

Introduction

... vous convient estre saiges, pour fleurir, sentir et estimer ces beaulx livres de haulte gresse, legiers au prochaz et hardiz à la rencontre; puis, par curieuse leçon et meditatione frequente, rompre l'os et sugger la sustantifique mouelle

Rabelais, *Gargantua*¹

The Experience of Education in Anglo-Saxon Literature offers a pedagogical interpretation of early English prose and poetry, showing how memories of education and theories of learning undergird much writing in the period across a range of genres and languages. The starting point is a simple proposition: every single Old English or Anglo-Latin text we have today has survived because someone literate wrote it down. In many cases, literate authors, translators, and adaptors were involved as well. Every one of these individuals learned to read and write from individual teachers who used particular pedagogical methods. What to us are abstract concepts of 'literacy' and 'education' were for them lived experiences, and must have carried all the joys, tensions, and traumas that going to school has always entailed. Like us, literate Anglo-Saxons reflected on their education. However, instead of writing campus novels as we do, they told their truth slant in dramatic textbooks, in quirky anecdotes slipped into histories and biographies, and in tiny but important changes made as they adapted Latin works or copied Old English ones. Trained to read closely and beneath the surface of the text, they left clues we often miss. We have learned to read for the subtle changes an author made in source material to promote a certain typological reading or a nationalistic agenda, but rarely do we imagine a personal story might motivate these variations.

Scholars of the middle ages are aware of the extent to which their understanding of the period is mediated by written texts and, by extension, by literate culture and ideology. However, the scribes, compilers, translators, adapters, glossators, and, often, composers of medieval texts learned their

specialised skills in a relationship or series of relationships patterned on the roles of *magister* and *discipulus*. They generally spoke well of education and of their teachers in official writing – this much is clear to any reader of early English lives, histories, and letters. The premise underlying this book is that they recognised how emotionally and cognitively intricate the process of education is, and that they reflected on this experience by translating, adapting, and composing fictions of teaching. The study of these ‘scenes of instruction’ is vital, not only because of its relevance to the growing body of research into Anglo-Saxon and early medieval education, not even because of the acknowledged importance of wisdom and learning in early England, but because the processes of teaching and learning underpin the very creation of the texts that comprise much of the past’s legacy to us. *The Experience of Education in Anglo-Saxon Literature* seeks to understand the emotions, tensions, and struggles inherent in the process of learning. To discover these, it investigates how Old English and Anglo-Latin texts represent encounters between teachers and students, uncovering a host of energies both dark and productive: desire, pain, fear, and failure.

Fundamental to my reading practice is New Criticism, which attends to the tensions and nuances of image and language within a literary work above their sources and historical context. While it is impossible to discuss early medieval texts without historical knowledge, the field of Anglo-Saxon studies has tended to conflate the explanation of sources or context with literary interpretation. As a result, some texts, like the Old English poem *Solomon and Saturn I*, are much studied but seldom read. Privileging the poem over its sources, and allowing that its tensions and confusions could be part of its meaning rather than failures on the part of the poet, allows us to see the drama of pedagogy enacted between the lines of *Solomon and Saturn I*. In other cases, as in the Old English *Life of St Mary of Egypt*, there are evident errors in the text as we have it, but these mistakes are also revelatory. I read the mistakes of translation and transmission in the *Life* suspiciously, as symptoms of the recognition that teachers and students establish their relationships through desire, but that desire threatens to undermine teaching itself.

I approach the works treated in this book with the assumption that a text may invite different audiences to form different interpretations.² Sometimes this effect is plain: the reader of *Solomon and Saturn I* is reminded by the silent runes on the manuscript page that listeners are missing part of the poem. At other points it is more subtle: the apostle at the heart of *Andreas* can be read as the model of a saint or as a failed pupil, depending on whether one focuses on the story’s hagiographical affiliations

Introduction

3

or on its troubling details. What does such watchful reading mean in practice? It means taking note of authors' statements about the way their work ought to be read, as when Ælfric Bata remarks that he has slipped jokes into his *Colloquies*. It means that obvious errors of logic in the hands of a skilled author like the *Andreas* poet may be taken as clues to a hidden layer of meaning.³ It calls for careful scrutiny of parallel passages, especially when they vary slightly from each other.⁴ It requires special attention to moments when an author presents an orthodox view and later contradicts himself.⁵ It means taking the speeches of rogue figures seriously, be they devils or naughty boys, as they may serve as mouthpieces for unacceptable views.⁶ It also means paying attention to how citations of earlier texts are employed, especially when they are altered or taken out of context, as Ælfric Bata does with Scripture.⁷ Finally, it means a close analysis of how a text's sources are adapted, especially when the changes are easy to miss.

This reading practice would have been familiar to educated Anglo-Saxons, who faced problems of interpretation when they read the Christian Bible. If the Bible is revealed text and the perfect handiwork of God, then its errors and contradictions must point to a hidden meaning. In order to examine its secrets, the reader must cultivate a mode of reading attentive to echoes, inconsistencies, telling parallels, and multivalent words. Learned Anglo-Saxons believed, after all, that Scripture must be interpreted in order to be understood.⁸ The positive testament to this conviction is the work of Bede. Although the eighth-century monk and scholar is primarily remembered as an historian, the bulk of his writing was dedicated to biblical exegesis. Bede inherited a tradition that was attentive to the literal meaning of Scripture but recognised a series of figural significations beyond the literal; to the unraveling of these he devoted his considerable efforts.⁹ To approach the problem of reading *ex negativo* we may turn to the tenth century and to Ælfric. In his preface to Genesis, he expresses his concern that people reading the Old Testament without the training to interpret it might be tempted to imitate the lifestyles of the patriarchs, not understanding that those patriarchs lived under the old law, one inappropriate for Christians. Ælfric is wary of translating the Bible into the vernacular and thus making it more widely available, but he is also wary of those who have learned a little Latin, for they read Scripture without understanding 'hu deop seo boc ys on gastlicum andgite' (how deep the book is in spiritual meaning).¹⁰ In this, he anticipates Pope's maxim, 'A little learning is a dang'rous Thing;/ Drink deep, or taste not the *Pierian* spring.'¹¹

This concern with deep reading, whether it means distinguishing between the law of the Old Testament and that of the New or uncovering a variety

of meanings under the surface sense, is intimately connected to elementary grammatical education in late antiquity and the early middle ages. *Grammatica*, as Martin Irvine has shown, was not simply what we would understand as ‘grammar’: the structure of a language, or more broadly, its syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics. Rather, it was an art of interpretation and of correct writing and speech, all of which aimed at ‘maintaining and promoting a Christian monastic *paideia* comprising the Scriptures, Christian literature, and the liturgy’.¹² For Anglo-Saxons this was an art to be exercised, primarily, in Latin, and it is no surprise that both Bede and Ælfric wrote works of basic instruction for that language.¹³ Nor was this method of interpretative reading exclusively applied to Scripture. Bede, it has been argued, intended his *Ecclesiastical History* to be read according to an allegorical scheme as well as literally.¹⁴ Much scholarship on Old English verse from the 1960s to the 1980s took for granted that poetry, too, was meant to be read allegorically or figuratively, though critical opinions on the legitimacy of this approach are divided.¹⁵ Riddles, which Anglo-Saxons wrote in both Latin and English, trained readers and hearers to think beyond the literal meanings of words, to perceive multiple meanings in a text, and to be attentive to incongruities within a narrative or description.¹⁶ In short, many literate Anglo-Saxons were practised close readers as a result of their grammatical training and exposure to scriptural exegesis.¹⁷

A more oblique influence on my reading practice is New Formalism, represented in Middle English studies by the work of Seth Lerer, Christopher Cannon, D. Vance Smith, Maura Nolan, and Eleanor Johnson, among others.¹⁸ Marjorie Levison has distinguished between formalist critics who aim to foreground aesthetic principles, firmly dividing artistic from historical texts, and those who understand attention to form as a corrective to and continuation of new historicism.¹⁹ A renewed embrace of literature’s aesthetic preeminence is not the goal of this book, which, after all, happily apposes history, biography, hagiography, poetry, and language textbooks. Rather, with Richard Strier, I consider that ‘the results of a formalist analysis ... may themselves be *data* for historical understanding’.²⁰ In medieval studies, formalist analysis offers a chance to perceive odd texts such as *Solomon and Saturn I* as inventive rather than egregious, and reveals the potential of form to animate practices of ethics, education, and interpretation.²¹

Although the texts discussed in this book hew to different genres, a single form quickens them: the dialogue. The dialogue had been established as a medium of education and a testing ground of wisdom and philosophy in

Introduction

5

antiquity. Anglo-Saxon literate culture was shaped, in various ways, by late antique catechetical texts and reflexes of Platonic philosophical dialogues.²² Not only were works such as Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, Augustine's *Soliloquies*, and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* read and copied in the original Latin, but all three were rendered into the vernacular as part of the Alfredian programme of translation.²³ Even when they did not translate late antique dialogues, Anglo-Saxons often adapted them for pedagogical use or took them as models for original compositions. This is the case with Isidore's *Synonyma*, which Ælfric Bata excerpted satirically in his *Colloquies*, with the *Altercatio Hadriani Augusti et Epicteti Philosophi*, which influenced Alcuin's *Disputatio Pippini cum Albino* as well as the vernacular *Prose Solomon and Saturn* and *Adrian and Ritheus*, and with Donatus' *Ars minor*, which lent its form to Aldhelm's *De metris*. School dialogues could be used to varied ends: Alcuin used a series of dialogues to teach grammar and rhetoric, Ælfric and his pupil Ælfric Bata composed and adapted colloquies for basic Latin instruction, and someone at Æthelwold's school at Winchester wrote a biting dispute in verse between a master and a disciple, a learned counterpart to the Germanic *flyting*.²⁴

Dialogues were standard tools in Anglo-Saxon schools in England and on the continent, as well as in spiritual teaching in the broader sense. This suggests something important about the nature of teaching and the place of the teacher in the early medieval period. Dialogues imply ambivalence toward authority. This is less true with catechetical works, though in the *Disputatio Pippini*, Alcuin managed to turn even a simple question-and-answer exercise into a sly and penetrating reflection on language and the world. On the whole, however, the form of the dialogue implies a dialectical process of contestation and interpretation. Late antique and early medieval dialogues that centre on education often refuse to present teachers as unassailable. Joel Relihan has argued persuasively that Philosophy fails to teach Boethius in the *Consolation*,²⁵ and school colloquies more often than not feature troubling masters. Classical dialogues, as Seth Lerer has noted, often explore the 'limitations of human language' rather than its unalloyed success.²⁶ The *agon* implicit in the educational dialogues so beloved by Anglo-Saxons permeates, by extension, the scenes of instruction studied in this book. Most of these are dialogues in their own right, and all of them are encounters between a pupil and a teacher whose assumptions, allegiances, and desires are at odds.

The subtle eristic and affective qualities of Anglo-Saxon depictions of teaching can be traced in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, a book that features several scenes of instruction and multiple reflections on the relationship

of emotions to learning. Despite the superficially celebratory, even hagiographic, qualities of the *Life*, Asser in fact paints an ambivalent picture of the king. He depicts Alfred as a man of many desires, longings that are laudable only when directed to the right ends. The example of Alfred shows that desire and suffering both help and hinder the processes of learning and self-improvement, thus demonstrating the paradoxical qualities of pedagogically useful emotions. But there is another level to Asser's biography: while Asser is clearly the king's social inferior, he is keen to present himself as the king's intellectual superior. To do so openly would be impolitic, but by weaving awkward references and similes into his narrative, he encourages a reading in which the balance of authority between the king and himself is reversed. And, lest readers miss his clues, he invites them to read suspiciously by denying the possibility of a suspicious reading.²⁷

In chapter 76 of the *Life*, following an encomium to Alfred as a king who embodies wisdom, faith, and good governance, Asser compares him to Solomon. As Anton Scharer has demonstrated, this is an eminently suitable comparison if the *Life* is to be read as a mirror for princes in the Carolingian mould, in line with Charles the Bald's deliberate self-presentation as a second Solomon.²⁸ However, although his name was readily associated with wisdom, medieval writers were also conscious of Solomon's apostasy at the instigation of his wives. Bede, whose work Asser knew, treated the subject, as did Augustine, Isidore, and Rabanus Maurus.²⁹ Read with a measure of suspicion, the mention of Solomon underscores the notion that Asser's Alfred is a man of powerful longings both erotic and intellectual. At a young age, Alfred worries that carnal desires might keep him from doing God's will, and prays that his mind should be made 'multo robustius per aliquam infirmitatem, quam posset sustinere' (ch. 74, much stronger by some illness, which he would be able to withstand).³⁰ He is subsequently afflicted by *ficus*, which is thought by some scholars to refer to haemorrhoids, by others to more general skin eruptions.³¹ Carnal lust is not the only kind of urge that characterises the king, however. More prominent in the *Life* is his enduring thirst for literacy, wisdom, and the liberal arts. Asser mentions his desire for wisdom (ch. 22, sapientiae desiderium), how he is 'enticed' (illectus) by his mother's book prize (ch. 23), his early unfulfilled desire (desiderio) for good teachers (ch. 24), how he did not leave off that same insatiable desire (insaturabili desiderio) for learning, and continues to yearn for it (inhiare) to the present day (ch. 25), the way the wisdom and learning of his four Mercian teachers both fulfilled and increased his desire (ch. 77, desiderium crescebat et impletur), the king's regal but laudable 'greed' for more teachers from abroad (ch. 78, regalis

Introduction

7

avaritia, sed tamen laudabilis), to mention but a few of the more obvious instances. While Alfred's curiosity is deeply commendable in the context of the *Life*, Asser's comparison of the king to Solomon and Alfred's own concern about sexual temptation remind us that *desiderium* is a double-valenced word, aimed rightly only when directed towards wisdom and knowledge of the faith.

In Alfred's case, as with a number of the depictions of teaching I examine in this book, desire is intimately bound up with suffering. Alfred's first illness is a result of his own attempt to control his physical urges, a self-willed punishment for his own concupiscence. His prayer to suffer some kind of manageable illness also shows that he could think of disease as a tool in his ongoing process of self-discipline and spiritual improvement, a way of making the mind 'multo robustius'. David Pratt has argued convincingly that the account of the boy's supplication for suffering is a 'retrospective rationalization' on the part of Alfred, and that the extreme piety exemplified in this story is the result, not the cause, of his illness.³² Even if the tale is a myth, it demonstrates the conception of instrumental pain Alfred and Asser could draw on to make sense of the king's sufferings.

However, like desire, physical suffering is also a double-edged sword. Alfred's first illness proves too much for him, leading him to despair of his life, and after praying for a more manageable disease, the *ficus* is relieved. However, after his wedding, he is stricken with an even worse condition: 'subito et immenso atque omnibus medicis incognito confestim coram omni populo correptus est dolore' (ch. 74, suddenly, in front of the entire crowd, he was seized by a swift and immense pain unknown to all the doctors).³³ As Alfred will come to lament, 'crebris querelis et intimis cordis sui suspiriis' (ch. 25, with frequent complaints and sighs from the depth of his heart), when he was young enough to learn, there were no good teachers in the West Saxon kingdom. When he was older and had teachers available to him, he was distracted from study by a host of problems including pagan incursions, concerns of state, and, first of all on the list, by 'omnibus istius insulae medicis incognitis infirmitatibus' (ch. 25, diseases unknown to all the doctors of this island), apparently the illness he acquired after his nuptials.³⁴ Alfred's illness has been interpreted in positive terms by scholars, who have argued that his infirmity, and his resulting piety, was a mark of kingly strength, not weakness.³⁵ Still, as Asser's description of the king's intellectual regrets makes clear, disease had a deleterious effect on Alfred's education. The *Life of King Alfred* thus offers us two competing notions of the relationship between bodily suffering and learning. Alfred's case reveals that the role of pain in education, whether this is conceived of narrowly as

a formal study of the arts or more broadly as personal spiritual progress, is a fundamentally conflicted one.

Alfred's kingly authority is thus anchored in a triangulation of desire, pain, and learning, themes which come together in Asser's curious comparison of Alfred to the fortunate thief crucified next to Christ. The context for this passage is the lengthiest instructional encounter of the *Life*, one in which Asser diplomatically guides Alfred to begin his famous *enchiridion*, or handbook. The scene is a cozy depiction of a happy exchange between a powerful student and his prudent teacher. Alfred urges Asser to copy a passage the latter has just read aloud into his book of prayers. Asser hesitates, as he tells us, 'maxime quia tam elegans regis ingenium ad maiorem divinorum testimoniorum scientiam provocare studebam' (ch. 88, because I wanted to challenge the king's fine intelligence to a greater understanding of Holy Scripture). When the king impatiently urges him to hurry, Asser delicately asks if Alfred would approve of beginning a new compendium that might be suitable for other texts as well. This done, Asser goes on to copy three more passages into the quire, to the king's delight – just as Asser had predicted (ut praedixeram). After this psychologically sensitive portrayal of a teacher who maintains his pedagogic authority while respecting his student's temporal power, Asser laments the belatedness of the king's education. He does so in a surprising way, comparing Alfred to the thief crucified next to Christ, 'qui Christianae fidei rudimenta in gabulo primitus inchoavit discere' (ch. 89, who first began to learn the rudiments of Christian faith on the gallows).

Such a comparison could be seen as a positive portrayal of Alfred. The thief is, in this simile, a student of Christ's example *par excellence*. Indeed, Asser's analogy between king and thief makes sense in the context of Alfred's many travails, and a light verbal echo underscores this point: the thief directs his physical eyes towards Christ, as his body is 'totus confixus clavis' (ch. 89, wholly transfixed with nails), and soon after Alfred is, despite his royal power, described as 'multis tribulationum clavis confossus' (ch. 91, pierced with the nails of many tribulations). Read in this light, the *passio* is a tidy interpretative capstone that places Alfred's suffering in the context of spiritual discipleship and *imitatio Christi*. On the other hand, Asser seems conscious of the potential negative implications of his simile. If the thief begins to learn on the gallows, Alfred does so 'dissimili modo, in regia potestate' (ch. 89, in a different way, in royal power). Moreover, the instructional context in which Asser uses the simile provokes another interpretation. For if Alfred, beginning his *enchiridion* on Asser's prompting, is compared to the thief who learns faith while looking towards the

Introduction

9

Lord, the logic of the analogy proposes that Asser occupies the role of Christ.

Asser seems conscious that such an interpretation is possible; indeed, his protestations draw attention to it. In the following chapter, Asser is more explicit about his reservations:

Sed, sicut a quodam sapiente iamdudum scriptum est, ‘invigilant animi, quibus est pia cura regendi,’ magnopere invigilandum mihi censeo in eo, quod ante aliquam, quamvis dissimili modo, similitudinem inter illum felicem latronem et regem composuerim: namque patibulum exosum est unicuique, ubicunque male habet. Sed quid faciat, si non possit se inde eripere aut etiam effugere, vel qualicunque arte causam suam meliorare ibidem commorando? Debet ergo, velit, nolit, cum moerore et tristitia sufferre, quod patitur. (Ch. 90)

But, as a certain wise man wrote long ago, ‘the spirits of those who have the pious office of ruling are ever watchful,’ I think I have to be exceedingly watchful in the comparison I made before between the fortunate thief and the king, however dissimilar they are in degree. For the gibbet is detestable to everyone who suffers misfortune. But what should he do if he cannot rescue himself from it or even flee, or stay there and improve his situation by some art? So he must endure, with grief and sadness, what he is suffering, whether he wants to or not.

Asser’s use of a hexameter from Corippus’ *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris* rewards perusal in both old and new senses of the word.³⁶ The hasty reader might think Asser is drawing back from any untoward implications about Alfred while recognising the cares of state, the ‘cura regendi’, that weigh on the king. The king’s ‘gibbet’ is, as the next chapter will go on to outline, a combination of physical illness and the difficulties of government, woes he must endure patiently. Read slowly, however, the hexameter suggests that, since he is the one who must be watchful, it is Asser, not Alfred, who shoulders the difficulty of governing. In Chapter 88 Asser was careful to maintain Alfred’s authority despite his intellectual shortcomings. However, in Chapters 89 and 90 Asser uses analogies that are awkwardly fitted to the situation and thus lead the reader to consider him superior to the king. Indeed, he invites this ‘misreading’ by twice denying it.

Asser’s mixed presentation of Alfred – an eager pupil who sadly started too late, a man who lusts for both knowledge and bodies – demonstrates *in nuce* the two main claims of this book. The first is that scenes of instruction often involve an element of *agon* even if the depiction of education seems at first idealised. Negotiations for power and subtexts of resistance

and criticism undergird the platitudes about the importance of wisdom and learning one often finds in Anglo-Saxon literature. The second claim is that education is a highly emotional process, one that often involves feelings we would now consider negative, unpleasant, or inappropriate. Anglo-Saxon writers recognise, however, that those affects that accompany and enable learning often also threaten to hinder it.

The Experience of Education offers a pedagogical reading of Anglo-Saxon literature without attempting a comprehensive history of Anglo-Saxon education. That history has yet to be written, although not for lack of effort on the part of Anglo-Saxonists, who in recent years have addressed the topic with vigour.³⁷ This scholarly energy is particularly evident in international collaborative projects focused on early medieval and Anglo-Saxon education. *Leorningcraft: Form and Contents of Instruction in Anglo-Saxon England in the Light of Contemporary Manuscript Evidence*, based in Italy, and *Storehouses of Wholesome Learning: Accumulation and Dissemination of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, a joint Dutch–Italian project, demonstrate a growing interest in understanding the education in great part responsible for the vernacular literary works we teach, explicate, and translate.³⁸ But telling the story of Anglo-Saxon schooling is no simple matter, comprising as it does multiple histories with disparate sources: textbooks, pedagogic techniques, theories of education, institutions, and biographies of influential teachers. While I do not propose to write a history of Anglo-Saxon education, in what follows I describe what such a history might look like, and what its points of contact are with the chapters in this book.

The type of source that most readily recommends itself to the study of early education is any text that might be described as a schoolbook. It is sometimes asserted that the difficulty Latin posed to the Anglo-Saxons, native speakers of a Germanic tongue, spurred them to great productivity in grammar and language pedagogy.³⁹ Accordingly, many schoolbooks are grammars, either late antique ones passed down to the Anglo-Saxons or those written by early medieval educators such as Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, Boniface, Alcuin, or Ælfric.⁴⁰ Other works composed especially for the classroom are the colloquies devised for the acquisition and practice of Latin, such as *De raris fabulis*, Ælfric's *Colloquy*, and Ælfric Bata's *Colloquies*.⁴¹ The evidence also includes glosses. These might be in English or Latin, as can be found in the glossed *Enigmata* of Boniface, and can of course also include Welsh or Irish glossing.⁴² Lexical glosses were compiled into lists, and these glossaries could, in turn, be adapted for use in educational works such as Ælfric's *Grammar* and conversational