

## EN230: Old English: Lecture 6

### Old English Prose

#### 1. *Ælfric's Letter for Wulfsgige, bishop of Sherborne. Cited in Wilcox, *Ælfric's Prefaces*, p. 20.*

Se mæssepreost sceal secgan Sunnandagum and mæssedagum þæs godspelles angyt on englisc þam folce... Crist cwæð on his godspelle, be unsnoterum lareowum: Cecus si ceco ducatum prestet, ambo in foueam cadunt. Gif se blinda mann bið þæs oðres blindan latteow, þonne befeallað hy begen on sumne blindne seað. Blind bið se lareow, gid he þa boclare ne cann and beswicð þa læwedan mid his larleaste swa.

The masspriest must explain the meaning of the gospel to the people in English on Sundays and massdays... Christ said in his gospel concerning unwise teachers: 'And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into a ditch'. 'If a blind man is the leader of another blind one, then they will both fall into a blind ditch.' The teacher is blind if he does not know book-learning and so deceives the lay people through his lack of learning.

#### 2. *Ælfric's Preface to the First Series of Catholic Homilies (OE text in Wilcox, p. 108)*

þa bearn me on mode, ic truwigedurh Godes gife, þæt ic ðas boc of Ledenum gereorde to Engliscre spræce awende, na þurh gebylde micelre lare, ac for ðan ðe ic geseah and gehyrde mycel gedwyld on mangeum Englisum bocum, ðe ungelærede menn ðurh heora bilewitnyse to micclum wisdometealdon; and me ofhrowe þæt hi ne cuðon ne næfdon ða godspellican lare on heora gewritum, buton ðam mannun anum ðe þæt Leden cuðon, and buton þam bocum ðe *Ælfred* cyning snoterlice awende of Ledene on Englisc, ða synd to hæbbenne.

Then it came to mind, I believe through the gift of God, that I should translate this book from Latin into English, not through the confidence of great learning, but because I saw and heard great heresy in many English books, which unlearned men because of their ignorance held to be great wisdom; and it grieved me that they did not know or did not have scriptural learning in their own writing, except for those men alone who knew Latin, and except for the books which King Alfred wisely translated from Latin into English which are to be had.

#### 3. *Ælfric's Latin and OE Prefaces to the Lives of Saints (Texts in Wilcox, p. 119-20)*

Hunc quoque codicem transtulimus de Latinitate ad usitatam Anglicam sermocinationem, studentes aliis prodesse edificando ad fidem lectione huius narrationis quibuscumque placuerit huic operi operam dare, siue legendo, seu Audiendo; quia estimo non esse ingratis fidelibus.

This book I have also translated from Latin into the usual English speech, desiring to profit others by edifying them in the faith whenever they read this relation, as many, namely, as are pleased to study this work, either by reading or hearing it read; for I think it is not displeasing to the faithful.

*Ælfric* gret eadmodlice *Æðelwerd* ealdormann, 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, and of handum gelæhton, eowerne geleafan to getrymmenne mid þære gerecednyse, þe ge on eowrum gereorde næfdon ær. Þu wast, leof, þæt we awendon on þam twam ærrum bocum þæra halgena þrowunga and lif þe Angelcynn mid freolsdagum wurþað. Nu gewearð us, þæt we þas boc be þæra halgena þrowungum and life gedihon þe mynstermenn mid heora þenungum betwux him wurðiað.

Nu secge we nan þincg niwes on þissere gesetnyse, for þan ðe hit stod gefyrn awriton on Ledenbocum, þeah þe þa læwedan men þæt nyston. Nelle we eac mid leasungum þyllic liccetan, for þan þe geleaffulle fæderas and halige lareowas hit awriton on Ledenspræce to langum gemynde and to trymmince þam towerdum mannun.

*Ælfric* humbly greets alderman *Æthelweard*, and I tell you, dear man, that I have now collected in this book such passions of the saints as I have had leisure to translate into English, because you, dearest man, and *Æthelmær* earnestly asked me for such writings, and received them from me for the confirmation of your faith by means of this history, which you did not have in your language before. You know, dear man, that we translated in the two former books the passions and lives of the saints which the English honour with feast-days. Now it becomes us that we should write this book concerning the sufferings and lives of the saints whom monks in their offices honour among themselves.

We say nothing new in this book because it has stood written down long since in Latin books, though lay people did not know it. Neither will we feign such things by means of lies because devout fathers and holy doctors wrote it in the Latin language, for a lasting memorial, and to confirm the faith of future generations.

#### 4. *Ælfric's Life of St Edmund and Abbo's Passio Sancti Eadmundi*

**Abbo:** [After a very lengthy introduction about the Anglo-Saxons and East Anglia] But to revert to our subject, over this fertile province reigned the most holy, and in God's sight, acceptable Prince Eadmund. He was sprung from noble stock of the Old Saxons, and from his earliest childhood cherished most sincerely the Christian faith. Descended from a line of kings, and endued with a high character, he was, by the unanimous choice of all his fellow-provincials, not so much elected in due course of succession, as forced to rule over them with the authority of the sceptre. He was in truth of a comely aspect, apt for sovereignty; and his countenance continually developed fresh beauty through the tranquil devotion of his most serene spirit. To all he was affable and winning in speech, and distinguished by a captivating modesty; and he dwelt among his contemporaries with admirable kindness, though he was their lord, and without any touch of haughtiness or pride etc.

**Ælfric:** Eadmund se eadiga, Eastengla cynincg, wæs snotor and wurðful and wurðode symble mid æpelum þeawum þone ælmyhtigan God.

**Abbo:** With this object [of deceiving the human race, the devil] despatched one of his own followers as an adversary to Eadmund, in the hope that, stripped of all his possessions, the king might be goaded into an outburst of impatience, and in despair curse God to His face. This adversary was known by the name of Inguar; and he, with another called Hubba, a man of equal depravity, attempted (and nothing but divine compassion could have prevented them) to reduce to destruction the whole confines of Britain. And no wonder – seeing that they came hardened with the stiff frost of their own wickedness from that roof of the world where he had fixed his abode who in his mad ambition sought to make himself equal to the Most High...

**Ælfric:** On þam flotan wæron þa fyrrestan heafodmen Hinguar and Hubba, geanlæhte þurh deofol...

**Abbo:** And so, on the 20<sup>th</sup> November, as an offering to God of sweetest savour, Eadmund, after he had been tried in the fire of suffering, rose with the palm of victory and the crown of righteousness, to enter as king and martyr the assembly of the court of heaven.

**Ælfric:** and his [Edmund's] sawl siþode gesælig to Criste.

**Abbo:** When they carried out this plan [of searching in the woods for the head], a thing happened marvellous to relate and unheard of in the course of ages. The head of the holy king, far removed from the body to which it belonged, broke into utterance without assistance from the vocal chords, or aid from the arteries proceeding from the heart. A number of the party, like corpse-searchers, were gradually examining the out-of-the-way parts of the wood, and when the moment arrived at which the sound of the voice could be heard, the head, in response to the calls of the search-party mutually encouraging one another, and as comrade to comrade crying alternately 'Where are you?' indicated the place where it lay by exclaiming in their native tongue, 'Here, here, here'. In Latin the same meaning would be rendered by Hic! Hic! Hic! And the head never ceased to repeat this exclamation till all were drawn to it. The chords of the dead man's tongue vibrated within the passages of the jaws, thus displaying the miraculous power of Him who was born of the Word, and endowed the braying ass with human speech, so that it rebuked the madness of the prophet.

**Ælfric:** Hi eodon þa secende and symle clypigende, swa swa hit gewunelic is þam ðe on wuda gað oft, 'Hwær eart þu nu, gefera?' and him andwyrde þæt heafod. 'Her! Her! Her!' and swa gelome clypode, andswarigende him eallum, swa oft swa heora ænig clypode, oþ þæt hi ealle becomen þurh ða clypunga him to.

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