CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE USE OF ÆLFRIC’S HOMILIES: MSS OXFORD, BODLEIAN LIBRARY, JUNIUS 85 AND 86 IN THE FIELD

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INTRODUCTION

History has been relatively kind to Ælfric. A substantial corpus of his works has survived, including a number of self-revealing statements declaring his intentions and aspirations for his writings. Indeed, the works of Ælfric make up almost 15% of all surviving Old English. There are good reasons for such prominence. Ælfric’s homilies were adopted by Archbishop Sigeric and subsequent church leaders to fill what must have been a considerable need for uniform preaching materials at a time of developing models of pastoral care. Ælfric’s emphasis on Christian verities meant that his writings remained useful through changing political and religious circumstances up until the time that their language ceased to be intelligible. On the rediscovery of Old English in the early modern period, Ælfric’s theology, explained in the vernacular, could be viewed as a kind of proto-Protestantism—or, at least, as useful to the Anglican cause—by Archbishop Parker and his circle, with the result that one of his Easter sermons was the first work in Old English to see print, and that Ælfric manuscripts were catalogued

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2 The Dictionary of Old English: Old English Corpus, containing essentially all surviving Old English, comprises some 3,900,000 words of Old English, of which some 570,000 are the works of Ælfric. My thanks to Antonette diPaolo Healey, editor, and Xin Xiang, systems analyst, of the Dictionary of Old English for providing me with those statistics in 2002.

3 See my essay, ‘Ælfric in Dorset and the Landscape of Pastoral Care’, and the discussion below for the development of this idea.

4 See, in particular, Swan, ‘Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies in the Twelfth Century’, and Treharne’s chapter in this volume.
and collected with care. Subsequently, his work caught the attention of outstanding scholarly editors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ælfric thus provides an exceptionally coherent body of work in Old English, rivalled in scope only by those writings associated with King Alfred. The result is both a phenomenon in need of explanation and an opportunity for understanding the nuanced thought and development of a single Old English intellectual who came to articulate the pastoral aspirations of the age.

Studies of Ælfric’s writings have successfully engaged with many aspects of his achievement. Critics have explored his handling of his sources, his contribution to developing the Old English language, and the nature of his style, and mined his work to understand such issues as nation-building and gender identity in early medieval England. Ælfric’s theology has been explored in a handful of major studies. Others have placed his writings within the historical context of Æthelred’s reign and the Benedictine Reform, and a fascinating strand of recent scholarship has uncovered the ways in which his thought is sometimes distinct from the main lines of the Benedictine Reform that he otherwise seems to embody. Ælfric studies have benefited, too, from a trend of recent Anglo-Saxon criticism to return to the manuscripts to understand in a fine-tuned way details of circulation and use of Old English works. In the present chapter I will pursue such a return to manuscript evidence in order to contextualize Ælfric’s preaching within the historical context of

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5 A Testimonie of Antiqvitie. See further Magennis’ chapter, above and Graham, ed., The Recovery of Old English.
6 For the homilies and saints’ lives, note the editions by Thorpe, Skeat, Assmann, Pope, Godden, Clemoes. For further details, see the chapter by Magennis, above.
7 See the chapter by Godden, above, for more on this comparison.
8 See Magennis’ chapter above for an overview, and note also the chapters in this volume by Gretsch, Lees, Hall, Davis, and Corona.
9 See, in particular, Gatch, Preaching and Theology, Grundy, Books and Grace, and Kleist, Striving with Grace.
10 See Godden, ‘Apocalypse and Invasion’, for a particularly satisfying example, along with the chapters by Hill, Jones, and Cubitt above.
11 See Jones’ chapter in this volume, and also Clayton, Cult of the Virgin Mary, on how his Marian position differs from that of Æthelwold; J. Hill, Ælfric’s Silent Days’ and ‘Reform and Resistance’, on his striking stance against preaching during Easter Week; and the outstanding exploration of his position on sexual issues in Cubitt, ‘Virginity and Misogyny in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England’.
12 See, inter alia, the Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts in Microfiche Facsimile project, ed. Doane, providing detailed new descriptions of all surviving manuscripts, and the ‘Production and Use of English Manuscripts 1060 to 1220’ project (www.le.ac.uk/ee/en1060to1220).