The importance of being foolish: Reconstruction of the pagan and the saint in Ælfric's *Life of St Cecilia*[1]

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The pagan in early martyr lives is a familiar figure, and is often portrayed as an object of scorn by both the saint and the audience of the life. This article explores the ways in which the figures of the saint and pagan antagonist are translated in late Anglo-Saxon England. Ælfric's translation of the *Life of St Cecilia* is examined alongside his Latin source text, discussing alterations Ælfric made concerning the portrayal of the pagan. In its focus on Ælfric's omissions and alterations from his Latin source, this article considers whether Ælfric considered it particularly important to translate the pagan as foolish in order to guide the audience towards a correct interpretation of the events of the life. In order to identify humour in both the Latin source and Ælfric's translation, this article engages with theories of humour, namely superiority and incongruity, discussing how the expectations of the genre make these texts particularly amenable to the application of these theories. Ultimately this article argues that humour had a serious function in hagiography.

Keywords: hagiography, Ælfric; humour theory; translation

1. Introduction

The virgin martyr and his or her pagan opponent are familiar figures in medieval hagiography, a genre which is built upon patterns and expectations. One of these expectations is the foolish rendering of the pagan antagonist.

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This article discusses the translation of the pagan character from the Latin into the vernacular, and considers the purpose and effect of such a foolish depiction when measured against the expectations of genre. In doing so, this article presents a platform on which to discuss the function of humour in hagiography, establishing the paradigms for identifying humour in medieval texts, as well as the types of humour at play. It illuminates how utilising humour for a serious purpose in hagiographic texts need not be regarded as unorthodox or that it necessarily undermines their purpose; humour may have been used to convey complex ideas to the laity, elucidating both the religious message of certain texts as well as perhaps resonating politically and socially with a contemporary audience.[2] For the purpose of this article, I use as a case study Ælfric's translation of the pagan and saint from the Latin *passio sancte cecilie virginis* included in his *Lives of Saints* collection.[3] In its focus on Ælfric's omissions and alterations of his Latin source, this article demonstrates that Ælfric translated these figures in a way which seems to have purposefully adapted the disparaging humour present in the life for his particular audience.

This analysis entails focusing on the specific terms chosen to describe the saint and pagan, the rhetorical construction of their speeches, and of course any omissions and alterations made by Ælfric. Focusing on the *Life of St Cecilia* as a case study allows for greater depth of analysis than a consideration of a collection of lives as a whole would afford, and will also demonstrate the benefits of close examination of vernacular translations alongside their source

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[2] In focusing on humour to guide audience interpretation, I am building on Shari Horner's work, which argues that humour had "strategic and didactic uses [...] in texts intended for monastic and non-monastic audiences alike" (2000: 128). For humour in saints' lives this article is indebted to both Horner's and Magennis' chapters in Wilcox's (2000) edited collection *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*. For Anglo-Saxon humour in general, see Wilcox (1994a) and also Wilcox (forthcoming).

[3] All quotes from the Latin *passio* are from the 'Cotton-Corpus' copy found in the twelfth century manuscript Hereford, Cathedral Library P. VII.6.ff. 73v–80r; page and line numbers refer to Robert Upchurch's edited and translated version in his book *Ælfric's Lives of the Virgin Spouses*. While Upchurch identifies this version as "imperfectly preserv[ing] the textual tradition that underlies Ælfric's immediate source", it does "account fully for the type of text Ælfric must have used", and is closer in tradition than other surviving 'Cotton-Corpus' versions (2007: 30). Quotes in Old English are from Skeat's *Lives of Saints,* edited from British Library Cotton Julius E vii; page and line numbers refer to his edition, translations are my own. For a good introduction to Ælfric and comprehensive bibliography, see Magennis & Swan (2009).

text.[4] By focusing on how the figures of the saint and her pagan antagonist were translated into the vernacular, it is possible to gain a better understanding of how disparaging humour was used to guide, or influence, an Anglo-Saxon audience's interpretation of the doctrinal message of the text, particularly clarifying the purpose of violence within a martyr's life such as Cecilia's. This article also considers how prose hagiographic texts, by virtue of their homogenous narrative patterns, can act as blueprints by which to identify humour, as well as perhaps offering a means for the translator to subtly comment upon contemporary socio-political events.

2. Humour in hagiography

As far back as 1948, Ernst Curtius stated that "[h]umoristic elements [...] are a part of the style of the medieval *vita sancti*" (1953: 428), here referring to the corpus of Latin lives. Christopher Crane has also argued for the presence of humour in medieval religious instructional works, supporting Curtius in his assessment that "the mixture of jest and earnest was among the stylistic norms which were known and practised by the medieval poet, even if he perhaps found them nowhere expressly formatted" (2007: 58). While there have been advancements made, most notably Crane's chapter in *Medieval English Comedy* published in 2007, and Jonathan Wilcox's edited collection *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature* published in 2000, humour's presence in Old English texts is often still noted cautiously: Gregory Sadlek, for example, has claimed that where humour is found it is necessary to ask "is [it] appropriate or [... does ...] it [break] hagiographic decorum" (1991: 45). Martha Bayless adds that where it is identified in Old English texts, humour is "defended [...] only by lengthy arguments buttressed with numerous footnotes" (2007: 13). Indeed Hugh Magennis, while rightly observing that humour from such a distant time is difficult to detect, is particularly hesitant to acknowledge the presence of humour in Old English saints' lives.[5] While Magennis accepts (but does not discuss) "tendentious humor disparaging the enemies of the saint", he appears

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[4] For a useful guide to identifying a Latin source life, see Whatley (1996).

[5] There is no denying the difficulty of identifying past humour. Formulating a working vocabulary with which to help identify past humour can go some way towards overcoming such a difficulty, however, as well as examining modern humour theories, and contextualising the texts within their socio-political background.

reluctant to allow for other types of humour in saints' lives, which he states "could easily be a bathetic distraction" from the proper response to saints' lives —that of wonder and reverence (2000: 141). He argues that incongruity was intended to provoke wonder rather than humour, humour being in Magennis' opinion a modern interpretation of the incongruities found within saints' lives (2000: 141); I will return to this important consideration later in the article.

While this article is not the place for a detailed discussion on all possible types of humour in saints' lives and how they function, it is clear that one form of humour then *is* widely, if at times cautiously, accepted —disparaging humour borne from superiority directed against the pagans, or devils. Indeed, in his brief discussion of humour Curtius focuses specifically on the depiction of the "pagans, the devils, the men of evil" and how "the saint reduces them *ad absurdum*" (1953: 428).[6] This manifestation of humour is well known and acknowledged by other scholars besides Curtius, Crane, Sadlek, and Magennis, including Shari Horner and Oliver Pickering.[7] While this article agrees with the arguments put forward by these scholars on several important points, it departs both in terms of its objectives —that is, to determine whether Ælfric intentionally adapted the humour from his Latin source, by focusing on the alterations made in his translation— and by engaging with humour theories in more depth than has hitherto been afforded them, in order to establish a foundation for identifying humour within medieval hagiographic texts.[8] In doing so, this article aims to further the argument that humour, and not solely tendentious humour, had a place in Old English vernacular hagiography.

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[6] For the relation between disparaging humour and cognitive-resolution theory, see Suls (1977).

[7] See Horner (2000). For Pickering's brief discussion, see his chapter 'Black humour in the *South English Legendary*' (2011), especially p. 435.

[8] This article does not claim to be the first to use humour theories when examining medieval humour. Amongst those who have looked at humour in hagiographic texts, Magennis has discussed theories of incongruity, see in particular his work 'Humorous Incongruity' for a full list (2000: 137). He also notes, but does not engage with, theories on cognition (ibid.). Shari Horner also discusses theories of incongruity, as well as those of superiority, and how they can be effectively applied to saints' lives. Horner devotes just a page at the end of her article however, and Magennis explains incongruity's meaning at the beginning of his article, before proceeding to identify incongruity in a selection of lives, which he believes to be wondrous rather than humorous. For later medieval religious works, Crane (2007) has looked at superiority-incongruity comic theories, applying them convincingly.

An effective model for the analysis of literary humour, particularly useful for this study, has been suggested by N. J. Lowe and can be charted simply through the following process:

Social frame → cognitive mechanism → affective response
→ physiological expression

This process for analysis is based on Salvatore Attardo's 1994 metacritical overview of the major categories of humour theory (Lowe 2007: 7–8).[9] Not all the steps of Lowe's model are relevant to this study: an examination of the physiological expressions of the readers' and/or listeners' is, due to lack of evidence for audience response, near impossible; examinations of their affective responses will be restricted to where such responses have been recorded by Ælfric. This study will rely mostly then on the social aspects of humour (particularly of the disparaging and superior variety), and cognitive (incongruous) aspects of humour, placed within their historical context.[10] It is perhaps useful first to briefly explain these theories before applying them to the *Life of St Cecilia*.

Superiority theories are integral to understanding saints' lives.[11] Patricia Keith-Spiegel claims that "according to the principle of superiority, mockery, ridicule, and laughter at the foolish actions of others are central to the humour experience" (1972: 6). Jerry M. Suls also explains, quoting Zillmann and Cantor, that humour "appreciation should be maximal when our friends humiliate our enemies, and minimal when our enemies manage to get the upper hand over our friends" (1977: 41). Bergson in 1911 furthered the theory by describing it as a type of social corrective, later developed of course by Bakhtin, whose "theory of Carnival misrule to describe medieval Comedy" has

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[9] See Attardo (1994), especially p. 47, for the metacritical overview upon which Lowe has based his model.

[10] While Suls suggests that "disparagement theory can be incorporated into the broader incongruity-resolution model", he also concedes that "it is conceivable that disparagement and incongruity-resolution are parallel processes each having separate influences on humour appreciation" (1977: 42–44). This study regards them in this specific case, as working in tandem.

[11] For a general introduction as to how superiority theory functions in Christian literature see Crane (2007). For an introduction to the theory itself, see Goldstein & McGhee (1972), especially pp. 6–7.

since been criticised by Crane for "not account[ing] for some of the orthodox rhetorical aims of humor" (2007: 32). Disparaging humour falls under this category of superiority; the superiority of the saint, and subsequently of the audience, can be described as both a cause and effect of disparaging humour directed at the pagan antagonist.[12]

In terms of incongruity theories, according to Kant, the basic premise is that laughter is an "affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (1987: 203).[13] In 1911 Bergson added that "a situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" (1914: 52).[14] As we shall see, Bergson's statement can be applied to the word-play between saint and torturer: the saint often speaks figuratively, while the pagan understands literally.[15] In an observation particularly pertinent to this study of medieval saints' lives, Bergson states that "any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned" (1914: 31). As we shall see, this is useful for understanding humour in saints' lives, with Crane commenting that:

> both superiority and incongruity theory are essential to the comedy of a poetics seeking to teach and delight while remaining ever conscious to the fundamental tension between God and man. The juxtaposition of the mechanical with the living, body with the soul, letter with spirit, provide the foundation of medieval religious comedy. (Crane 2007: 39)

It is not difficult to see how incongruity can be applied to saints' lives: indeed, it could be argued that incongruity often arises from the paradox inherent in

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[12] While superiority theory has in recent years come under a certain amount of criticism —notably Hobbes' theory put forward in his *Leviathan*— for being too simplistic, I believe that a cautious application of this theory while being aware of its limitations remains a valid approach for identifying certain types of humour. Particularly so in the genre of hagiography, where a sense of superiority over the saint's antagonist is, as we shall see, consciously encouraged.

[13] For the other major proponents of incongruity theory, again see Kant (1987: 7–9).

[14] For how we can categorise Bergson's work as incongruity theory, see Crane (2007: 38).

[15] Horner (2000) discusses the literal understanding of the pagan versus the figurative understanding of the saint.

Christian doctrine. Christ himself was a paradox, neither man nor God, and the miracles he performed also centred on paradoxes. As God's representatives on earth, saints, particularly martyr saints, were centres of such paradox: they survive unblemished and unhurt after suffering horrendous torture at the hands of pagans, they are neither mortal nor immortal whilst alive, they die when deemed ready by God, and not as a result of the torments they endure. A point of contention appears to be whether such incongruity produces humour. As shall be demonstrated below, the audience of such lives surely would have found pleasure in such an incongruity, from the "transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Kant 1987: 203); furthermore, they may have expected such pleasure.

Related to incongruity theories are configurational theories, the final to be considered here. According to Keith-Spiegel, the difference between the two theories is where the humour emerges. She claims that "in incongruity theories, it is the perception of 'disjointedness' that somehow amuses" whereas "in configurational theories it is the 'falling into place' or 'insight' that leads to amusement" (1972: 11). Keith-Spiegel cites the proponents of this theory, Quintilian and Hegel, who "viewed the growing intelligibility of a situation, unintelligible at first sight, as a primary ingredient in the comic situation" (1972: 11–12). This description is similar to Suls' "incongruity-resolution" theory, the slight difference being that Suls describes the humour arising from the *sudden* resolution of the incongruity "which is then made congruous" (1972: 82). The implication of configurational and incongruity-resolution theories in relation to saints' lives, with their links to theories of superiority and dramatic irony, is that while incongruity may have led to a sense of wonder —as argued by Magennis— configurational and incongruity-resolution theories may help explain the cause for amusement. These theories shall be returned to later in this article, when discussing the effect of Ælfric's translation of his Latin source on the interpretation of humour.

Of course, for the aforementioned theories of humour to function the audience must be made aware that what they are being told is to be interpreted, or could be interpreted, as humorous; for this, cues for humour must be provided (Berlyne 1972: 55). Daniel E. Berlyne has argued that for acts to be interpreted as humorous "it is recognised that the events are somehow cut off from the main body of life, which has to be taken seriously", further stating that for this to occur "humour takes place [...] within a frame [...] accompanied by discriminative cues" (1972: 55–56). The fact that early martyr lives were heard or read, the historical and geographical distance of the

saint from an Anglo-Saxon audience, the saint's ability to withstand horrendous torture, and the miracles often performed within the lives would have rendered them "cut off from the main body of life" for an Anglo-Saxon (and indeed modern) audience (Berlyne 1972: 55). The saints themselves are of course known for leading extra-ordinary lives —it is that which marks them as saints. When an event is perceived as within a frame, as opposed to happening within everyday life, we interpret and react to it differently, as Berlyne notes when he states that "the ways in which we might react to the same events in the absence of these cues become inappropriate and must be withheld" (1972: 56).[16] The children's cartoon *Tom and Jerry* may here serve as a (perhaps surprising) example for comparison. While the cartoon itself is quite violent, it is also amusing; the fact that *Tom and Jerry* is a cartoon and not real life, and that the events are taking place on a screen, are cues.[17] Familiarity with the cartoon is also a factor; the audience know that the cat will never catch the mouse. Similar to a martyr's life then, the cartoon is cut-off from everyday life, the resolution is predetermined; the cartoon can thus be enjoyed. Berlyne's theory is important for allowing for the possibility of humour within saints' lives. It could be that for early martyrs' lives the category of text itself signified to the audience to expect humour. This expectation would have been borne from audience familiarisation with the narrative pattern of martyr lives: familiarity itself serves as a cue.

Stanley Schachter has further argued that familiarity can constitute the cognitive framework necessary to interpret what follows as humorous, stating that "cognitions arising from the immediate situation as interpreted by past experience provide the framework within which one understands and labels his feelings" (cited in McGhee 1972: 64). In the case of martyr lives, the homogenous pattern may have served as a cue for humour at the structural level. Thus it can be said that it is the expectations of such a *Life* that help to create the particular framework in order for humour to be acceptable. The prerequisite that the saint will be martyred, resulting in a positive outcome for the saint and subsequently negative outcome for the persecutor, presumably was known and anticipated by a late Anglo-Saxon Christianised audience. The homogeneity of saints' lives would have ensured that the audience also knew torture would be welcomed by the saint. Any violence enacted upon the saint

[16] See also Suls (1977: 42).

[17] Related to this is the concept of fantasy versus reality assimilation; see McGhee (1972).

would not have been regarded by the audience as a cause for concern, as they knew that the saint could often not feel pain, and that torture was a necessary process for the saint to achieve sainthood and ascend to heaven. Therefore the saint's death constituted a happy ending.[18] It could even be argued that the threat of violence may have been a cue for humour: if the audience knew that violence was necessary, this allowed them to enjoy the violence.[19] The expectations borne from familiarity with the narrative pattern of martyrs' lives then allows for humour to function within them —particularly tendentious humour at the expense of the pagan, who is always one step behind both the saint and the audience.

3. Ælfric's translation of humour

Superiority and incongruity theories provide a good framework for close analysis of Ælfric's translation of the *Life of St Cecilia*, focusing on how he adapted the saint and the pagan from the Latin *passio* for his Anglo-Saxon audience, in order to adapt the tendentious humour for his Anglo-Saxon audience. This leads to a consideration of the effects of such a translation, and the role that humour plays in hagiography beyond simply disparaging the pagan in order to elevate the saint.

Cecilia of Rome, whose feast day is the 22nd of November, is described in her *Life* as being an early Roman martyr and a virgin spouse.[20] Cecilia converts her husband Valerian to Christianity on their wedding night, who in turn converts his brother Tiburtius. Together they preach Christianity to the pagans, converting many people, before Cecilia engages in a debate with Almachius the pagan prefect of Rome, after which she is martyred. Ælfric's *Life of St Cecilia* is found within the early eleventh-century manuscript British Library, Cotton Julius E vii, and is thought to have been composed in the

[18] For a discussion on the comedic structure of saints' lives, see Newhauser (2009).
[19] This brings voyeurism and wish-fulfilment into question, topics much discussed particularly in relation to female martyr lives. While there is no room to discuss these topics here, for a general introduction, see Gravdal (1991). For a discussion against reading female martyr lives as 'pornographic', see Mills (2005). For Ælfric and voyeurism, see Trilling (2013).
[20] For information on her lives, see under 'Cecilia' in *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture* (Biggs et al. 2001).

late-tenth century.[21] The *Life* forms part of Ælfric's work known as the *Lives of Saints*, which he composed for ealdorman Æthelweard and his son Æthelmær. Elements of her *Life* adhere to the conventional patterns of early female martyrs: Cecilia is of noble birth and a Christian since childhood, and she is verbally bold in the face of torture. As we shall see, in translating the life from the Latin *passio*, Ælfric abbreviated or omitted much of the direct speech, while also introducing emotive language to describe both Cecilia and Almachius: such alterations are typical of his style, and both impact upon how we interpret Cecilia and Almachius (Magennis 1986).[22]

There is far less emotive directing in the *passio* in comparison to Ælfric's translation, particularly of Almachius. In the *passio*, Cecilia's character is referred to just three times, as *uirgo clarissima* ('most illustrious virgin'; 174, l. 45), *beata Cecilia* ('blessed Cecilia'; 176, l. 74), and *uirgo deuotissima* ('most devoted virgin'; 178, l. 108). The only references to Almachius, on the other hand, are more focused upon his actions and reactions rather than whether he is good or bad: when he is first introduced the audience are told that he *fortiter laniabat* ('violently butchered') Christians in Rome (194, ll. 343–344); directly before he tortures Valerian and Tiburtius we are told that he becomes *iratus* ('enraged'; 200, l. 454), and finally before he tortures Cecilia, we are told that he becomes *iratus vehementer* ('violently angry'; 214, l. 651). He is never referred to directly as being wicked, or evil, as he is in Ælfric's translation — although this is of course inferred from his actions. Ælfric's emotive directing is noteworthy by comparison. For example, words used to describe Cecilia include *æðele* ('noble'; 356, l. 1), *snoter* ('wise'; 356, l. 29), *anræd* ('steadfast'; 364, l. 177), *halgan mædene* ('holy maiden'; 360, l. 71), *seo eadige* ('blessed'; 370, l. 253), and *deorwurðe mædon* ('precious maiden'; 370, l. 257). These descriptions help to develop her character as a strong teacher of Christianity and a chaste wife, an image firmly established by the time Almachius is introduced. Almachius, typical for Ælfric's martyr lives, is at once identified as

[21] For the cult of St Cecilia in Anglo-Saxon England, and the treatment of her life by earlier writers, see Upchurch (2007: 3–19). For Upchurch's discussion on Ælfric's translation of his Latin source in particular, see pp. 23–24. Upchurch focuses on how Ælfric recast Cecilia as bearing spiritual children through conversion, and how he may have intended her as a model for married lay folk, nuns, monks, and priests.

[22] On Ælfric's prose style, see Momma (2003). For Ælfric's developing style, see Clemoes (1970) and also Clemoes (1966). For a response to Clemoes, see Mitchell (2005).

the villain by the use of phrases such as *reðe cwellere* ('cruel murderer'; 366, l. 196), *se arleasan ehtere* ('the wicked persecutor'; 368, l. 203), and *man-fulla* ('wicked man'; 368, l. 201). Such "emotive insertions, guiding the response of the audience", are, as mentioned, characteristic of Ælfric's style (Magennis 1986: 319). The binary opposition that Ælfric sets out to establish between saint and pagan is perhaps epitomised in the line "*Almachius se arleasa het þa ardlice gefeccan þa eadigan Cecilian*" ('then the wicked Almachius ordered the blessed Cecilia to be fetched quickly'; 374, ll. 308–309). By comparison, this line in the *passio* simply reads, "*Almachius ceciliam sibi presentari iubet*" ('Almachius ordered Cecilia to be presented to him'; 208, ll. 568–569).

This difference of style is also evident in the manner which direct speech is conveyed in both versions. Dialogue in the *passio* is reported quite matter-of-factly, as can be witnessed in the debate between Cecilia and Almachius in which … *Almachius dixit* … *Cecilia dixit* … is repeated no less than thirty-three times, with one instance of *Cecilia respondit* ('Cecilia responded'; 212, l. 614), and another of *ridens beata Cecilia dixit* ('laughing, blessed Cecilia said'; 212, l. 607). Ælfric, by comparison, varies his reporting of direct speech. Rather than following the *passio*, he sometimes modifies the interrogative with such phrases as "*cwæð Cecilia sona mid ge-byld*" ('Cecilia said immediately with boldness'; 364, l. 137), "*Cecilia þa aras and mid anrædnysse cwæð*" ('Cecilia then arose and with steadfastness said'; 364, l. 156), "*[h]wæt þa Cecilia him snoterlice andwyrde*"[23] ('So, then Cecilia wisely answered him'; 366, l. 177), and "*Cecilia clypode and cwæð to him eallum*" ('Cecilia called and said to them all'; 370, l. 258). Such variation is perhaps an attempt to make the *Life* less monotonous if being read aloud —testament to Ælfric's aim for "effective storytelling" as Dorothy Bethurum has noted and Magennis has reiterated (1986: 319). It also of course contributes to Cecilia's characterisation as wise, steadfast, and bold in the face of danger.

The most striking aspect of Ælfric's translation however, are his alterations to, and omissions of, the speeches found in the source *passio*. Perhaps the most interesting indicator of how Ælfric set out to direct his audiences' understanding of the protagonists is not the alterations to the debate between Cecilia and Almachius (as shall be discussed later), but the omission of the exchange between Almachius and Cecilia's husband, Valerian, and her brother-in-law, Tiburtius. While it is true that Ælfric most likely omitted this particular dialogue to "[remove] the rhetorical extravagance of his [source]",

[23] Magennis (1986) discusses Ælfric's use of clauses.

and so produce a clearer, more succinct text, which is typical of his style, he may have also done so to present a more simple —and more foolish— Almachius to his audience (Magennis 1986: 319).

By removing Almachius' interrogation of Valerian and Tiburtius, Ælfric omits 104 lines of direct speech. He perhaps worried that this particular episode might evoke an undesirable response from the audience due to the characterisation of Almachius. Within this episode, Almachius' retorts to Valerian and Tiburtius may have entertained an unlearned audience, with the danger that this entertainment would be at the expense of the saints. Despite Valerian and Tiburtius emerging triumphant from the debate in the *passio*, Ælfric perhaps saw too much scope for an unlearned audience appreciating Almachius' retorts —particularly if they themselves were confused by the saints' responses. For example, when telling Almachius that earthly joys will result in torment, and earthly suffering will result in heavenly joys, Almachius appears to ask seemingly genuine questions: "[q]uid est quod uidetur esse et non est?" ('what is it that seems to exist but does not?'; 194, l. 359), and "[q]uid est quod uidetur non esse et est?" ('What is it that seems not to exist but does?'; 194, l. 362). Tiburtius replies in an intentionally circuitous, elaborate manner, culminating in Almachius responding with "[n]on puto quod mente tua loquaris" ('I do not think that you speak with your mind'; 196, l. 368). Tiburtius' reply is for the benefit of the learned reader or listener, rather, it seems, than to enlighten Almachius: "[n]on mea mente loquor sed eius quem in uisceribus mentis accepi" ('I do not speak with my mind, but of his which I received in the innermost mind'; 196, l. 369–370). Such a response serves to confuse Almachius further, as he asks "[n]unquid tu ipse scis quid loquaris?" ('do you yourself know what you are saying?'; 196, l. 371). The saints do return like for like, with Valerian responding, "[a]uditus tuus errorem patitur quia uim sermonis nostri non potes intueri" ('your hearing suffers an error, as you are not able to consider the power of our words'; 196, ll. 380–381). It can be argued then that in the *passio*, Almachius does not respond in the manner that an audience familiar with Ælfric's lives would expect —he does not become immediately foolishly frustrated, nor does he straight-away resort to violence when his authority and his gods are questioned. Rather, he appears to offer a genuine attempt to understand the saints' explanations, and, when he ultimately fails in this endeavour, he somewhat coolly questions, "[e]rgo omnis mundus errat, et tu cum fratre tuo uerum 'Deum' nosti?" ('So, the whole world is wrong, and you with your brother know the true 'God'?'; 200, ll. 449–450). Indeed, it is only after 100

lines of questioning that he becomes angry, arguably justifiably so, in response to the indirect answers given by the saints.

If an audience of the *passio* were learned in Christian doctrine, and therefore understood the saints' explanations, then no doubt the humour would have been interpreted as being directed against Almachius, who is here depicted as foolish for not understanding the saints' replies. As the *passio* was composed in Latin, one can assume that the reader or listener would have been educated to a certain degree, and would have therefore understood Valerian and Tiburtius' rhetorical replies. Superiority theory can be applied here —the audience, understanding the saints' explanations, could laugh at the foolish responses of Almachius: humour is a result of their superior understanding of the saints' words. Indeed, Valerian and Tiburtius appear to tease Almachius with their rhetorically elaborate replies —Almachius, with no knowledge of Christian doctrine, really has no hope of understanding their explanations. This is confirmed when, after dismissing Tiburtius and asking Valerian to explain, Almachius says, "[s]apienter quidem te uideo prosecutum, sed non ad interrogationem meam uideris dedisse responsum" ('I see that you at least wisely pursued my inquiry, but seem not to have given an answer'; 198, ll. 414–415). For a learned audience Almachius' response would have appeared foolish, as they would have understood that both Tiburtius and Valerian *had* answered Almachius' questions —he just had not understood. It is in such an exchange that we can also see incongruity at play. As mentioned above, "a situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" (Bergson 1914: 52). Thus, while Almachius and the audience (or readership) of the *passio* both hear the same explanations from the saints, they interpret the explanations differently — while Almachius does not understand, the audience does, and furthermore are aware that Almachius is interpreting incorrectly. Pleasure is increased because of their correct understanding, and the disparaging humour against the pagan distances him from the audience, discouraging any sympathy with him.

If Ælfric intended his work to be dispersed to a wider, unlearned, audience beyond the direct recipients of his translation (ealdorman Æthelweard and his son Æthelmær), there is a danger that the saints' replies may have confused such an audience, as they confuse Almachius.[24] In this instance the superiority

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[24] We know that Ælfric's patron, Æthelweard, was learned as he translated the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle into Latin (Wilcox 1994b: 9). He also requested a translation of the

of understanding (or resolution of the saints' speeches) necessary for regarding Almachius as foolish would be missing. This can be supported by humour theory. Suls has claimed that "if the information or rule needed for the incongruity resolution is too challenging or complex then humour appreciation declines [...] and [...] when resolution is made easier by making the joke material salient, appreciation of the humour stimulus increases" (1977: 41). The elaborate speeches of the *passio* may have confused an unlearned audience, and as a result Almachius may not have been regarded as a foolish figure —instead his retorts may have been found amusing. There is a risk that the audience may have identified more with Almachius' confusion, thus deriving a sort of pleasure from his defensive insults, rather than finding pleasure in the saints' elaborate answers. This of course would have been problematic for Ælfric. Everything we know of his style tells us that he would not have desired to elevate the pagan even momentarily, and he certainly would not have wanted to confuse those reading or listening to his works, to which his repeated concerns regarding the translation and circulation of his works are testament.[25] Ælfric resolves any possible confusion then by completely omitting the elaborate exchange between Almachius and Valerian and Tiburtius, thereby presenting a much more clear-cut good versus evil dichotomy between his protagonists.

While Ælfric does retain disparaging humour against the antagonist, he had to tailor it for his audience: he achieves this by simplifying both the direct speech and the characterisation of Almachius himself. For the humour to function in favour of the saint, and for an Anglo-Saxon audience, Ælfric had to recast Almachius in a more obviously foolish light. As well as inserting emotive cues to clearly identify Almachius as the villain for the audience, removing any ambiguity of interpretation, Ælfric also dramatically reduces the episodes in which Almachius speaks rationally, resulting in him appearing angry almost immediately.

In terms of the content of his interrogation of Cecilia, Ælfric omits the rather tit-for-tat exchange that occurs at the beginning in the *passio* (including Cecilia's elaborate replies), instead directly relaying the core message of Cecilia's argument: that Almachius' earthly might is of no real subsequence.

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first half of *Genesis*, which Ælfric did only reluctantly, as is evident from his *Preface* to the piece (Whatley 2002: 161–162).

[25] For a discussion on Ælfric's cautiousness in translating, see Whatley (2002), and also Wilcox (1994b).

This reduction of direct speech is again distinctive to Ælfric's style. Ælfric sums up much of the material found in his Latin source by saying simply that "*hi motodon lange oþþæt þam deman ofþuhte hyre drystig-nyss*" ('they disputed for a long time until her boldness insulted the judge'; 374, ll. 310–311). In reducing Almachius' direct speech, Ælfric presents him as appearing more pig-headed and dense in his lack of patience than his Latin counterpart. The first sentence he utters to Cecilia (indeed, the first example of direct speech from him in the entire *Life*) is "[n]ast þu mine mihte?" ('Do you not know my might?'; 374, l. 313). Such careful editing on Ælfric's part sets Almachius up for an immediate fall, one which perhaps the audience were expecting. Cecilia, along with the audience, do know Almachius' might (or lack thereof), and perhaps derived pleasure from Cecilia's cutting reply:

> Ic secge gif þu hætst hwilce mihte þu hæfst,
> Ælces mannes might þe on modignysse færð
> is soðlice þam gelic swilce man siwige
> ane bytte, and blawe hi fulle windes,
> and wyrce siððan an þyrl þonne heo to-þunden bið
> on hire greatnysse þonne togæð seo miht ... (374, ll. 314–319)
> 'If you urge me, I will speak of the kind of might that you have. Each man's might who goes in pride is truly like if someone had sewn up a bladder, blown it full of wind, and then afterwards, when it was swollen, to work a hole into it; then the might, in its greatness, goes away ...'

In the *passio* Almachius' might is likened to an inflated wineskin —a bladder would have no doubt been a more amusing image. Ælfric does not allow Almachius to rationally refute Cecilia statements, rather he is immediately and without ambiguity reduced, as Curtius has noted, *ad absurdum*. That it is a physically weaker young woman who ridicules and reduces his earthly 'might' perhaps added to the humorous incongruity. Disparaging humour is clearly present also. Suls, in his consideration of this type of humour (although in a different context), discusses Gutman and Priest's observations of a "verbal aggressor and a victim who [gets] squelched in a punchline" (1977: 43). He notes that when the aggressor's behaviour is viewed as socially acceptable, and if the 'good guy' squelches a 'bad guy', the humour is at its highest, as it is justifiable (1977: 43). Humour is then perhaps multiplied in this instance, due to the incongruity of the victim (as Almachius views her) gaining the upper hand, and also of the confirmation of the audiences' expectations that the saint *will* get the upper hand of her antagonist (in this instance by way of a witty

jibe). Almachius' foolish characterisation continues; he does not understand Cecilia's message of the insignificance of earthly power, instead believing *her* to be the one in need of pity and teaching: "[h]wæt þu ungesælige, nast þu þæt me is geseald anweald to ofsleanne and to edcucigenne" ('ah! You unhappy one, do you not know that authority is given to me to kill and to give life?'; 374, ll. 321–322). Cecilia once again rebuffs his claim, explaining that while he can condemn men to death, he does not have to power to give life as he claims to have —such power lies with God alone. She reveals him to be foolish in his presumed power, "... ic cwæðe þæt þu miht þa cucan adydan and þam deadan þu ne miht eft lif forgifan, ac þu lyhst openlice" ('... I say that you might kill the living, but you cannot give life back to the dead, you lie openly'; 374, ll. 329–331). Perhaps ironically, Almachius does not recognise his own presumptions, rather advising Cecilia to put aside her *dyrstignysse* ('presumption'; 374, l. 333), and offer sacrifice to his gods. When she refuses, he straight away becomes *deoflice (sic) gram* ('fiendishly furious'), and orders that she be submerged in boiling water. Almachius does not, nor will he, understand that because of this action he is in fact the victim, and Cecilia the victor.

Not only does Almachius not understand Cecilia's simplified and shortened responses, the omissions Ælfric makes result in Almachius growing angry almost immediately. Such a characterisation of Almachius is achieved by also making omissions to Cecilia's dialogue during their debate, which serve to recast her as more measured and calm than she is in the Latin *passio*. This serves to underline Almachius' foolish nature as he cannot control his emotions, as Cecilia does. Cecilia's speeches in the Old English *Life* are arguably more toned-down than in the *passio*, in which she is portrayed as more audacious, and even perhaps ruder than in Ælfric's translation. For instance, when Almachius orders Cecilia to worship the pagan idols, in Ælfric's translation she responds by telling him to:

> ... cunna mid grapunge
> hwæðer hi stanas synd, and stænene anlicnysse
> þa þe þu godas gecigst begotene mid leade,
> and þu miht swa witan gewislice mid grapunge
> gif ðu geseon ne miht þæt hi synd stanas ... (374–376, ll. 334–338)
> '... know whether they are stones and stony images by touching those [idols] covered in lead which you call gods, so that you might certainly know by touching, if you might not see that they are stones.'

Compare this with her response in the *passio*, in which before advising him to "[m]itte manum tuam et tangendo disce saxum esse si uidendo non nosti" ('put out your hand and learn by touching that it is stone, if you don't know by seeing'; 214, ll. 645–646), she first baldly states, "[n]escio ubi tu oculos amiseris" ('I don't know where you lost your eyes'; 214, l. 637). This is just one of many rather brazen retaliations that Ælfric omits in his translation — again characteristic of his style to abbreviate and cut direct speech. It also serves to present Cecilia as perhaps more modest and measured, further emphasising the stark difference in character between her and Almachius.

Almachius' lack of understanding of Cecilia's teaching allows us to identify humorous incongruity, as their discourse can be "interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" —just as it could be in the *passio* for a learned reader, perhaps suggesting a sophisticated translation of humorous rhetoric by Ælfric. It could also be argued that the torture of Cecilia (being boiled alive then beheaded unsuccessfully), could be interpreted as an "altogether independent series of events"; for Cecilia, torture is her way to prove her love for God and to gain entry to heaven; for Almachius, torture is simply a way to obtain what he desires, and he presumes at the outset that he will be successful.

Configurational and incongruity-resolution theories can be applied to the debate between Cecilia and Almachius, and Cecilia's subsequent torture. The audience, along with Cecilia, either suddenly become aware of the outcome of the debate, and of the purpose of the martyrdom, or can claim a growing intelligibility —Almachius cannot, thus eliciting a humorous response from the audience. Familiarity with the plot of martyrs' lives both encourages and confirms a correct interpretation. The pleasure experienced by the audience from their superior understanding may have been intended to subsequently strengthen their faith, thus humour is utilised for a serious purpose. It is perhaps then their realisation of the purpose of Cecilia's martyrdom and debate, rather than the incongruity of her martyrdom, which causes pleasure. In this way pleasure is used to teach rather than merely to delight, as Augustine of Hippo advocated, and whose guide to teaching shall be returned to at the close of this article.

In recasting the dialogue in this manner, Ælfric leaves no room for an audience to identify with the pagan, even in a shared laugh. It can be argued that these alterations have the effect of reducing Almachius' dimension as a character; he is depicted by Ælfric as much more one-dimensional than he appears in the *passio*, and is certainly a recognisable figure in the context of

Ælfric's other martyr lives, indeed in the *Lives of Saints* as a whole. Ælfric's omissions, abbreviations, and emotive directing render Almachius more emotionally stunted, more hot-headed and rash, and more foolish in his cruelty and lack of understanding —or, rather, lack of effort to understand— Cecilia's message, and by extension of course, that of Christianity.

It is reasonable to believe that the effects of Ælfric's translation of Almachius' character were intentional, rather than accidental, due to his fears that an audience may misconstrue the message of the text. Such fears are evident in the Latin preface to the *Lives of Saints* series, in which he states, referring to his Old English translations, "[n]ec tamen plura promitto me scripturum hac lingua, quia nec convenit huic sermocinationi plura inseri, ne forte despectui habeantur margarite Christi" ('[n]evertheless, I promise not to write more in this language because it is not fitting to introduce more in this language, lest, perhaps, the pearls of Christ be held in disrespect'; Wilcox 1994b: 119, 131).[26] It was perhaps important then that the pagan appear unambiguously foolish in Ælfric's translation in order to adapt for an unlearned audience the tendentious humour present in the *passio*, leaving no room for misinterpretation of the dialogue. By clearing the path (as it were) of any ambiguities resulting from Almachius' characterisation, his probing questions, and his defensive insults as found in the *passio*, Ælfric's simplified translation guides the audience towards a proper understanding of Cecilia's messages concerning heavenly might's power over earthly might; adapting the humour present in the *passio* was an important part of this process.

The foolish depiction of Almachius thus plays a serious pedagogical role in guiding an Anglo-Saxon audience towards a correct understanding of the message of the *Life*. By being encouraged to ridicule Almachius, the audience are encouraged by Ælfric to also ridicule the earthly pleasures that Almachius loves and represents, and to instead uphold the Christian ideal of salvation through suffering. Seriousness and humour then need not be regarded as necessarily distinct from one another: humour can play a serious role in hagiographic texts.

In addition to helping guide the audience towards understanding the meaning of Cecilia's martyrdom, disparaging humour directed at the pagan may have served a further purpose in martyr lives such as Cecilia's. There has been much scholarship on the perceived voyeuristic pleasure associated with the torture of female martyrs. While the limits of this article do not allow for

[26] Both the Latin and the translation are from Wilcox (1994b).

a full discussion, a few preliminary remarks can be made: by emphasising the tendentious humour and foolish nature of the pagan, Ælfric may have been attempting to direct the (presumed male) audience away from sexualising female martyrdom. If an audience viewed the tortures of female saints in a sexualised manner, this perhaps meant aligning their interpretation with that of the pagan's; portraying the pagan as foolish, animalistic, and damned, may have been a way to discourage such an alignment, as in doing so the audience may have felt as foolish as the pagan. This possible attempt to guide the audience away from such an understanding fits in with what Renée Trilling has described as "Ælfric's reluctance to engage with the erotics of sanctity inherent in narratives of martrydom" (2013: 272–273). Such reluctance is perhaps also reflected in the fact that more male martyrs are stripped in his *Lives of Saints* series than female.[27] Indeed, this reluctance also ties in with Ælfric's concern that the purpose of violence in saints' lives be understood correctly (that is, understood for its underlying message, not the erotics of torture). We know that he was anxious about the interpretation of martyrdom, as he states in his *Nativity of St Clement the Martyr* from his *Catholic Homilies* series that:

> … oft hwonlice gelyfede men smeagað mid heora stuntum gesceade hwi se Ælmihtiga god æfre geþafian wolde *þæt* ða hæðenan his halgan mid gehwylcum tintregum acwellan moston … (502, ll. 148–150)
> '… often men of little belief question with their foolish debates, why the God Almighty always desired to allow the heathens to destroy his saints with all types of torments …'

It is possible that Ælfric's anxiety concerning a correct interpretation of violence within the lives betrays an anxiety that the violence might be sexualised. Ælfric's approach to the use of humour to guide an audience's understanding of the violence of martyrdom might then engage with his

[27] Of the saints that are stripped in *Lives of Saints*, four are male (Chrysanthus, Abdon and Sennes, Denis and his Companions, and the saints in The Forty Soldiers). St Benedict is described as stripping himself (for baptism). Compare this to the two female saints that are stripped, Agnes and Agatha. St Eugenia strips herself, and we are not explicitly told that St Lucy and St Cecilia are stripped. Due to the nature of their deaths their nakedness is perhaps implied (Lucy was disembowelled and Cecilia was put into a hot bath), but if arguing for an intentional voyeuristic element in the female lives, this implicitness would hardly strengthen such an argument.

approach to sexuality: just as disparaging humour influences an audience's interpretation on the true purpose of violence, so too it may have discouraged sexualisation of violent martyrdoms. Such an interpretation of this possible additional use for humour would need further investigation, however, considering varied audiences, and is beyond the scope of this article.

4. Conclusions

While we must always be cautious of applying modern theories to past texts and patterns of thought, examining classical writings on laughter brings us closer to modern theories of humour than one might expect. M. A. Screech claims that "Quintilian held that laughter was never far from derision", and that "Cicero probed deeply into the causes of laughter when he held that laughter arises from our perception of deformity and ugliness" claiming, however, that "[t]here is a proviso: that ugliness must be made to appear trivial and unthreatening [...] [p]ity has to be kept well away, since pity dries up the springs of laughter" (1997: 56–57). Of course, this is reminiscent of superiority theory (or rather this theory is reminiscent of Cicero's thinking on the subject). For humour to thrive, the audience's beliefs must be suspended somehow to set aside pity, whilst being made to feel superior in some way to whom or what they are laughing at. As we have seen, this is evident in martyr lives, where persecutors are made to look foolish, perhaps to allow for laughter. This laughter in turn serves to highlight the wrongness of the persecutors' beliefs, and makes them appear less threatening. This indicates that laughter was intentionally utilised at particular moments and for particular effect.[28] Indeed, Augustine, whom we know Ælfric read, cites Cicero, claiming that "the eloquent should speak in such a way as to instruct, delight, and move their listeners" (2007: 117). Augustine advocates that there are many benefits for the use of delight, not least that it may be needed to keep an audience's attention: "it may be necessary to make it attractive, and so implant it in the mind" (2007: 117). He claims this is particularly so with listeners who are not desirous to learn: "the disdainful kind of person [...] is not satisfied by the truth presented anyhow, but accepts it only if expressed in such a way that the discourse also gives pleasure, delight has been given an

[28] For a study of performative laughter *within* texts, see Magennis (1992).

important role in eloquence" (2007: 119). Augustine affixes a warning however to this, that if delight is needed for this purpose, that "it should be done with restraint, to prevent boredom" (2007: 117). This brevity and controlled use of delight (or humour), certainly accords well with Ælfric's own style. It would seem then that humour, or delight, was an accepted rhetorical device for its mnemonic purposes: "A hearer must be delighted so that he can be gripped and made to listen, and moved so that he can be impelled to action" (2007: 118).

Augustine does warn however that while delighting the audience is acceptable, delight should not be used to just delight. He claims that it is not the truths within Christian doctrine alone that produce delight but the act of revealing them: "the truths themselves, as they are revealed, do produce delight by virtue of being true" (2007: 118). This, along with statement that "the more opaque they seem, because of their use of metaphor, the greater the reader's pleasure when the meaning becomes clear", bears strikingly similarity to configurational theory, which suggest that it is exactly this process of enlightenment that produces humour (2007: 111). Also akin in a way to superiority theories, Augustine states that "[s]imilarly the exposure and refutation of falsehoods generally give delight. They do not give delight because they are false, but because it is true that they are false delight is given by the words in which the truth is demonstrated" (2007: 119).

Perhaps this was what Ælfric had in mind in his depiction of the pagans — that their roles in the narrative should be to reveal the truth of Christian doctrine. This ties in with Horner's theory that it is the pagans' literal understanding of the saints' words that aid in revealing the truth to the audience (2000). It perhaps then seems not unlikely that Ælfric may have utilised such a restrained use of 'delight', or humour, in his own works, a restraint which certainly accords well with his own style of writing. While the words 'humour' and 'Ælfric' in the same sentence may appear incongruous in itself, there is no reason to believe that he would not have utilised humour in a controlled manner for a particular effect. Indeed, we have evidence from his works that audiences may not have regarded saints' lives, or the liturgy, as solemnly as modern audiences may believe. In his *Prayer of Moses*, Ælfric despairs that "nu doð men swa-þeah dyslice foroft, þæt hi willað wacian and wodlice drincan binnan godes huse and bysmorlice plegan, and mid gegaf-spræcum godes hus gefylan" ('now men still act foolishly very often, that they

wish to watch and madly drink within God's house and disgracefully play, and to defile God's house with lewd speech'; 288, ll. 75–78).[29] Interestingly, he goes on to reference saints' lives, "seþe wylle wacian and wurðian godes halgan, wacie mid stilnysse and ne wyrcan nan gehlyd" ('he who desires to watch and worship God's saints, watch with stillness and do not make any observation'; 288, ll. 81–82). The need to include this admonishment in his sermon signifies that it was more than a one-off occurrence. It can be inferred from this that audiences may have expected to be entertained as well as edified —or at the least some audiences did not revere God's house as solemnly as might be expected. The manner in which Ælfric recasts Almachius may have been an attempt to limit any undesired responses, or sympathies, from his audience.

Ælfric may have also had another reason for wanting to adapt the humour directed at the pagan from his Latin sources. It is well known that the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh centuries was a time that saw more sophisticated Viking attacks intent on conquest (Cubitt 2014: 352). Malcolm Godden states that Ælfric "did see a close parallel between the times of the early martyrs and the troubles of his own time with the Viking[s]" (1985: 96). He also comments that *Lives of Saints* was intended to be read "as providing important political and ethical lessons for the present" (1985: 94). Godden argues that Ælfric may have translated the saints' lives within *Lives of Saints* in order to bolster people's faith during a particularly intense period of Viking raids. While Godden mostly focuses upon how the miracles within the lives would have achieved this, the foolish depiction of the pagans themselves may have also contributed, as an audience saw a similarity between the "barbarian" pagans and the invading Vikings. Increased Viking attacks thus perhaps influenced Ælfric's decision as to which material to include, and exclude, within his series.[30] Ælfric may have also adapted the tendentious humour at this particular moment in time, recasting his pagans in a more unambiguously foolish manner than their Latin counterparts, to further the cause of strengthening people's faith by 'othering' the opposition. Aligning the Vikings with the foolish pagans may have served to render them less threatening —whether this worked or not, it is impossible to know.

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[29] It is not clear who Ælfric is talking about here, monastics or secular audiences. While many texts within the *Lives of Saints* were not traditionally for secular consumption, Ælfric did translate them for a secular audience. Either way, his admonishments reveal a level of merriment perhaps unexpected.

[30] Gretsch (2005: 57) has discussed the political influences on Ælfric's writings.

What is clear, however, is that in translating his Latin source, Ælfric has adapted the disparaging humour present in the *passio* by recasting Almachius, through emotive cues, and omissions and alterations of his speeches, as a more unambiguously foolish character for his Anglo-Saxon audience. In making these alterations, Ælfric was able to aid in guiding his audience towards a correct understanding of the martyrdom in the *Life*, by making obvious how earthly might is of no consequence. Through a close examination of Ælfric's translation alongside his Latin source then, it is possible to say that Ælfric did engage with the humorous rhetoric that he found in the *passio*, and in quite a sophisticated manner. Rather than removing all humour during the process of translating, Ælfric instead adapts it so that the humour is recognisable to an Anglo-Saxon audience. Furthermore, his controlled translation of humour fits well with his overall careful style of translation. Ælfric makes sure that the humour serves a strict purpose, and he leaves little room for uncertainty as to what, or whom, the audience ought to find amusing. By discussing the translation of humour, this article has shown that humour's presence need not be regarded as undermining to the message of hagiography —it can serve a serious purpose in educating the laity.

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