Essays in Medieval Studies 10

[*Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.*]

page 1

1. Famous Last Words:
Ælfric's Saints Facing Death

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Old English prose is underrated. Many prose works in Old English possess literary as well as cultural interest, have narrative drive, and establish and play with conventions. These texts have sufficient interest and appeal to be included in undergraduate surveys of medieval English literature and to be made available to non-specialist audiences. Even works in a convention-bound genre, such as the saint's life, can play with conventions, have narrative excitement, and even, at times, humor.

I begin with such a polemical assertion as a corrective. Old English poetry has a secure foothold in medieval survey courses but Old English prose is conspicuous in its absence. 1 Two of the most influential teaching anthologies are symptomatic. The Norton anthology contains four famous short Old English poems ("Cædmon's Hymn," "The Dream of the Rood," "The Wanderer," and "The Battle of Maldon") and *Beowulf*, but no prose; the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature* contains the same five Old English poems and adds "Deor" and an excerpt of "The Phoenix" but also excludes any prose.2

Scholarship by Anglo-Saxonists reveals a similar weighting towards poetry. That convenient compendium, *A Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the End of 1972*, contains 4265 entries on poetry compared with 1411 entries on prose.3 The survey-like *New Critical History of Old English Literature*, in the second edition of 1986, devotes 180 pages to the poetry, 83 to the prose.4 The latest bibliography published in the *Old English Newsletter* covers scholarship from 1991 and contains nine columns of studies on poetry as opposed to three on prose.5 Because of the dearth of translations, most Old English prose is unavailable to non-specialist readers. Translations of *Beowulf* proliferate, but only one major collection of translated prose texts has received

page 2

significant circulation in the last twenty-five years.6 The marginal position of Old English prose in the classroom is suggested by the finding of a recent survey that seventeen Old English teachers reported their students favor poetry while only four reported their students favor prose.7

Such a weighting towards poetry is striking in view of the pattern of survival of Old English literature. E. G. Stanley has estimated that approximately two and one-quarter million words of prose survive compared with "perhaps a little less than a quarter million words of verse, i.e. the proportion of prose to verse is about 10:1."8 The concordancing undertaken by the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English* project confirms the heavy predominance of prose and broadly confirms Stanley's figures: 69 percent of the approximately three million running words in the Old English corpus are classified as prose, 6 percent as poetry, with the remainder classified as Old English glosses to Latin texts, glossaries, or inscriptions.9 Clearly, substantially more prose survives from Anglo-Saxon England than poetry. Anglo-Saxon prose, nevertheless, has been treated by modern readers as massively forgettable. Is this a fair judgment?

Not all medieval prose has suffered the same fate. The saga literature of medieval Iceland provides an instructive contrast. Icelandic sagas have received considerable attention: most are readily available in Modern English translation, many in economical (and widely-distributed) paperbacks.10 Sagas are taught in many medieval survey courses and are the subject of a vital and copious body of scholarship.11 The reason for this popularity is not hard to discern. Sagas have strong narrative drive, tell an exciting story worked out at length, incorporate extensive characterization and psychological motivation, take place in realistic and often local settings, and are told by an unobtrusive narrator. English had no prose form like this before the rise of the novel.12 Nevertheless, in their use of compositional conventions, as well as in elements of their ideology, sagas are comparable to Old English prose forms. I will use the sagas as a context and as a point of comparison for my study of Old English saints' lives.

When Old English prose does receive scholarly attention, the question of what to do with it is usually answered diachronically. Much of the scholarship on Old English saints' lives is devoted to discovering their sources.13 This may seem self-evident as an avenue of study for a genre in which the story is always drawn from the source; it generally fails, however, to explore (or even to imply) the interest in the Old English narratives.14 Instead of such an approach, I intend to offer a synchronic study. Most saints' lives contain certain predictable compositional elements. Lives of martyrs include a scene in which the saint is subjected to various tortures (often at length) on account of his or her adherence to the Christian faith. The martyr dies, usually after converting onlookers or the torturer, and much stress is placed on the recovery of the body for burial.15 The exemplary lives of confessors tend to follow more diverse patterns but predictably end with a death-scene and subsequent miracles

page 3

associated with the tomb. The inclusion of such elements in an Old English saint's life is predictable, but the use made of the elements varies in fitting, interesting, and sometimes surprising ways.

In this study, I will focus upon a single compositional element as it appears across a broad range of Old English saints' lives: the portrayal of the moment of death and, in particular, of the saints' last words. I will confine my analysis to the Old English saints' lives written by Ælfric. Ælfric, the reform monk and abbot writing at the turn of the millenium, is a good example of an Old English prose writer worthy of a wider modern audience, both for the care which he devoted to his writings and for their extensive range.16 The predominant author of Old English saints' lives, he composed lives for fifty-six festivals; only twenty additional Old English lives were written by others.17

Last Words as Compositional Element: the Example of Old Norse Sagas

Last words are an abiding fascination in life and a telling locus in fiction. Teetering on the threshold of another world, the dying are expected to offer transcendent wisdom to those who live on. Last words ought to be epigramatic (such as Elizabeth I's "All my possessions for a moment of time" or Oscar Wilde's "I am dying, as I have lived, beyond my means"), suggestive (such as Goethe's "More light!" or Leonard Bernstein's "What's this?"), or both (such as Emily Dickinson's "I must go in, the fog is rising"). The expectations of the moment are so clear that they can be played upon by the one who is dying (such as Edith Sitwell's answer to a solicitous question--"I am dying, but otherwise quite well"--or Gertrude Stein's response to a request for the ultimate answer, "What is the question?"). A failure to rise to the occasion can in itself suggest the expectations which exist, as in Walt Whitman's cruel betrayal by nature ("Hold me up; I want to shit") or the reputed last words of the Mexican revolutionary, Pancho Villa, to on-looking journalists ("Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something").18

Last words provide a consciously heightened defining moment for characters in medieval literature, too. Icelandic sagas include many examples as entertaining or ironic as the modern examples cited.19 "Broad spears are becoming fashionable nowadays," observes Atli in *Grettir's Saga* as he is stabbed by one in a statement which helps to establish his insouciance in the face of death.20 The noble Vestein in *Gisli's Saga* awakes to receive his murderous death blow with an accurate self-diagnosis, "A heart thrust!"; while Gisli gathers up his uncoiling bowels and stops the final assault against him in order to have time enough to recite his final verse.21 Precise last words are taken to an extreme by Thorgrim in *Njal's Saga*. After climbing onto Gunnar's roof to establish whether Gunnar is at home, Thorgrim is stabbed through the thatch. He makes it back to Gizur, the leader of the attackers:

page 4

> Gizur looked up at him and asked, "Is Gunnar at home?"
> "That's for you to find out," replied Thorgrim. "But I know that his halberd certainly is."
> And with that he fell dead.22

Thorgrim's incongruous precision creates humor.

Last words give heroes a chance to establish their heroic credentials by displaying appropriate indifference to death. The convention is sufficiently predictable in the sagas that it can be played with for comic effect. Once the Jomsvikings have been captured by Earls Eiríkr and Hakon, two chapters are devoted to their progressively more outlandish death-speeches:

> Thorkell said [to one of the Jomsvikings]: "What do you think about dying?" "I am well content to die: I shall suffer the same fate as my father." Thorkell asked what that was. He said: "Strike; he died." Then Thorkell cut off his head. . . . Then a young man was led forward whose long hair was as golden as silk. Thorkell posed his usual question. He said: "I have had the best part of my life; and I am not interested in living longer than those who have just fallen. Yet I don't want to be led by thralls to my death, but rather by a warrior who is of no less account than you are; and it won't be difficult to find someone. Let him hold the hair away from the head and pull the head sharply so that the hair does not become blood-stained." A hirdman came forward, took hold of the hair and twisted it round his hands. Thorkell made a blow with a sword. At that very moment he pulled his head away sharply so that the blow fell on the man who was holding the hair and cut off both his arms at the elbows. The other sprang up and said: "Whose hands are in my hair?"23

This last example proves not to be a death speech in that Earl Eiríkr is so impressed by the calculated cheek of the viking that he lets him live. Throughout the incident each of the Jomsvikings tries to use verbal humor as an assertion of cool control in the face of death. Saga heroes live in a world in which the aesthetic interpretation of their lives transcends death, even when it does not save their lives. In such a world, fitting and memorable last words are an essential component of a lasting reputation.

Last words also serve other functions in Icelandic sagas. One is a Christian purpose best exemplified in the death speech of Kjartan in *Laxdæla Saga:*

> *Then Kjartan said to Bolli, "It is an ignoble deed, kinsman, that you are about to do; but I would much rather accept death at your hands, cousin, than give you death at mine."*

And with that, Kjartan threw down his weapons, and made no attempt to defend himself.24

page 5

Kjartan's chiasmus verbalizes a version of the Christian turn-the-other-cheek ethos.

The most famous character in saga literature also fits into this Christian paradigm of compassion: Njal, on choosing not to leave his sons in the burning and besieged house, lies down with his wife and grandson and commends their souls to God. This final utterance is only in reported speech, however. His penultimate direct speech is a statement of defiance which has more of the epigramatic quality expected of a death speech:

> *"I have no wish to go outside," said Njal, "for I am an old man now and ill-equipped to avenge my sons; and I do not want to live in shame."25*

The mix between Christian gesture and heroic defiance premised upon a revenge-ethic is characteristic of the productive dialogism between apparently conflicting social strands found throughout the sagas.

Death and the Old English Saint

Old English saints' lives might be expected to lack entirely such productive tensions. If ever there were a monologic genre, surely saints' lives would be that genre. Philippe Ariès, in exploring the broad sweep of the social construction of dying, levels out the Middle Ages to a time when men and women were capable of anticipating their death and accepting it readily.26 Karl S. Guthke's study suggests the dull uniformity which can be expected of saints' last words:

> *exciting and worthy of attention as such revelations may have been..., they were revelations within the framework of Christian beliefs and were therefore, strictly speaking, not entirely surprising. One had an idea of what heaven and hell were like; and what saints, at any rate, representing as they did the ideal form of life, had to say on their deathbeds was entirely predictable, as their numerous vitae confirm.27*

The situation sounds irredeemably dull, but I will aim to show a lively manipulation of the narrative opportunities of

the moment of death in Old English saints' lives matching that in the saga literature.

Sometimes saints' death speeches serve the expected functions, especially that of emphasizing the Christ-like nature of the dying saint. Saint Mark, for example, dies uttering, "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit" (LS 15, 86-87), echoing Christ's last words ("Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" [Luke 23:46]).28 Some martyrs enact Christian compassion in their death by praying for those doing the martyring. Stephen, the protomartyr, establishes such a pattern when he is stoned to death for speaking against the temple. His dying words are "My Lord, do not set these deeds against them as

a sin" (CH I, 3, 48). Ælfric explicates this speech in a subsequent homily on Stephen as another imitation of Christ by relating it to Christ's intercession for his murderers ("Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" [Luke 23:34]; see CH II, 2, 177-86). In a different kind of act of faith, the apostle Peter emphasizes his pastoral responsibility in his final words: "My Savior, I commit your sheep to you, which you entrusted to me: they will not be without a shepherd when they have you" (CH I, 26, 382).

Other saints anticipate their death, enacting the pattern suggested by Ariès. John the Apostle acts upon a vision of his coming death by having his grave dug, entering into it, and saying from there a final prayer summing up his life and thanking God (CH I, 4, 74-76). Likewise Benedict, whose final prayers are mentioned in reported speech, announces his death before the event, has his grave opened a week in advance, and dies suitably arranged in the church (CH II, 11, 554-62). Martin anticipates his death to his followers and, in his death speech, expresses extreme confidence about his happy subsequent fate. He dies addressing a visiting devil (in a scene conceiving of death as a contest between devils and angels for the soul): "Bloodthirsty beast, why do you stand thus close by? You will not find in me anything for punishing; the patriarch Abraham will truly receive me into his dwelling in eternal joy" (CH II, 34, 301-4).

The second and longer life of Martin (LS 31) provides further examples of memorable death speeches by this same saint. Two speeches are cited in full before the saint's death which have the epigramatic quality of last words even if they lack the requisite precise timing. When his monks offer him softer bedding, he comments euphoniously:

> Ne gedafnaþ cristenum menn. buton þæt he on duste swelte gif ic eow oþre bysne selle. þonne syngie ic. (LS 31, 1355-56)
>
> It is not fitting for a Christian man, except that he die on the dust. If I were to give you another example, I would be sinning.

His denial plays on the idea of death as earth returning to earth and dust to dust drawn from Genesis 3:19. The followers offer to turn him over, but he requests instead "that I may gaze rather upon heaven than upon earth" (LS 31, 1361-63). The exemplary and epigramatic nature of St. Martin's almost last words here suggests that the saint was ensuring that his final speech would be appropriately memorable.

A different use of the moment of death by some saints is to predict the future, encouraging the Christian cause. Thus Apollinaris survives a brutal beating long enough to predict the end of the persecution and the conversion of the Roman emperors to Christianity (LS 22, 237-44). Lucy predicts her own significance as a saint (LS 9, 130-38).

The Christian uses of the death speeches of saints described so far are not those most commonly found. Instead, one particular function clearly predomi-

nates: the use of speech--particularly witty or epigramatic speech--as an act of defiance. The pattern is exemplified well in the martyrdom of St. Lawrence (CH I, 29), which, accordingly, I will describe at some length. Because he refuses to offer to heathen gods, Lawrence is brought before the high reeve Valerianus and the Roman Emperor Decius. Lawrence plays on the demand that he give an offering of his treasures by explaining that he has given his treasures to God's poor, "and those are the eternal treasures, which will never be diminished." The high reeve recognizes impudent punning: "Why are you playing on words? (Hwæt fagettest þu mid wordum?)." Decius commands

Lawrence to be stripped and whipped for insulting the gods. Then, in a blatant display of power, the emperor orders the torture implements to be shown to Lawrence, who sarcastically says that he looks forward to such "luxuries." Decius attempts to assert his will through physical force, directing the saint to be beaten. Lawrence verbalizes the failure of that force: "Wretch, understand indeed that I am victorious through Christ's treasures, and I do not at all feel your torments." As Lawrence is tortured by glowing-hot metal, Decius recognizes the saint's cool responses as mockery ("I see that you, through your magic, mock these torments; nevertheless, you shall not mock me"). Great stress is put on Lawrence's mouth as the site of his power. He thanks the Lord "with laughing mouth"; Decius "commanded the mouth of the saint to be struck with stones," after which the saint still continues to praise God, again "with a laughing mouth." Lawrence responds to Decius's command to offer to the heathen gods by offering himself to the almighty God. Placed on a bed of burning coals, he offers last words of thanks to the Lord, which are preceded by a gibe at the emperor: "Lo, wretch, you have toasted (brǣddest) one part of my body, now turn the other, and eat" (CH I, 29, 424-30). Death speeches under torture can here be seen to play into a contrast between the body and the spirit. At the happy moment of the saint's birth into the eternal world, martyrs represent the power of the uncorruptible spirit by using humor in speech as an expression of strength.29

The disjunction between body and will, action and speech, is spelled out by St. Lucy during her torment by Paschasius: "The body is not brought to any danger if it is not approved by the mind. Even if you raise my hand to your idol and so offer through me against my will, I will nevertheless be innocent before the true God" (LS 9, 84-88). Speech is crucial as an expression of the mind's intent. Such an articulation of the power of language is particularly poignant in the voice of a woman, who might be seen as particularly vulnerable to the physical violence which martyrs suffer. Another female saint, Cecilia, engages the persecuting prefect Almachius in a struggle in words ("hi campodon mid wordum" [LS 34, 320]) during which she berates his pride and the worthlessness of his idols.

Sometimes the defiant death speech is displaced from the precise moment of death. In the contest between Pope Alexander and the Emperor Aurelian,

page 8

Alexander has been placed in a burning oven with a fellow Christian priest while another priest, Theodolus, is forced to watch. Instead of expressing fear, the undiscomfited pope calls out: "Brother Theodolus, come hither to us: that same is herein which before saved the faithful youths from Nebuchadnezzar, who cast them bound into the burning oven" (CH II, 18, 128-30). The emperor has the Christians killed a few lines later with no further speech cited, so that Alexander's cheerful defiance effectively serves as a death speech within the narrative. Similarly Julian taunts his tormentor, Martianus, in his final direct address ("Where is now the beauty of your adorned temple? Where are the images which you glorified? Just as they sank into the dark abyss so shall you heathens sink into the abyss of hell, where there will be eternal fire..." [LS 4, 381-8]). He dies somewhat later after further torments but without further direct speech.30

In two saints' lives, the recitation of psalter texts in outrageously incongruous circumstances functions as a symbol of defiance. In the "Life of St. Sebastian," Marcellianus and Marcus die under the persecution of Diocletian. They are tortured by being nailed together into a great stocks; physically united in pain, they sing the psalm "Lo how great good it is, and what pleasure, where brothers are in unity" (LS 5, 392-94, echoing Psalm 133:1). A verbalized spirit of resistance transcends the grotesque nature of their enforced "unity" and turns it into "pleasure," which is dramatized in the unseemly joke of the literal appropriateness of the psalm text. They make light of further torments (in reported speech only) until they are killed. The forty soldiers martyred under Licinius also die singing a psalm in unison. As their legs are broken, they sing a psalm which is again alarmingly literal in its application: "Our soul has escaped from the snare just like a sparrow; the snare is broken, and we are released...", forcing attention on the ill-treatment of their bodies, as well as their transcendence (LS 11, 251-52, echoing Psalm 124:7).

Other examples of terminal defiance abound. The final words of the Christian kings Abdon and Sennes to the persecuting emperor Decius are "Do what you will" (LS 24, 46). The death of the apostle Andrew sees a more extreme play on the motif. When Aegeas orders Andrew to be tortured and finally crucified for his faith, Andrew joyously exhorts the cross which will kill him. Facing a popular rebellion, Aegeas changes his mind and decides to release the apostle. Andrew, however, will have none of it, commenting: "If you come in order to release me, I will not be released from here living." In a total inversion of expectation, a miracle prevents the people from saving the saint:

their hands freeze as soon as they touch the cross. Andrew's last words express a desire for the Lord and a defiance of the earthly torture: "My good teacher, do not allow me to be released, but first receive my spirit" (CH I, 38, 598). Andrew's spirit is so unbowed by earthly torment that he refuses to allow the torment to be stopped and so comically inverts earthly hierarchy.

Last Words

The attitude towards death implicit in Ælfric's saints' lives is certainly not the same as modern attitudes towards death. Death scenes in the saints' lives, however, do have strong similarities to portrayals of death in the Old Norse sagas. The aestheticization of death puts especial emphasis on a hero's or a saint's last words: transcendence of fear is verbalized by both hero and saint. The requirements of this moment in the life of any saint create a pattern of expectations which is open to variation or emphasis or even to comic play. Such variation and play can be made apparent only through a synchronic study of a substantial body of work. By taking saints' lives seriously as a literary genre, we can elucidate the play, variety, and even humor within them.

Ælfric's saints' lives include some self-consciously explanatory moments which emphasize the point of the aestheticized life and death of spectacle described in these works. When water miraculously cools the irons heating his naked feet, St. Thomas explains to his torturer, King Mazdai: "God did not do this for me, but rather for you, that you might so indeed believe in the living God" (LS 36, 393-94). The intention of a saint's last words is, thus, to turn an audience toward God; in contrast, a hero's last words are intended to turn an audience toward the hero. Heroes and saints often achieve these contrasting ends by similar means of defiance, nonchalance, or wit.

This study has attempted to demonstrate that compositional elements in a series of Old English prose texts can be fruitfully compared to similar elements in Old Norse saga literature and in Old English poetry. Saints' lives, sagas, and heroic poetry all unfold through predictable conventions, final speeches among them. Facing death, many of Ælfric's saints articulate last words as memorable as, and related in spirit to, the quintessentially heroic last words of the faithful old retainer, Byrhtwold, faced with overwhelming odds in the battle at Maldon:

> *"Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,*
> *mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlaþ."*[31]

"Mind must be the firmer, heart the bolder,
spirit must be the greater, as our strength diminishes."

Notes

1. For an analysis of the treatment of prose in Old English textbooks and a different consideration of the lack of attention to prose hagiographies, see Clare A. Lees, "Whose Text Is It Anyway? Contexts for Editing Old English Prose," in *Editing Old English in the 90s*, ed. Donald Scragg and Paul E. Szarmach (Boydell, forthcoming). A fuller analysis of the marginal state of Old English prose, with a suggested remedy, is provided by Clare A. Lees, "Working with Patristic Sources: Language and Context in Old English Homilies," in *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen

(Albany, 1991). For a major study which historicizes and critiques the pedagogical and scholarly establishment of Old English studies, including pointing to the relative neglect of Old English prose, see Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, 1990).
2. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams, et al., 6th edn., 2 Volumes (New York, 1993); *Medieval English Literature*, ed. J.B. Trapp, Oxford Anthology of English Literature (New York, 1973). The Norton anthology does, however, present *Beowulf* as if it were prose. For a critique of other confusion which the presentation in the Norton anthology encourages, see Kevin S. Kiernan, "Reading Cædmon's `Hymn' With Someone Else's Glosses," *Representations* 32 (1990), 157-74.
3. Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson (Toronto, 1980).
4. Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York, 1986). An honorable exception to the general pattern of ignoring the prose in introductory surveys is the recent *Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991), which integrates discussions of prose and verse in thematic chapters.
5. *Old English Newsletter*, 25.4 (1992), 12-18.
6. Namely, Michael Swanton's admirable (if brief) compilation, *Old English Prose* (London, 1975). Numerous selections of Old English prose are reprinted from earlier translations in *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*, ed. Kevin Crossley-Holland (Oxford, 1984; first published 1982). Historical prose has been better served by such collections as *English Historical Documents I: c. 500-1042*, trans. Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd edn. (New York, 1979) and *Alfred the Great: Asser's "Life of King Alfred" and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (Harmondsworth, 1983), which includes extracts from Alfred's writings. Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., *The Vercelli Book Homilies: Translations from the Anglo-Saxon* (Lanham, 1991) is an exception to the prevailing trend but of limited distribution.
7. Allen J. Frantzen, "A Recent Survey of the Teaching of Old English and its Implications for Anglo-Saxon Studies," *Old English Newsletter* 26.1 (1992), 34-45: question 10 (p. 37).
8. E.G. Stanley, "Studies in the Prosaic Vocabulary of Old English Verse," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971), 385-418 at 385-6. Stanley continues, "but the margin of error in my count may be great, and the problem is complicated by interconnection, partial or whole, of some of the texts."
9. The statistics were provided in a personal communication by Antonette diPaolo Healey, to whom I express thanks. The concordance is published by Antonette diPaolo Healey and Richard L. Venezky, *A Microfiche*

Concordance to Old English (Toronto, 1980) and Richard L. Venezky and Sharon Butler, *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English: the High-Frequency Words* (Toronto, 1985). The problem of the multiple versions of some texts mentioned by Stanley is also implicit in the concordance.
10. The widest readership must be through the long-established non-academic series of Penguin Classics and Everyman. Further translations have been made available by more specialist presses, such as the New Saga Library of Canongate and Garland.
11. See the bibliographical essay by Carol Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (íslendingasögur)," *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, Islandica 45 (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 239-315.
12. For an instructive attempt to put Icelandic sagas into a context, see Carol J. Clover, "The Long Prose Form," *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 101 (1986), 10-39. On the relation of the novel to the early romance tradition, see Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore, 1987), pp. 1-4.
13. For an account of the ultimate sources of Ælfric's saints' lives, see Max Förster,*Über die Quellen von Ælfric's Homiliae Catholicae. I. Legenden* (Berlin, 1892); J.H. Ott, *Über die Quellen der Heiligenleben in Ælfrics Lives of Saints I* (Halle, 1892); Grant Loomis, "Further Sources of Ælfric's Saints' Lives," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 13 (1931), 1-8. For Ælfric's immediate source, see Patrick H. Zettel, "Saints' Lives in Old English: Latin Manuscripts and Vernacular Accounts: Ælfric," *Peritia* 1 (1982), 17-37, which draws on his unpublished 1979 Oxford D.Phil. dissertation, and Peter Jackson and Michael Lapidge, "The Contents of the Cotton-Corpus Legendary," *Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Binghamton, forthcoming). For the latest scholarship on sources, see the two large-scale collaborative projects: SASLaC, which has published *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture: A Trial Version*, ed. Frederick M.

Biggs, Thomas D. Hill, and Paul E. Szarmach (Binghamton, 1990), and Fontes Anglo-Saxonici, the latest progress report on which is in *Old English Newsletter*, 25.3 (1992), 12.

14. A handful of studies of individual lives against their sources show aspects of the artistry of the Old English: see Cecily Clark, "Ælfric and Abbo," *English Studies* 49 (1968), 30-36 on Ælfric's "Life of St. Edmund;" Judith Gaites, "Ælfric's Longer *Life of St Martin* and Its Latin Sources: A Study in Narrative Technique," *Leeds Studies in English* 13 (1982), 23-41; Joyce Hill, "Ælfric, Gelasius, and St. George," *Mediaevalia* 11 (1989 for 1985), 1-17.

15. For a study of this compositional element in Latin saints' lives from Belgium, see Michel Lauwers, "La mort et le corps des saints: La scène de

page 12

la mort dans les Vitae du haut Moyen Age," *Moyen Age* 94 (1988), 21-50. The death scene in early Latin saints' lives is surveyed in Pierre Boglioni, "La scène de la mort dans les premières hagiographies latines," in *Le sentiment de la mort au Moyen Age*, ed. Claude Sutto (Montreal, 1979), pp. 185-210.

16. For an introduction to the works of Ælfric with a stress on Ælfric's self-consciousness as a writer, see my *Ælfric's Prefaces*, Durham Medieval Texts (forthcoming). Many of Ælfric's saints' lives were written in a form of rhythmical prose which has sometimes been viewed as verse. The relative popularity of Old English poetry which I describe above applies only to those poems which appear in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records. Whether Ælfric's writing is called verse or prose, it is still widely ignored.

17. See Michael Lapidge, "The Saintly Life in Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Cambridge Companion*, ed. Godden and Lapidge, pp. 243-263, which provides a good introduction to the subject.

18. For an entertaining and informative study of the cultural phenomenon, see Karl S. Guthke, *Last Words: Variations on a Theme in Western Culture* (Princeton, 1992), from which the examples in this paragraph are taken. On the significance of the moment of death in English literature of the 17th to 20th centuries, see Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

19. For examples in Old Norse literature and Old English poetry, see Joseph Harris, "Beowulf's Last Words," *Speculum* 67 (1992), 1-32. Harris is interested in defining the structural elements of a literary subgenre: he cites some, but by no means all, of the examples from Icelandic sagas given here.

20. *Grettir's Saga*, trans. Denton Fox and Hermann Palsson (Toronto, 1974), ch. 45, p. 95.

21. *The Saga of Gisli*, trans. George Johnston, Everyman (London, 1963), ch. 13, p. 17 and ch. 36, p. 58.

22. *Njal's Saga*, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1960), ch. 77, p. 169.

23. *The Saga of the Jomsvikings*, trans. N.F. Blake (London, 1962), chs. 36-37, pp. 40-41.

24. *Laxdæla Saga*, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1969), ch. 49, p. 175.

25. *Njal's Saga*, ch. 129, p. 267.

26. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (Oxford, 1981).

27. Guthke, *Last Words*, pp. 56-57.

28. References to Ælfric's works are embedded in the text. *Lives of Saints* (abbreviated LS) are edited by Walter W. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, EETS o.s. 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881-1900; repr. in two vols., 1966), with facing translations largely by Gunning and Wilkinson (see "Prelimi-

page 13

nary Notice," p. vii); reference is by the number of the life followed by the line number. *Catholic Homilies* circulated in two series (abbreviated CH I and CH II), edited with a facing translation by Benjamin Thorpe, *The Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric*, vol. 1 (London, 1844) and by Malcolm Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: the Second Series; Text*, EETS s.s. 5 (London, 1979); references to CH I are by homily and page number in Thorpe's edition, references to CH II are by homily and line number in Godden's edition. All translations from Old English are my own.

29. *Natale* is the term for the festival celebrating a saint's death to this world. For a theoretical statement of the joyousness of the occasion, see Jean Leclerq, "La joie de mourir selon Saint Bernard de Clairvaux," in *Dies illa: Death in the Middle Ages*, ed Jane H.M. Taylor (Liverpool, 1984), pp. 195-207.

30. On Ælfric's careful use of direct speech for dramatic effect, see Ruth Waterhouse, "Ælfric's Use of Discourse in Some Saints' Lives," *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976), 83-103.

31. *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. D.G. Scragg (Manchester, 1981), lines 312-13.