old English *Boethius* seems hard to reconcile with the notion of it being a product of King Alfred or his circle. Nor should we imagine that these were conceivably works for the uneducated and newly literate—any more than the two Gregorian translations were.⁷²

⁶⁹ Carnicelli, *King Alfred's Soliloquies*, pp. 87–9, 97. See further M. R. Godden, 'The translations of Alfred and his circle, and the misappropriation of the past', H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lectures, 14 (Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2004).

⁷⁰ Carnicelli, *King Alfred's Soliloquies*, p. 92.

⁷¹ On the treatment of knowledge in Book 3, see further my 'Text and eschatology in Book III of the Old English Soliloquies', *Anglia*, 121 (2003), 177–209.

⁷² Smyth, *King Alfred*, p. 562, similarly argues for the elite nature of the readership of the *Boethius* and *Soliloquies*, but thinks that they were composed by King Alfred for himself and his scholarly circle (though most of its known members, of course, knew Latin better than they knew English).

What kind of textual community might then have produced and read works like these? One place we should think of is Glastonbury where, in the early decades of the tenth century, Dunstan was able to study classical writers such as Ovid and Statius as well as to compare different copies of Boethius and their glosses.⁷³ The odour of sanctity which hung about Glastonbury and indeed Dunstan later should not blind us to the kinds of books that were in use there early in the century. If the author of these Old English works was not Dunstan himself (and the dating may be too tight to make this possible), then we might think of those who taught him and introduced him to texts of this kind. Another important place is Canterbury. It was producing de luxe copies of the Latin *Consolation* in the second half of the tenth century, and may have been the place where someone scribbled extracts from the metres as early as 912. It owned a copy of the Old English *Boethius* and, it would seem, of the Old English *Soliloquies*.⁷⁴ But there is clearly work still to be done on the scholarly activities of England in the early tenth century.

I have emphasised the heterodox aspect of these two works and one teasing possibility is that the Old English *Boethius* and *Soliloquies* were part of what Ælfric had in mind when he famously complained, in the preface to his *Catholic Homilies* around 994, about the *gedwyld* (heresy or error) that he found in many vernacular books.⁷⁵ The Old English *Boethius* and *Soliloquies* are after all rife with views which Ælfric rejected or explicitly condemned.⁷⁶ When in his homily on the magi he roundly condemned the belief in *wyrd* or fate and the influence of the stars, and referred to it as *gedwyld* and the work of *gedwolmen* or heretics, he was castigating a belief which is prominently displayed and affirmed in the Old English *Boethius*.⁷⁷ That Ælfric was referring to these texts may seem

⁷³ The so-called Dunstan class-book (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F.4.32), which includes material in Dunstan's hand, contains part of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and a picture showing Dunstan himself and a Latin couplet by him which echoes the *Thebaid* of Statius; his hand has also been identified comparing readings in the text of the *Consolation* in Vatican City, MS Lat. 3363 (see M. R. Godden, 'Alfred, Asser, and Boethius', in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. K. O'Brien O'Keefe and A. Orchard, 2 vols., Toronto Old English Series (Toronto and London, 2005), I. 326–48).

⁷⁴ For the *Boethius*, see Godden and Irvine, *Old English Boethius*, I. 42–3; an extract from the Old English *Soliloquies* occurs in an eleventh-century Canterbury manuscript, London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A. iii.

⁷⁵ Clemons, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*, p. 174.

⁷⁶ These are discussed in more detail in M. R. Godden, 'Ælfric and the Alfredian precedents', in *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. Hugh Magennis and Mary Swan (Leiden, 2009).

⁷⁷ Clemons, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*, pp. 235–8.

an absurd suggestion since he went on in his preface to exempt the translations of King Alfred from his criticisms. But it would be foolish to assume that his list of Alfred's works was the same as ours, or indeed that either was correct. (Ours has changed a lot over the last century after all.) The only translations associated with Alfred which he specifically mentions are the Old English versions of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and Gregory's *Dialogues*—both safe, literal translations of safe, mainstream texts. The one other translation which we can be fairly sure he knew as Alfredian was the *Pastoral Care*, another cautious translation of a mainstream work. If these three formed his list of Alfredian translations it is not surprising that he could recommend them and distinguish them from the dangerous works in circulation. But even if he did think the *Boethius* and *Soliloquies* to be Alfredian, that would not have prevented him rejecting some of their ideas. A writer such as Ælfric who could invoke Augustine and Gregory as his great authorities while still condemning ideas which they held, and sometimes using their own words to do so, was quite capable of invoking King Alfred by name as a precedent for vernacular writing while condemning some of his supposed works without naming their author. And Ælfric would not be the only scholar to be troubled by what he read in these texts: Nicholas Trevet in the thirteenth century expressed amazement at one of the arguments he found in the Old English *Boethius*.⁷⁸

Some conclusions

The traditional consensus tells us that in the last decade of his reign Alfred launched a massive and innovative programme of education, translation and book-production, and himself translated the *Pastoral Care*, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Augustine's *Soliloquies* and the Psalms as well as commissioning translations of Orosius, Bede and Gregory's *Dialogues*, and perhaps the Old English *Martyrology*.⁷⁹ Many scholars have expressed reservations about aspects of this story. James

⁷⁸ Donaghey, 'Nicholas Trevet's use', pp. 30–1.

⁷⁹ See for instance Patrick Wormald's entry on King Alfred in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: from the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*, ed. H. C. Matthew and B. Harrison, 60 vols. (Oxford, 2004), vol. I [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/183>]; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, esp. pp. 25–36; Dorothy Whitelock, 'The prose of Alfred's Reign', in *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 67–103.

Campbell questioned whether such translations were really an innovation.⁸⁰ Janet Bately pointed out long ago that there was no evidence that Alfred knew the work of Orosius, in Latin or in English.⁸¹ More generally, Allen Frantzen has urged us to stop taking King Alfred at his word.⁸² Simon Keynes has remarked cogily that ‘The development of the Alfredian myth was set in motion during the king’s own lifetime, and it should come as no surprise that there is already some detectable movement away from what we might judge to have been the truth.’⁸³ But there has been an understandable reluctance to push the boat out all the way and question the whole cultural narrative.

What then might be the outcome of rethinking the Alfredian project? Firstly, it may have been much less novel than Alfred claims, when he asks why no one had done this before. The written vernacular was in use from the beginning of the seventh century for documents and records such as laws, charters, wills. English versions of Latin saints’ lives and Biblical narratives were in circulation in manuscript form from at least the early ninth century, in the work of Cynewulf, who clearly wrote from an established tradition of written poetry, and very probably earlier, with learned poems like *Guthlac A*, *Genesis A* and *Exodus*; and Bede himself was supposedly translating the Bible at his death. These were all in verse apart from Bede, but there is no obvious reason to suppose that prose was not used for such purposes around the same time too—Bede and Aldhelm took it for granted that both verse and prose could be used for such topics. And there are some likely candidates. The ambitious collection of nearly three hundred saints’ lives and Biblical stories in English known as the Old English *Martyrology* was clearly in circulation by the last decade of the ninth century and there is no reason to suppose that it had just been composed then or that it came from the Alfredian circle. The Old English version of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* was in circulation by the very beginning of the tenth century at least, and again there is no reason to link it with the Alfredian circle. Given the time-lag between Cynewulf and the earliest manuscripts of his work, of nearly two centuries, it would

⁸⁰ James Campbell, ‘Placing King Alfred’, in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 3–23, esp. 13.

⁸¹ *The Old English Orosius*, ed. J. Bately, Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series 6 (London, 1980), p. 220.

⁸² Allen J. Frantzen, ‘The form and function of the preface in the poetry and prose of Alfred’s reign’, in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 121–36, esp. 136.

⁸³ Simon Keynes, ‘The cult of King Alfred’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 28 (1999), 225–356, at 227.

hardly be surprising if the Old English *Martyrology* and the Old English *Bede* were composed and circulated a few decades or a half-century earlier than the date of the earliest manuscripts. And of course as we noted at the outset, the *Pastoral Care* with its claims of launching wholly new initiatives had been preceded by the Old English *Dialogues*, whose prefaces say nothing of the novelty of the exercise. And if the *Martyrology* and the Old English *Bede* were indeed pre-Alfredian works, it would be easy to see such apparently genuine Alfredian initiatives as the Old English *Dialogues* and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as continuing an existing tradition of vernacular versions of saints' lives and history.

Secondly, the Alfredian project may also have been more limited than we have come to assume on the basis of later reports, such as Æthelweard's story of the many Latin books which King Alfred translated, Ælfric's vague reference to the translations of King Alfred and attribution of the Old English *Bede* to him, and William of Malmesbury's long list of the king's works. There is no really reliable evidence that the project extended beyond the rather pedestrian translations of the two works by Gregory, the *Dialogues* and the *Pastoral Care*. Nothing compels us to believe that King Alfred wrote or commissioned or instigated the translations of Orosius, Bede, the Psalms, Boethius and Augustine, or even knew of them—or even that they were done in his reign. Still less is there evidence that the programme of mass education for literacy ever happened. As the preface acknowledges, many people could already read English texts, and they continued to do so, but the historical record finds no trace of that array of new primary schools suggested by Alfred's preface.⁸⁴

If we were to drop the Alfredian project in its larger form from our cultural narrative of the Anglo-Saxons, along with the burnt cakes and the foundation of Oxford University, what could we put in its place? We might want to substitute a narrative that looks rather like the story we already have for Old English poetry: a variety of prose works, written by various people at different times over the ninth and early tenth centuries and in different contexts, people whom we cannot currently identify, and

⁸⁴ Some historians have linked the proposed programme of education and translation to the theory, derived from Asser, that Alfred had already established a palace school on a Carolingian model for the training of his children and other young aristocrats and future officials. Keynes and Lapidge (*Alfred the Great*, p. 257) dismiss the idea of a palace school and Smyth (*King Alfred the Great*, pp. 561–2) ridicules it. In any case, a palace school is quite different from the proposal to educate all the children of the kingdom, and seems an unlikely purpose for the translations of Boethius and Augustine at least.

perhaps never will, for readers who were often themselves intelligent and educated. By dropping the Alfredian narrative for these texts it is true that we lose the comforting sense of their historical moment in a particular decade and court and personality. But by freeing them from that strait-jacket and from that over-familiar story of books most necessary for all men to know, emerging from a community insecure about its abilities and short on scholarship and written for the uneducated, we allow ourselves to see them in a very different light: as intellectually ambitious and learned enterprises and, in the case of the *Boethius* and *Soliloquies* at least, enterprises aiming, however hubristically, to go well beyond the range of their Latin predecessors and to attempt something remarkably adventurous—and creating in the process the first English works of philosophy.