Pluralisms and possibilities remained the hallmarks of early medieval Christianity—or, better, of early medieval Christianities—and enabled this universal religion to take endlessly varied local forms.¹

(Julia M. H. Smith)

Introduction

Even when Anglo-Saxonists do not take Ælfric as central to their work, important contributions to our understanding of this writer can be made. Some recent scholarship engages with Ælfrician texts alongside other early medieval texts, for example, and thereby participates in a broader sense both with Anglo-Saxon Studies and with the discourses of English Studies more generally. Into this category falls an emerging critical conversation that explores early medieval ideas about nations and peoples using perspectives derived from colonial and post-colonial studies, as well as from gender and sexuality studies.² One popular text for this kind of critical practice is Ælfric’s *Life of St. Gregory the Great* from the Second Series of Catholic Homilies (CH II.9). Ælfric’s *Life* is the first English-language hagiography of this important saint, Apostle of the English, at whose prompting the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity began, at least from the perspective of Rome and Bede.³ The *Life*’s association of English and Englishness with conversion and


² Magennis notes in his chapter in this collection the recent influence of feminist theory on Ælfric studies; it would be interesting to explore why the impact of gender and sexuality studies on work on Ælfric has so far been relatively limited. See, in this regard, Lees, *Tradition and Belief*, pp. 133–53, and Treharne, ‘The Invisible Woman’.

³ A helpful, revisionary overview of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity according to Bede is Brooks, ‘From British to English Christianity’.

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CHAPTER TEN

IN ÆLFRIC’S WORDS: CONVERSION, VIGILANCE AND THE NATION IN ÆLFRIC’S *LIFE OF GREGORY THE GREAT*

Clare A. Lees
with pastoral care—with the care of souls—has commanded attention, although that attention has tended to focus on the celebrated anecdote about Pope Gregory the Great and his sighting of the fair Angles in the slave markets in Rome (CH II.9, lines 53–80 [p. 74]).

This chapter takes up questions of language, belief and identity prompted by critical analysis of the episode of Gregory and the Angles in its Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Latin reflexes in order to offer a more detailed interpretation of Ælfric’s Life of Gregory than has hitherto been attempted. The sheer number of Ælfric’s saints’ lives means that even such obviously well-known texts as the Life of Gregory are rarely taken as the focus for critical reading. Detailed textual analysis is central, however, to Ælfric’s own interpretive style and practice, as Peter Clemoes famously pointed out, and as Robert Upchurch’s chapter in this collection reminds us.4 Reading as interpreting is built in to the dynamics of Ælfrician style: the Word finds its complement and complement in the written word. Few words in Ælfric’s works are wasted and most are made to work hard.5 This feature of his writing and style forms, for me, part of the case for Ælfric’s contribution to the history of English literature. Gabriella Corona too demonstrates in her chapter in this volume how close is the fit between rhetoric and morality in Ælfrician texts, making the Homily on St Laurence (CH I. 29) central to her analysis. Indeed, the pleasures and powers of Ælfric’s style are well known. Nevertheless, our collective understanding of the stylistic intersection of piety and politics has much to gain from sustained attention to Ælfric’s words in particular texts. In this regard, the Life of Gregory is particularly rewarding: not only does it include a sermon by Gregory the Great, rewritten in Ælfric’s words, which is as stylistically adept as the celebrated anecdote of the Angles, but the entire Life is structured around a series of puns and etymologies.6 Ælfric plays in English with Gregory’s words and, in so doing, draws out the inner, moral dimension of the ever-vigilant Gregory whose very name records his watchfulness. The name of Gregory, Ælfric reminds us, means vigilant or watchful

4 Clemoes, ‘Ælfric’, remains an exemplary introduction to this aspect of his work.
5 As Clemoes put it, ‘Ælfric’s sentences have momentum. They have shape. They have a firm and well-articulated grammatical structure. One is not in doubt of the distribution of emphasis within them. The meaning of their words is clear. They combine precision with economy. They are, in fact, sentences which say neither more nor less than their author intended’ (Ælfric’, p. 201).
6 This was first discussed by Godden, ‘The Sources for Ælfric’s Homily on St Gregory’.