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Introduction: ideas of community and an Anglo-Saxon audience/readership

A concern with ideas of community and of the relationship of individuals to communities is widely evident in surviving Old English poetic texts, both secular and religious. Images of community in the poetry are most typically expressed in the terms of Germanic warrior society but they also make reference to ideals of divinely sanctioned order and authority. The concern with community in poetic texts is reflected in the very stances of narrators and speakers and is apparent both in the ostensible themes of many poems and in recurrent clusters of imagery found throughout the tradition.

The narrator of *Beowulf*, for example, speaks in the first person singular:

> ne hyrde ic cymlicor   ceol gegyrwan;[1]
> hyrde ic þæt ...[2]

However, the use of the first person plural at the very beginning of this poem reflects the narrator's posture of speaking from and for a community:

> Hwæt! We Gardena   in geardagum,
> þeodcyninga,   þrym gefrunon.[3]

Beowulf presents itself as if it were the utterance of a traditional *scop*, 'minstrel', figure. Other narrative poems similarly suggest by their participatory use of the first person plural the communal aspect of the voice of the individual narrator.[4] The Old English lyric poems referred to

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[1]   *Beowulf*, line 38: 'I have not heard of a ship more splendidly adorned.'
[2]   Line 62: 'I heard that ...'
[3]   *Beowulf*, lines 1–2: 'Behold, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes in days gone by, of the kings of the people.'
[4]   Examples are *Exodus*: 'Hwæt! We feor and neah   gefrigen habað' (line 1): 'Behold,

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by critics as the 'elegies', even when they purport to present personal experience, do so with reference to their speakers' relation to ideas of community.[5] *The Seafarer*, for example, begins with a voice expressing such experience, outside society: 'Mæg ic be me sylfum   soðgied wrecan',[6] but it is the poem's underlying sense of community which gives this expression its depth and significance. And *The Seafarer* ends with the inclusive, authoritative voice of the homilist, in the first person plural, urging the audience, having forsaken earthly community, to strive to achieve heavenly community: 'Uton we hycgan   hwær we ham agen.'[7]

The poems whose overall themes relate most obviously to ideas of community are perhaps lyric poems like *The Seafarer*, but non-lyric verse also concerns itself with the theme of community. The poems which modern commentators have come to categorize as 'wisdom' poems[8] can be seen as inviting their audiences to share in the acceptance and appreciation of communal values. Narrative works, as well as presenting pictures of social harmony, show a concern with portraying threats to and disruption of community. Like some of the elegies, narrative poems often appear to

far and near we have heard'; *Andreas*: 'Hwæt! We gefrunan   on fyrndagum' (line 1): 'Behold, we have heard in former days'; *The Battle of Brunanburh*: 'þæs þe us secgað bec' (line 68): 'as books tell us'. On the narrators of Old English poetry, see W. Parks, 'The Traditional Narrator and the "I Heard" Formulas in Old English Poetry', *ASE* 16 (1987), 45–66; see also R. Frank, 'The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 75 (1993), 11–36.

5   See Klinck on the theme of exile in the elegies (*The Old English Elegies*, pp. 225–6). Klinck's discussion of exile is part of her useful genre study, 'The Nature of Elegy in Old English' (*ibid.*, pp. 221–51).

6   *The Seafarer*, line 1: 'I can utter a true tale about myself.'

7   Line 117: 'Let us think where we have our home.' Lois Bragg contrasts the 'fictive speaker' of *The Seafarer* and other lyrics with the 'nonpersonal speaker' observed, for example, in *The Ruin* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*, but does not explore the communal aspect of lyric voices (*The Lyric Speakers of Old English Poetry*, pp. 65–111). The 'inclusive, authoritative' voices of Old English poetry are characteristically those of male speakers. The narrators of the poetry are overwhelmingly male. Even where gender is unspecified, as in *The Seafarer*, the narrational perspective is usually implicitly male. We shall see below that female speakers, though they are affected by communal concerns, are not normally presented as speaking from or for a community.

8   See Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, pp. 1–4; Greenfield and Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*, pp. 253–79.

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endorse received notions of community, but Old English poetic texts also raise unsettling questions about such notions and prompt critical reflection upon them.

Ideas of community are reflected in the images of warmth and security of society found throughout Old English poetry and in antithetical images of dislocation and alienation. One such powerful image of warmth and security appears in the scene of joy in heaven in the closing lines of *The Dream of the Rood*:

> Þær is blis mycel,
> dream on heofonum,   þær is drihtnes folc
> geseted to symle,   þær is singal blis.[9]

This image comes at the culmination of the poem's movement from a depiction of the speaker's solitariness and detachment from community to a closing scene of whole-hearted embracing of the joys of community in heaven. In this passage from *The Dream of the Rood* a Christian idea, that of eternal beatitude, is expressed in imagery which suggests the world of the secular hall with its feasting and fellowship among warriors. The poem is making use of the traditional Christian figure of the heavenly *convivium*, 'banquet', but this figure can be perceived as presented in terms distinctive of the tradition of Germanic literature.

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The identification and exploration of ideas of community expressed in Old English poetic texts are one part of the purpose of this book. To the extent that it achieves this purpose, the book is a contribution to the 'traditional' study of Old English poetry, concerning itself with questions of the Old English scholarly agenda as it developed in the post-war period – What kind of poetry is Old English poetry? What are its distinctive character-istics and concerns? The present book, however, also concerns itself with another dimension of the topic, which interacts with the traditional philological one. This other dimension is that of the textuality of Old English poetry and pertains to questions of reception and interpretation of

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[9]   *The Dream of the Rood*, lines 139–41: 'where there is great bliss, joy in heaven, where the Lord's people are seated at the feast, where there is perpetual bliss'. Note that the end of *The Dream of the Rood* also presents a shift from first person singular to inclusive first person plural: 'He us onlysde   and us lif forgeaf' (line 147).

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the poetry in Anglo-Saxon England rather than to those of composition. The book considers aspects of the significance of Old English poetry for a particular textual community. The term 'textual community' (which contains an implicit opposition to 'oral community') is employed here to refer to the nexus between texts and interpretation in a specific historico-cultural context.[10] I find the term useful as highlighting the reception of Old English poetry in a text-based culture in late Anglo-Saxon England. I also interchange the term 'textual community', however, with the looser term 'audience/readership', not least because of the potential ambiguity in the use of the word *community* (in 'textual community') in a book which itself focuses on the theme of community.

We have little information, of course, about the circumstances of the composition of most Old English poetry, and what little information we have (as in Bede's story of the poet Cædmon) we wisely take with a pinch of salt. The 'pre-history' of the surviving texts, before they were textualized in their present form by being copied into the manuscripts in which they were preserved into the modern era, remains, to coin a phrase, a closed book: for most Old English poems we cannot even supply a reliable date of composition to within a century.[11] On the other hand, we do have evidence to enable us to identify features of an interesting reception context for the poetry. The context for which we have significant evidence is that of the period of the copying of the great poetry codices, roughly the second half of the tenth and first half of the

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[10] The term 'textual community' has been adapted here from the work of Brian Stock, particularly in *The Implications of Literacy: Written Languages and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 1983). The term is applied to Old English in a recent essay by Martin Irvine, which I have found very useful to my own work: see Irvine, 'Medieval Textuality'. Irvine points out (p. 277, n. 9) the similarity of the term to Stanley Fish's notion of an 'interpretive community' (though 'textual community' is used in 'a far more historicizing sense'): see S. Fish, *Is There a Text in the Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA, 1980). See also Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*: Lerer makes use of the idea of a textual community (see esp. pp. 19–21), and his wider project of showing how the act of reading 'becomes a way of aligning the individual within a social framework' (p. 59) throws light on aspects of the relationship between texts and audience/readership which are not developed in the present study.

[11] See A. C. Amos, *Linguistic Means for Determining the Dates of Old English Literary Texts* (Cambridge, MA, 1980). Dates have been proposed for the composition of *Beowulf* as far apart as the seventh and eleventh centuries: see *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Chase.

eleventh century.[12] The codices themselves are a key part of the literary evidence for this period.

The present study views the concern with community evident in Old English poetic texts as fitting into a larger pattern of preoccupation with issues of identity and society in the late Anglo-Saxon period, the period in which we know the poems to have been read. This period, stretching from the time of the aftermath of the battle of Brunanburh (937) to the decades of Danish rule in England, was, of course, far from monolithic in character: this was a time of change and upheaval, in which, among other things, the uses and significance of literature must have been diverse and even contradictory, rather than being narrowly associated with a particular ideological or spiritual view. Generally, however, this period has been characterized by recent commentators as one of growing intellectual and ideological confidence but also of political anxiety and instability.[13] The late Anglo-Saxon period is also a period in which can be discerned a preoccupation with 'desire for origins'.[14] There is interest in the Anglo-Saxon past and in the notion of a shared Germanic heritage,[15] although relations with the contemporary Germanic reality of Scandinavians in

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[12] For a convenient summary of knowledge about the dating and compilation of the poetry manuscripts, see D. G. Scragg, 'The Nature of Old English Verse', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Godden and Lapidge, pp. 55–6. The manuscript context of the poetry is discussed by F. C. Robinson, 'Old English Literature in its Most Immediate Context', in *Old English Literature in Context: Ten Essays*, ed. J. D. Niles (Cambridge and Totowa, NJ, 1980), pp. 11–29 and 157–61.

[13] For an authoritative recent account of the period, see Stafford, *Unification and Conquest*. On aspects of the period, see the essays in *Tenth Century Studies*, ed. Parsons, particularly H. R. Loyn, 'Church and State in England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries', pp. 94–102 and 229–30; see also E. John, 'The World of Abbot Ælfric', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. P. Wormald, D. Bullough and R. Collins (Oxford, 1983), pp. 300–15; B. Yorke, 'Æthelwold and the Politics of the Tenth Century', in *Bishop Æthelwold*, ed. Yorke, pp. 65–88; and Campbell, 'England, *c.* 991'.

[14] The phrase has been used recently with reference to the modern reception of Old English poetry: see A. J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London, 1990). 'Desire for origins' is also evident, however, in late Anglo-Saxon England: see Irvine, 'Medieval Textuality', pp. 207–8.

[15] The cultivation of the Germanic past in Anglo-Saxon England is discussed by R. Frank, 'Germanic Legend in Old English Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Godden and Lapidge, pp. 88–106.

Images of community in Old English poetry

England are marked by contradiction: to the Anglo-Saxons, relations with Danes and Norwegians meant conflict *and* settlement, paganism *and* conversion, disorder *and* law (the latter epitomized by the legal and political writings of Wulfstan in the reign of Cnut, 1016–35).[16]

In this broad historical context of perception of discontinuity and desire for cohesion, concepts of community are of particular interest and urgency. Such concepts inform much homiletic writing of the period, occurring not least in the most famous of all sermons of late Anglo-Saxon England, Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, and an implicit appeal to a shared sense of community underlies even as apparently politically disinterested a text as Ælfric's *Colloquy*.[17] The next section of this chapter will examine the notable preoccupation with themes of treachery and betrayal evident in later Anglo-Saxon texts. Before turning to these themes, however, we need to define more sharply our imagined audience/readership of the poetry codices, an audience/readership which, I suggest, found in Old English poetry a significant reinforcement of its ideological interests.

The primary audience/readership which we must imagine for the poetry codices is a monastic one, since literacy throughout the Anglo-Saxon age is overwhelmingly associated with the monastery. The late Anglo-Saxon period, with which we are particularly concerned, is the period of the 'Benedictine Revival' in England, a time of monastic resurgence and of the cultivation of the vernacular written language as a medium for religious teaching. If we are to consider with any confidence the basic, but fraught, question of how Old English poetry might have been received in Anglo-Saxon England, how real Anglo-Saxon men and women might have

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16 A recent assessment of Wulfstan's work as legal advisor to Cnut, noting his concern for continuity with the past, is provided by Greenfield and Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*: '[Wulfstan] evidently was in charge of the creation of I and II Cnut – the culmination of Anglo-Saxon law. For after the chaos of Æthelred's reign, Wulfstan tried to reestablish the laws of the West Saxon kings, especially those of Edgar' (p. 110). Wulfstan's *Institutes of Polity* is a detailed account of the proper structure of a Christian society, showing the integral relationship of church and state: see *Die 'Institutes of Polity, Civil and Ecclesiastical'*, ed. Jost (trans. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Prose*, pp. 187–201).

17 *Sermo Lupi*, ed. Whitelock; *Ælfric's Colloquy*, ed. Garmonsway. Ruffing, 'The Labor Structure of Ælfric's *Colloquy*', brings out the social ideology of the *Colloquy*, noting how, 'After addressing the contending parties as *socii* to efface differences, the counselor stresses mutual service ... and asks that no one disrupt the arrangements' (p. 68).

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understood and interpreted the poetic texts, a starting point is provided by
the existence of a number of specific poetry manuscripts in this late Anglo-
Saxon monastic context.

Our late Anglo-Saxon audience/readership may have been quite dif-
ferent in character from the original audiences of the literature and it may
have interpreted the poems in a manner which the poets did not 'intend'.
The origin of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, say, or *The Fight at Finnsburh* might have
been a long way from the monastery walls. On the other hand, poems such
as these were evidently (for whatever reason) of enough interest to literate
religious at this time to allow for their preservation. Literate religious
might have read new meanings into such poems but, even if they did,
these readers and hearers must have been sufficiently attuned to the
traditions represented in the poetry to make interpretations of it seem
worthwhile to themselves. We do not have to assume that tenth- and
eleventh-century monastic readings of earlier poems would in all cases
have been different from other possible Anglo-Saxon readings. However, a
critical approach which takes account of an identifiable reception for a
body of literature can, it is hoped, avoid some of the dangers of the
grander unverifiable generalizations about 'the Anglo-Saxon poet' and 'the
Anglo-Saxon audience'. Some of the dangers will remain, since our
imagined audience is itself a construct, and inevitably is crudely
delineated. However, we can contemplate with more confidence the idea
of an audience/readership with shared experience and expectations in our
monastic context than we can the idea of the (oral?) reception of poetry in
Anglo-Saxon England as a whole.[18]

A key dimension to the literature as we perceive it being received in
late Anglo-Saxon England is its very existence in particular manuscripts,
its textuality. Quite apart from considering the implications of the highly
ruminative nature of the reading process in monastic culture (as mentioned
below), this manuscript existence encourages us to include codicological
factors in a historicized interpretion of the poetry: awareness of the overall

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[18] As Carol Pasternack puts it, 'we should consider the extant texts of Old English poetry
as treating issues of concern contemporary to the era of their manuscript production'
(*The Textuality of Old English Poetry*, p. 200). Pasternack goes further than this, indeed,
suggesting that the manuscript context of Old English verse is the only one that can
be fruitfully discussed, since we can never recover antecedent forms of the verse: 'The
task of identifying the poet's work versus the scribe's work is impossible and
anachronistic' (*ibid.*, p. 193).

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composition of the 'Junius Manuscript', for example, *is* relevant to the interpretation of *Exodus*; *The Battle of Brunanburh* needs to be understood in the context of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; the recurrence of the themes of repentance and conversion throughout the 'Vercelli Book' contributes a significant intertextual context for reading individual works in the collection. The contents of the 'Vercelli Book' also warn us against too tidy a compartmentalization of Old English literature into prose and poetry (and thus encourage us to study the poetry in the context of Old English literature as a whole), whereas those of the 'Junius Manuscript' and the 'Exeter Book' – '.i. mycel englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisan geworht'[19] – show that poetry could be taken as a textual genre separate from prose in the period (thus authorizing particular concentration on poetry on the part of the critic).

Though it would not have been monolithic, we can identify characteristics of our possible audience/readership, enabling us to see how some Anglo-Saxons at least might have understood Old English poetry. One characteristic of this audience would be its acquaintance with the traditions of Christian Latin, particularly monastic, literature. This does not mean that its members would all have been well-read in the works of the church Fathers but that they would have been influenced by the perspectives and concerns of patristic writings, and would have been predisposed towards particular kinds of interpretation. Such an audience would, for example, have been familiar with the notion of the heavenly *convivium*, which we have seen represented in *The Dream of the Rood*.[20] And

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[19] 'One large book in English on many subjects, composed in verse': quotation from Leofric's bequest to Exeter Cathedral, ed. M. Lapidge, 'Surviving Booklists from Anglo-Saxon England', in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes*, ed. M. Lapidge and H. Gneuss (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 33–89, at 64–9.

[20] This idea has its ultimate source in biblical texts such as Luke XIV.15, 'Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God'; Luke XXII.30, 'That you may eat and drink at my table, in my kingdom'; Apoc. XIX.9, 'Blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' Allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs, following Origen (*In Canticum Canticorum*, PG 13, 61–193), see this book as referring to feasting in heaven, when Christ is united with his bride, the church. Of the 'cellar of wine' (Cant. II.4), Origen writes that the bride of Christ asks to be taken into the house of happiness, the place where wine is drunk and food is prepared: 'This is the house of wine and the house of banqueting', says Origen (154C-155A), of which Christ spoke when he said, 'Many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven' (Matth. VIII.11).

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they would have been nurtured on the ideals of monasticism, with its combination of renunciation and *coenobium*, '(house of) communal living'.[21]

Reading itself, as Lois Bragg has recently reminded us, remained a communal activity in Anglo-Saxon England, in that the audience was more likely to be a group rather than individuals reading in private. 'The size of early manuscript books is one indication', writes Bragg (noting that the Junius, Vercelli and Exeter Books all measure approximately twelve by eight inches), 'that they were intended for reading aloud in a communal setting.'[22] Being read to aloud, however, even for the illiterate, is an experience of textual as opposed to oral culture. As Martin Irvine declares, 'Medieval textual communities were formed of literate, semiliterate and illiterate members: those unable or just learning to read were expected to participate in textual culture, having the necessary texts, and their interpretation, read to them.'[23] And in the monastic context of our textual

> The heavenly *convivium* becomes part of the common imagery of Christian tradition and is freely exploited in early medieval writing, not least in England. Alcuin is among those drawn to this imagery. He writes to a female correspondent urging her and those with her to strive to serve Christ so that he will bring them to his banquet of unending and unfailing joy: they must serve Christ,
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> donec introducat vos in domum patris et in cubile genetricis suae (Cant. III.4), ut edatis et bibatis super mensam eius in regno suo (Luke XXII. 30), ubi est cibus sine fastidio, et potus sine siti, et vita sine morte, et gaudium sine tristitia, et gloria sine fine.
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> (*Ep.* xv, ed. Dümmler, MGH Epist. IV, 43, lines 4–6)
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> In another letter Alcuin expresses his desire for himself, 'ut ... inter convivas Dei Christi in aeternae beatudinis epulis recumbere merear' (*Ep.* lxxxvi, ed. Dümmler, MGH Epist. IV, 131, lines 14–16).
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> Ælfric speaks of the heavenly *gebeorscip* at which the soul will feast: in the homily 'On the Assumption of St John the Apostle', as the death of the saint approaches, Christ tells him that it is time for him to feast at his banquet, 'tima is þæt þu mid ðinum gebroðrum wistfullige on minum gebeorscipe' (*Catholic Homilies I*, ed. Thorpe I, 74). John thanks Christ that he has invited him to his banquet: 'Ic þancige ðe þæt þu me gelaðodest to þinum wistum' (*ibid.*). Another Old English homiletic example of the idea of the heavenly banquet occurs in one of the texts edited by Assmann, *Angelsächsische Homilien*, where the banqueting of angels – *engla gebeorscipe* – is mentioned (p. 142, lines 106–7).

[21] Translation from R. E. Latham *et al.*, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London, 1975–) II (1981): among Latham's citations are Bede, Aldhelm, Alcuin, the *Regularis Concordia* and the *Chronicon* of Æthelweard.

[22] Bragg, *The Lyric Speakers of Old English Poetry*, p. 28.

[23] 'Medieval Textuality', p. 185.

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community the meditative and contemplative character of the reading process should also be borne in mind, since this would have had a distinctive influence on the way texts were read.[24] *Ruminatio* introduces private response in reading even when the activity of reading may be communal.

The great expression of religious community in monastic life is the liturgy itself. In shared worship the individual participates in a reflection of heavenly community on earth. Jean Leclercq speaks of the liturgy as 'the eternal praise that the monks, in unison with the angels, began offering God in the abbey choir and which will be perpetuated in heaven'.[25] Emphasis on the *opus Dei*, 'work of God', the common daily services chanted in the choir, was particularly developed in the Cluniac tradition of Benedictinism, which influenced the reformers of English monasticism in the tenth century.[26] In its *form* the liturgy reflects heavenly community, and in its *content* it dwells upon the theme of community, giving voice to the church's aspiration of complete unity with God. And the concept of community provides a recurrent theme in non-liturgical monastic writing as well, appearing particularly in hagiography. Community among the faithful (as opposed to treachery and social discord among the enemies of the saint) is often demonstrated in hagiography, and the saint is portrayed as choosing between different types of community, the earthly and the heavenly. In the saint the sublimity of heavenly community can be seen extending into the world.[27]

A second essential feature of our late Anglo-Saxon audience/readership (after that of its acquaintance with Christian Latin literature) is that it would have had some familiarity with the tradition of vernacular poetry.

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[24] The classic account of monastic reading is Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, pp. 78–93.

[25] *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, p. 249.

[26] See G. Zarnecki, *The Monastic Achievement* (London, 1972), p. 36. On continental influence on the English monastic reform, see D. A. Bullough, 'The Continental Background of the Tenth-Century English Reform', in *Tenth-Century Studies*, ed. Parsons, pp. 20–36 and 210–14; repr. in D. A. Bullough, *Carolingian Renewal: Sources and Heritage* (Manchester and New York, 1991), pp. 272–96; see also P. Wormald, 'Æthelwold and his Continental Counterparts: Contact, Comparison, Contrast', in *Bishop Æthelwold*, ed. Yorke, pp. 13–42.

[27] With reference to this extension of heavenly community into the world, see the discussion of the *passio* of St Margaret in *The Old English Lives of St. Margaret*, ed. Clayton and Magennis, p. 39.