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CHAPTER 5

Framing material in early literacy

Presenting literacy and its agents in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts

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The remarkably extensive and diverse Anglo-Saxon text corpus clearly testifies to the literary precocity and self-awareness of both writers and book producers in Anglo-Saxon England, the first period of literacy in English. This becomes particularly evident in prologues and scribal colophons, the two kinds of framing material discussed in the present chapter. Clearly modelled on classical or early Christian genre conventions, the famous Alfredian and Ælfrician prologues frame the reading of the following vernacular texts by investing them with the authority implicit in Latin literacy. At the end of texts or manuscripts, scribal colophons exploit the value of manuscripts as material objects, by presenting the – in a manuscript culture typically individual – agents of literacy, namely the book and its producer(s). Similar in their formal characteristics to maker formulae in epigraphy, colophons further serve independent functions in keeping the names of the scribes in remembrance through the centuries. Both kinds of framing material thus attest to the authorial and medial (self-)awareness of the agents of Anglo-Saxon literacy, who understood the great potential of the written medium to carry authority and to secure longevity.

Keywords: Anglo-Saxon, manuscript, literacy, colophon, scribe, Alfredian texts, Ælfric, Genette, maker formula

1. Anglo-Saxon literacy: The surviving evidence

For a volume focusing on the “Dynamics of Text and Framing Phenomena” from a historical perspective, the Anglo-Saxon period is a most appropriate starting point because this first period of English (traditionally dated from the early 5th to the late 11th century) is clearly a fully literate period. All in all, our Anglo-Saxon text corpus encompasses about 100 runic and about 240 non-runic inscriptions

(and often a mixture of both scripts),¹ and ca. 960 manuscripts and fragments (if we include both manuscripts written in England and those imported from the Continent; cf. Gneuss and Lapidge 2014). Some 420 manuscripts and fragments contain Old English (Ker 1957), so that we have a rather extensive written record of vernacular Old English (over 3 million running Old English words in about 3,060 texts; cf. *DOEC*).

The majority of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, however, are solely or partly in Latin, which is not at all surprising since manuscript literacy was brought to England with Christianization from the end of the 6th century onwards and since the Christian Latin textual traditions dominate the process of text transmission throughout the period. In the vast majority of cases, Anglo-Saxon scribes were ecclesiasts “working in a regulated Christian culture” (Wilcox 2001: 51). This means not only that the surviving record is heavily weighted towards Christian learning, but also that Christian models shaped Anglo-Saxon textual traditions from their very beginnings. In deliberate undertakings, “writers in the vernacular relied heavily on Latin traditions as a means of investing their own work with the authority implicit in the use of Latin” (Irvine 2014: 143). This reliance on Latin traditions includes the adoption of classical and early Christian genre conventions for both the main texts and for framing material such as prefaces and colophons.

The most important Latin models for Anglo-Saxon paratexts² and other framing material are provided by Gospel manuscripts, which have survived in large numbers.³ Among these, the epistolary preface of Jerome to his translation of the Bible into Latin, the Vulgate, served as the prime model in both form and contents, even down to the level of wording.⁴

1. For surveys of this material, see Waxenberger (forthc.) and Okasha (1971) (and supplements), respectively.

2. When referring to ‘paratexts’, I here use the terminology developed by Genette (1997), in which ‘peritext’ is a paratext which is found on the same medium as the main body of the text it surrounds, in contrast to ‘epitext’, which relates to the text, but is “not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space” (Genette 1997: 344).

3. About one in ten Anglo-Saxon manuscripts (more than 90) are (fragmentary) Latin gospelbooks. For a survey on Anglo-Saxon gospelbooks, see, e.g., McGurk (2011) or Lenker (2017); for more detailed descriptions of the gospelbooks, see Lenker (1997) and Gneuss and Lapidge (2014). On their status as treasured material objects, see below, Section 4.3.

4. Most of the Latin gospelbooks contain a number of other paratexts by Jerome, also mainly in epistolary form, in which he relates the circumstances and names the commissioner of translation (Pope Damasus) and gives an insight into his translation practices, sketching the perils

2. Paratexts from Anglo-Saxon England: Paucity of evidence

In his introductory chapter of *Paratexts*, Genette stresses that “a text without a paratext does not exist and has never existed” (1997: 3). Even though this is also true for many of the textual productions of the earliest phase of literacy in England, we still have to acknowledge some substantial differences to paratexts in later print cultures (which are in the focus of Genette’s *Paratexts*). First, most of the Anglo-Saxon texts have come down to us anonymously,⁵ both with regard to the author or translator and the scribe, and mostly with little or no information on the place and time of production of the manuscript. One exception are some of the scribal colophons. All in all, however, only 44 manuscripts, i.e. about five per cent of all extant Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, have colophons (Gameson 2002), among them 12 in high-status gospelbooks (see further below, Section 4.3).

Similarly, the Old English and Latin ‘Prefaces’ surviving in the vernacular manuscript production only yield a very meagre text corpus, although most of them – in contrast to the colophons – have gained a prominent place in Anglo-Saxon scholarship; they feature frequently in anthologies of Old English, conspicuously without (!) the text they accompany in the manuscripts. This is particularly true for the Alfredian and Ælfrician prefaces (and epilogues) discussed in the following sections.

3. Investing vernacular literacy with authority in Alfredian and Ælfrician prefaces

3.1 The conceptualization of prefaces as a threshold

That the Latin textual culture was the predominant literary model for Anglo-Saxon prefaces is already reflected in their Old English term – *fore-spræc* (see *DOE*, s.v. *fore-spræc*, 3. ‘(written) prologue, preface, foreword’) – a loan translation of Latin *prae-fatio* (cf. Latin *prae-for* ‘to say or utter beforehand’) or *prae-locutio* (Latin *prae-loquor* ‘to speak/say first’; cf. also Greek *prol-logus*).

of translation. On their model character for the Alfredian and Ælfrician prefaces, see below, Section 3 and n. 11.

5. Named authors of the Anglo-Saxon period proper (without continental authors whose books came to England) are Bede, Cædmon and Cynewulf for Old English poetry. As concerns Old English prose, named individuals are Ælfric of Eynsham, Æthelwold (bishop of Winchester), Aldred, King Alfred (‘Alfredian texts’), Bald, Bede, Byrhtferth, Werferth and Wulfstan the Homilist. There are furthermore some 25 named individuals who produced texts in Latin (list compiled from the classified index of Lapidge et. al. (2014); see also Thornbury (2014: 243–247).

Quite strikingly, also the spatial metaphor of paratextual material as a ‘threshold’ (see the original French title of Genette’s *Paratexts*, *Seuils* ‘thresholds’) can be shown to have a long tradition. In his preface to his *Liber Pastoralis*, Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) conceptualizes the beginning of the book as a threshold to the larger discourse, when referring to it as (*in ipsa locutionis nostrae ianua* ‘at the door of our speech’. The Old English translation accordingly uses the term *duru* ‘door’:

- (1) From ðære dura selfre ðisse bec, ðæt is from onginne ðisse spræce ...
(DOEC, CP B9.1.3 0014)

‘From the door of this book, that is from the beginning of this speech ...’

As models, quite a number of examples of Latin prologues and epilogues were available to Anglo-Saxon authors and compilers. In addition to the prefatory matters in gospelbooks and Bibles (see above, Section 1 and n. 4), there are, for instance, the preface and epilogue to Pope Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis*, the prefaces accompanying or introducing Latin Saints’ Lives or Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which has a prefatory letter to King Ceolwulf and a concluding prayer (for a survey, see Irvine 2014: 144).

Even though the conceptualization of the preface as the ‘door’ to a text was thus known to the Anglo-Saxons and even though the classical models were available in both form and concept, most of the well-known vernacular texts from Anglo-Saxon England do neither have prefaces nor epilogues. Indeed, one production circle (the Alfredian one; see Section 3.2) and one author (Ælfric; see Section 3.3) account for almost all of the prefaces and epilogues accompanying vernacular texts.

3.2 The Alfredian prefaces

On the backdrop of the rareness of prefaces in the vernacular Anglo-Saxon textual tradition, Frantzen (2003) stresses the relevance of the comparatively many prologues and epilogues in Alfredian texts. Since the learned people in this cultural milieu, i.e. the earliest phase of Anglo-Saxon literacy, not only translated works into the vernacular, but also created prefaces for works that did not originally have them, Frantzen maintains that “the preface seems to have been a signature pre-occupation of Alfred and his court” (2003: 121).

This “signature preoccupation” has survived in a large number of ‘Alfredian’⁶ prefaces and epilogues in Old English prose and verse.⁷ Tellingly, in contrast to the Latin and Old English prefaces by Ælfric, all Alfredian prefaces are in Old English:

OE Prose Prefaces:

- translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues* (GDPref 1 (C))
- revised version of translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues* (GDPref 1 (H))
- translation of Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis* (CPLetWærf)
- translations (prose and prosimetrical version) of Boethius’ *Consolatio* (both: BoProem)
- Old English version of Augustine’s *Soliloquies* (SolilPref)
- Law Code (LawAfEl)

Verse Prefaces:

- translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues* (GDPref)
- translation of Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis* (CPPre)
- *The Meters of Boethius* (Met)

Verse Epilogue:

- translation of Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis* (CPEp)

This survey shows that we are dealing with a range of different and, most importantly, diversified texts. Most striking is the employment of verse following the principles of Germanic alliterative verse in prefaces accompanying Old English versions of received texts by the Church Fathers (Gregory, Boethius).

Many of the Alfredian paratexts are modelled on Latin genre traditions. Godden considers this a “programme” of paratexts in Alfredian manuscripts, which are generally “richly furnished with the kind of framing texts we call prologues, prefaces, proems, and epilogues” (Godden 2011: 441). Complex presentations of the paratexts as in Cambridge, University Library, Ii.2.4 (translation of Gregory’s

6. According to Irvine (2014: 147), the prose preface to the translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues* “may well represent the earliest use of the prefatory form in Old English”. Because of the function of these paratexts as royal stamps of authority, they were composed throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, so that dates (even relative ones) and allocations to King Alfred himself (or his contemporaneous circle) are difficult (for details on suggested dates and provenances, see Irvine (2014)).

7. Other forms of non-paratextual framing material are the epilogue to the Old English version of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* and closing prayers in BoProem and Met. On blurred genre conventions, see below, Section 4.1.

Liber Pastoralis)⁸ can be seen as a “conscious attempt to present these works in a similar light to much of Carolingian writing” (Godden 2011: 472), investing them with the authority implicit in the use of Carolingian Latin textual traditions.

More particularly, these prefaces (many of which were written much after Alfred’s time; see n. 6) mark the vernacular texts by a “stamp of royal authority” (Irvine 2014: 148). This “stamp of royal authority” is mainly achieved by naming the king (in the voice of the king or in a third-person reference), usually at the beginning or end of the paratext (or both, as in the formula *Ic ða ælfred ... Westseaxna cyning* at both the beginning and the end of the preface to the Laws (LawAfEl; 2 h, i)), i.e. at the most prominent positions for presenting a text. Apart from naming the king and his status, the prefaces also highlight the king’s involvement in the translation (see underlined passages in (2)) and in the distribution of these books in what can be seen as part of a national programme of publication of vernacular texts with the clear purpose of authorizing them.

- (2) a. **Ic ÆLFRED** geofendum Criste mid cynehades mærnysse geweorðod, ...
 & forþan ic sohte & wilnade to minum getreowum freondum, þæt hi me
 of Godes bocum be ... awriten. (1.1, 1.12)⁹
 ‘I, Alfred, honoured with the glory of kingship by Christ’s gift ... And
 therefore I sought and asked of my true friends that they should write
 down for me from God’s books the following teachings concerning ...’
 (GDPref 1 (C); beginning)
- b. þæt is se selesða sines brytta, / Ælfryd mid Englum, ealra cyninga ...
 (16)
 ‘Alfred of the English, the best distributor of treasure of all the kings that
 he has ever before heard of ...’ (GDPref; end; verse)
- c. Ælfred kyning hateð gretan Wærferð biscep his wordum luflice &
 freondlice (1–2)
 ‘King Alfred greets bishop Werferth with affectionate and friendly
 words.’ (CPLetWærþ; beginning)
- d. Siððan min on englisc Ælfred kyning awende worda gehwelc ... (11)
 ‘Afterwards King Alfred translated every word of me [= the book/text]
 into English.’ (CPPref; middle)
- e. Ælfred kuning wæs wealhstod ðisse bec ... (1.1)
 ‘King Alfred was the translator of this book ...’ (BoProem; beginning)

8. This manuscript has the Old English prose preface (fol. 5r), the Old English verse preface (fol. 6v), a “table of contents” in the form of a Latin list of sixty-five chapters and their subjects (fol. 7r) and then the Latin text of Gregory’s original prose preface.

9. The translations are adapted from Irvine (2014), who partly takes hers from the editions of the respective texts.

- f. Ðus **ælfred** **us ealdspell reahte**, / **cyning Westsexna**, **cræft meldode**, /
leoðwyrhta list. (A6, 1)
 ‘Thus Alfred, king of the West-Saxons, maker of verse, told us old
 stories, revealed his craft ...’ (Met; beginning; verse)
- g. Hær endiað þa **cwidas þe Ælred kining alæs** of þære bec þe we hataþ in
 Ledene ... (11)
 ‘Here end the sayings which King Alfred selected from the book which
 is called in Latin ...’ (SolilPref; end)
- h. Ic ða **ælfred cyning** þas **togædere gegaderode & awritan het**, monege
 þara þe ure foregengan heoldon ... (49.9)
 ‘Then I, King Alfred, gathered these laws (together) and commanded to
 be written many of those that I liked of those our predecessors observed
 ...’ (LawAfEl; beginning).
- i. Ic ða **ælfred Westsexna cyning** eallum minum witum, þas geowde, ...
 (49.10)
 ‘Then I, Alfred, King of the West Saxons, showed these to all my
 councilors, ...’ (LawAfEl; end).

What we see here is that the prominent framing function of the paratexts – the authorization of the vernacular texts by presenting them with a royal stamp – is made in either the voice of King Alfred himself, by a third-person reference to him or in the voice of the book/text, in particular in the verse paratexts (on parallels of all of these features in scribal colophons, see below, Section 4.2). In this presentation of authority, many of the paratexts strikingly do not only follow classical models by, e.g., choosing the epistolary style (see above, Section 1 and n. 4), but deliberately also draw on Old English models by using Old English alliterative verse (2b), (f); in (2f), King Alfred is even presented as ‘the maker of verse, (who) revealed his craft’. Thus, the full range of literary models, both Latin and vernacular, available to the authors of these paratexts is exploited in these prefaces for investing them with royal authority: In this accommodation of vernacular patterns in classical models, the dynamics of a literacy specific to Anglo-Saxon England becomes evident.

3.3 Framing in Ælfric’s prefaces

The largest number of surviving Anglo-Saxon prefaces are the more than thirty surviving Latin and Old English texts by Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 950–c. 1010).¹⁰

10. *Catholic Homilies First Series*: Latin Preface (1), Old English Preface (1); *Catholic Homilies Second Series*: Latin Preface (1), Old English Preface (1), *Admonition (1), *‘De Sancta Maria’ (1), *‘Excusatio dictandis’ (1), *Closing Prayer (1); *Lives of Saints*: Latin Preface (1), Old English

In genres and voices, we see major differences to the Alfredian prefaces. Most of Ælfric's prefaces are in the first-person voice of Ælfric himself (see, e.g., (3a) and (4a) below). None is in the voice of the book. None of them is in Old English alliterative verse.

The tradition Ælfric links himself up with is clearly the Latin tradition only. Thus he regularly chooses the common epistolary form and mainly provides information which conforms to classical (and also today's) genre conventions. This can be illustrated by a brief comparison of prototypical passages in Ælfric's Latin and Old English prefaces to the *Catholic Homilies*. These provide an identification of Ælfric himself as the author ((3a), (4a)) and information on the circumstances of text production, including – though only in the Latin preface – commissioners or patrons (3a), the envisaged audience ((3b), (3f), (4c)), the structure of the main text and its text type (3b), the principles of translation ((3b), (4b)) and – very prominently – detailed references on Ælfric's authoritative sources, i.e. the *auctores* he relies on (3e).

(3) Latin preface to the First Series of Catholic Homilies (Wilcox 1994: Text 1a)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>a. Ego Ælfricus, alumnus Æðelwoldi, benevoli et venerabilis presulis, salutem exopto domno archiepiscopo Sigerico in Domino.</p> | <p>‘I, Ælfric, a student of the benevolent and venerable prelate Æthelwold, send a greeting in the Lord to the lord Archbishop Sigeric.</p> |
| <p>b. Licet temere vel presumptuose, tamen transtulimus hunc codicem ex libris Latinorum, scilicet Sancte Scripture, in nostram consuetam sermocinationem, ob edificationem simplicium, qui hanc norunt tantummodo locutionem, sive legendo sive audiendo; ideoque nec obscura posuimus verba, sed simplicem Anglicam, quo facilius possit ad cor pervenire legentium vel audientium ad utilitatem animarum suarum, quia alia lingua nesciunt erudiri quam in qua nati sunt.</p> | <p>Even if rashly or presumptuously, we have, nevertheless, translated this book from Latin works, namely the Holy Scripture, into the language we are accustomed for the edification of the simple, who know only this language, either through reading or hearing it read; and for that reason we could use no obscure words, just plain English, by which it may more easily reach to the heart of the readers or listeners to the benefit of their souls, because they are unable to be instructed in a language other than the one to which they were born.</p> |

Preface (1), *Preface to ‘Life of St Edmund’, *Preface to ‘Life of St Thomas’; *Translation of Genesis*: Old English Preface (3); *Grammar*: Latin Preface (6), Old English Preface (6); *Vita Æthelwoldi*: Latin Preface (1); *Letter to the Monks of Eynsham*: Latin Preface (1); *Letter of Sigefyrth*: Old English Preface (3); *Letter to Sigeward*: Old English Preface (1); *Letter for Wulfsgie*: Latin Preface (2); *Letters for Wulfstan*: Latin Preface (1). The numbers in brackets refer to the copies of extant manuscripts for the respective texts. On Ælfric's prefaces, see Wilcox (1994) and Swan (2009).

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| c. | Nec ubique transtulimus verbum ex verbo, sed sensum ex sensu; | We have not translated word for word throughout but in accordance with the sense; |
| d. | cavendo tamen diligentissime desceptivos errores, ne inveniremur aliqua heresi seducti seu fallacia fuscati. | guarding, nevertheless, most diligently against deceptive errors so that we not might be found to have been led astray by any heresy or darkened by fallacy. |
| e. | Hos namque auctores in hac explanatione sumus secuti, videlicet Augustinum [Y]pponiensem, Hieronimum, Bedam, Gregorium, Smaragdum, et aliquando [Hæg]monem, horum denique auctoritas ab omnibus catholicis libentissime suscipitur. | For indeed, we have followed these authors in this exposition: namely, Augustine of Hippo, Jerome, Bede, Gregory, Smaragdus, and sometimes Haymo, for the authority of these is most willingly acknowledged by all the orthodox. |
| f. | Nec solum evangeliorum tractatus in isto libello exposuimus, verum etiam sanctorum passiones vel vitas, ad utilitatem idiotarum istius gentis. | We have not only expounded homilies on the gospels in this book but also the passions or lives of saints for the benefit of the uneducated among this people. |

(4) Old English preface to the First Series of Catholic Homilies

(Wilcox 1994: Text 1b)

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| a. | Ic, Ælfric, munuc and mæssepreost, swa ðeah waccre þonne swilcum hadum gebyrige, wearð asend on Æþelredes dæge cýninges fram Ælfeage biscope, Æðelwoldes æftergengan, to sumum mynstre, ðe is Cernel gehaten, þurh Æðelmæres bene ðæs þegenes, his gebyrd and goodnys sind gehwær cuðe. | ‘I, Ælfric, monk and mass-priest, although more weakly than for such orders is fitting, was sent, in king Æthelred’s day, from bishop Ælfeah, Æthelwold’s successor, to a minster which is called Cernel, at the prayer of Æthelmær the thane, whose birth and goodness are known everywhere. |
| b. | Þa bearn me on mode, ic truwige ðurh Godes gife, þæt ic ðas boc of Ledenum gereorde to Engliscra spræce awende, | Then it occurred to my mind, I trust through God’s grace, that I would turn this book from the Latin language into the English tongue, |
| c. | na þurh gebylde micelre lare, ac for ðan ðe ic geseah and gehyrde mycel gedwyld on mangeum Engliscum bocum, ðe ungelærede men ðurh heora bilewitnysse to micclum wisdom tealdon; | not from confidence of great learning, but because I have seen and heard of much error in many English books, which unlearned men, through their simplicity, have esteemed as great wisdom;’ |

Ælfric’s prefaces first and foremost evince his conscious attempts at placing himself in the long tradition of the church fathers and Carolingian writers: There

are clear echoes on classical and, in turn, the Alfredian prefaces in form and contents and wording.¹¹

While the Alfredian prefaces (also in their later manuscript transmission; see n. 6) set a more general coordinate system in that they aim at placing the vernacular texts on a par with the received Latin texts by investing them with a royal stamp of authority, in the Ælfrician prefaces it is the author/translator himself who has strong individual aims regarding the reception of his texts. Ælfric's main concern is his teaching of orthodox lore to unlearned/lay people (3b, 3f, 4c) or, more generally, to those who are not competent enough in Latin to fully and correctly understand his authoritative sources. His central aim in presenting his texts is the avoidance of fallacies and heresy (3d).

This is also echoed in the paratext printed as (5), an exhortation to the scribe regularly found at the end of a prologue: False copying – a commonplace in manuscript culture, also found, for instance, in Chaucer's poem *Adam Sciveyn* – is here equalled with the heresy detested by Ælfric.

- (5) Nu bydde ic and halsige on Godes naman, gif hwa þas boc awritan wylle, þæt he hi geornlice gerihte on þære bysene, þy læs ðe we ðurh gymelease writeras geleahtrode beon. Mycel yfel deð se ðe leas writ, buton he hit gerihte, swylce he gebringe þa soþan lare to leasum gedwyld; forði sceal gehwa gerihtlæcan þæt þæt he ær to woge gebigde, gif he on Godes dome unscyldig beon wile.

'Now I desire and beseech, in God's name, if anyone will transcribe this book, that he carefully correct it by the copy, lest we be blamed through careless writers. He does great evil who writes false, unless he correct it; it is as though he turn true doctrine to false error; therefore should everyone make that straight which he before bent crooked, if he will be guiltless at God's doom.'

Interestingly, this imprecation of scribes is the most widely surviving of all Ælfrician paratexts and almost identically found in all of Ælfric's Old English

11. Apart from the epistolary form, compare phrases such as *Nec ubique transtulimus verbum ex verbo, sed sensum ex sensu* (3c) to the Alfredian *Hwilum he sette word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgite* 'Sometimes he set it down word for word, sometimes sense for sense' in the Preface to the *Boethius* (BoProem 2.1), itself probably modelled on *hwilum word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgiete* in the Old English prose preface to the translation of the *Cura Pastoralis* (CPLetWærf 58). These phrases (and their concepts!) are essentially borrowed from Jerome's reactions on his critics on the question of verbatim, word-for-word translations: When accused of deviating from the source text, Jerome stated that, when translating, he 'render[ed] sense for sense and not word for word' (*non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu; Patrologia Latina* 22, 571, col. 571).

prefaces (to the Second Series of *Catholic Homilies*, to the *Grammar*, to the *Lives of Saints* and to the *Translation of Genesis*).¹²

In contrast to the literary authorial self-awareness attested in the prologues through presentation of author, audience and translation principles in the prefaces (see (3) and (4) above), the terminal framing text in (5) focusses on the medium: It refers to this particular text in this particular manuscript, which will be copied in a particular context by a particular scribe for a particular audience. It thus negotiates the production and reception of a particular text in a particular manuscript. The scribal colophons, i.e. the terminal paratexts reviewed in the following sections, can in this context be seen as an interaction with and response to the authorial exhortations such as Ælfric's in that they also focus on the main agents in literacy, namely the book and its producer(s).

4. Terminal framing material in manuscripts: The communicative functions of Anglo-Saxon scribal colophons

4.1 Anglo-Saxon scribal colophons: Presenting the agents of literacy

On this backdrop of the construction of royal and textual authority in both Alfredian and Ælfrician prefaces (and their echoes of classical models), I will now focus on a kind of paratext typical for manuscripts: scribal colophons at the end of manuscripts (or rarely, texts).¹³ As has been pointed out above, the 44 colophons identified for Anglo-Saxon manuscripts by Gameson (2002) are the exception rather than the rule: only about five per cent of surviving manuscripts feature colophons. The majority of Anglo-Saxon colophons are in Latin; only 8.5 colophons are in Old English (in (17), both Latin and Old English are used).

In medieval studies, the term colophon usually refers to “the scribes’ inscriptions at the end of a manuscript, in which they provide some kind of information about their copying endeavour” (Schiegg 2016: 129; see also Scase, Chapter 4, this volume). While in about 2/3 of Anglo-Saxon colophons, individuals involved in

12. Despite Ælfric's exhortations not to alter his texts, his homilies are regularly found in compilations together with other (in Ælfric's view certainly unorthodox) homilies. This reveals that Ælfric's sense of his work as an authorized and fixed was not compatible with the practice of early medieval text transmission (Wilcox 2001: 63), which was in the responsibility and power of scribes and compilers (see below, Section 4).

13. Sherman (2011: 65) suggests the term ‘terminal paratext’ for paratexts at the end of books and points out that virtually all of the paratextual elements in Genette's inventory are located at the beginnings of books and that the metaphors used – *threshold*, *vestibule*, *canal lock* or *airlock* (Genette 1997: 2, 408) – can also be seen to primarily refer to front matter.

the production of the manuscripts are indeed named, such a narrow definition would exclude some of the colophons listed in Gameson (2002), which – as the most basic forms of colophons – only mark the end of a text or provide some “finishing touch”¹⁴ in the form of a prayer (7):¹⁵

- (6) Finit euangelium secundum Iohannem.
‘Here finishes the gospel according to John.’
- (7) Amen deo gratias.
‘Amen. Thanks [be] to God.’

Colophonic material like (6) is, of course, closer to rubrics marking the beginning or end of texts (i.e. *incipits* or *explicitis*). They do at first glance not seem to provide much information on particularities of manuscript production. Gameson (2019), however, can show in an investigation of rubrics and colophons in the Codex Amiatinus that in spite of the generally formulaic and conventional nature of this material, it still “indicates that in small elements (such as the form and content of rubrics and subscriptions) as well as larger ones (such as Uncial script and layout *per cola et commata*), Wearmouth-Jarrow adopted conventions of the late antique/Italian book culture to which it was exposed”.

Another very brief kind of colophon gives the name of the scribe, thus individualizing him or her.¹⁶ These are common in both Latin and Old English:

- (8) Johannes me scripsit.¹⁷
‘John wrote me.’
- (9) Wulwi me wrat.¹⁸

14. The *OED* (s.v. *colophon* 2.a) relates the term to Greek κολοφών ‘summit, finishing touch’ and gives as a meaning ‘[t]he inscription or device, sometimes pictorial or emblematic, formerly placed at the end of a book or manuscript, and containing the title, the scribe’s or printer’s name, date and place of printing, etc.’

15. Both (6) and (7) are from Echternach Gospels; Paris, BN, lat. 9389; s. vii/viii; fol. 222v (Gameson 2002, no. 2).

16. Most of the identifiable scribes of colophons are male; in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 451, however, we have an unambiguous reference to the female scribe through the female form *scriptrix*: *Salua et incolomis* [sic] *maneant per secula scriptrix* ‘May the [female] scribe remain safe and sound forever’ (fol. 119v; Gameson 2002, no. 42).

17. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 311, fol. 85r; penitential collection; s. x²; Gameson (2002, no. 21).

18. London, British Library, Cotton Otho C.I (I), fol. 110r; Old English Gospels; s. xi med.; Gameson (2002, no. 28).

‘Wulfwi(g) / wrote me’.

Such colophons inform us about the name of the scribe and give an explicit verbal reference to his or her writing activity (*scripsit, wrat*) and the material object itself, in both cases as a speaking object (cf. *me*; on this employment of prosopopoeia, see below, Section 4.2). They thus index the main agents in the production of this material object (a book individualized by its personification).

Colophons recurrently also address the third major agent of literacy, the reader(s).¹⁹ For early examples, see the following colophons from the Codex Amiatinus (for details on these colophons and their classical models, see Gameson 2019: 90–92):²⁰

- (10) a. Lege Feliciter (fol. 86v; fol. 146r)
 b. Lege Felix (fol. 110v)
 c. Feliciter qui legis. (fol. 796r; fol. 1016r)
 ‘Read happily’ ‘Happy you [who you] read.’

The specific association of colophons with negotiating the interaction of the processes of writing and reading is particularly striking in colophons using cryptic writing:

- (11) Ælxxnfiu≡ fxxm-rt· dūræ cð.=dxuunxxn
 (transliteration: Ælfuine me wrat raed ðu ðe cenne)
 ‘Elfwine wrote me. Read you who might be able.’²¹

Cryptograms such as this are the realm of professionals: only those fully literate are able to solve the usually not very complicated ciphers. Most often, vowels are replaced by dots or by the consonants which follow them, as in:

- (12) DFPGRBTKBS.AMEN = Deo gratias. Amen.²²

Simple as these ciphers may be, they still elude those who have not been trained in a scriptorium. These ciphers are intrinsically related to their scribes’ medial self-awareness, their identification and perhaps even pride as professionals of literacy.

19. Only in London, British Library, Royal 5 D.v (Gameson 2002, no. 41), readers and listeners are addressed: *Pax legentibus et audientibus in Christo. Amen.* ‘Peace to the readers and hearers, in Christ. Amen.’ (fol. 252v).

20. For further Latin examples, see, e.g., Gameson (2002, nos. 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 16, 17, 18, 22, 23, 28, 33).

21. London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius E.xviii (Gameson 2002, no. 35). The transliteration and translation follow Pulsiano (1998: 99) (but see now also Scragg 2019).

22. Reims, Bibliothèque municipale, 9, fol. 154v (Gameson 2002, no. 33).

4.2 Prosopopoeia: Not only scribes, but books speak

A similar display of professional scribal intricacies can be seen in the many cases of prosopopoeia in Anglo-Saxon colophons. While the focus in the interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon colophons has generally been the scribe, we see from the colophons such as *Johannes me scripsit* (8), *Wulwi me wrat* (9) and the cryptogram ‘*Elfwine wrote me*’ (11) that the scribe’s voice is not the only one in colophons: We rather hear the book’s voice, which refers to itself in the first person (*me*) in clear instances of the rhetorical device of personification in a ‘speaking object’, i.e. prosopopoeia (on prosopopoeia in Anglo-Saxon England, see Knappe 1998: 26). What is placed in the centre of attention by this rhetorical device is the reified text presenting itself, the manuscript as the (now finished) material object (on reification as one of the prime functions of literacy, see Coulmas 1989: 12).

The employment of the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia first of all displays the rhetorical education of the scribes: Common in riddles and other literary forms from Anglo-Saxon England in both Latin and Old English (see, e.g., Bredehoft 1996; Knappe 1998: 26; Orton 2005, 2014), prosopopoeia is common in all kinds of framing material, not only in colophons, but also in prefaces and epilogues. The most prominent examples are found in the Alfredian texts introduced above in Section 3.2. In the verse preface to the translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues* (GDPref), the book speaks in phrases similar to those we have seen in the colophons:

- (13) a. Se ðe me rædan ðencð ... (line 1)
 ‘He who sets out to read me ...’
 b. He in me findan mæg ... (line 2)
 ‘He can find in me ...’
 c. Me awritan het ... Wulfsige bisceop (line 12)
 ‘Bishop Wulfsige had me written.’

Similar employment of prosopopoeia is attested in the verse preface to the Old English *Pastoral Care*, in

- (14) Siððan min on englisc Ælfred kyning / awende worda gehwelc, and me his
 writerum / sende suð and norð ... (CPPref, lines 11–13)
 ‘Afterwards king Alfred translated every word of me into English and sent
 me south and north to his scribes ...’

Expert scribes must also have been especially aware of the prominence given to personal names in these phrases, in particular when the speaking object ‘book’ or ‘text’ singles out the individuals responsible for its existence.

4.3 Colophons as micro-texts

This function of profiling names and individuals in colophons employing prosopoeia opens up yet another perspective on their communicative functions, a function that transgresses their ancillary presenting functions directed at the text(s) they accompany. This view is supported by the fact that, in many cases, the speaking material object of a colophon is a gospelbook and thus a most valuable kind of manuscript. This material aspect is one of the characteristics distinguishing the status of (most) books in a manuscript from those in a print culture: The cost and value of books has continuously decreased with ever more multiple copies produced of one and the same book (increasingly getting cheaper over the centuries, from parchment to paperback). The high value and the extraordinary public esteem of gospelbooks have also caused the frequent insertion of various kinds of important legal documents and records of an administrative character (charters, records of guilds, manumissions) on their blank folios or spaces well into the modern period.²³

Expert scribes would have been involved in or at least been aware of this use of gospelbooks as a treasured material objects safeguarding longevity. In obviously successful attempts at ensuring permanence, scribes often add their names and their supplications into this esteemed carrier medium, as in (15):

- (15) *De min bruche gibidde fore owun ðe ðas boc gloesde.*
 ‘Whosoever uses me, may he pray for Owun who glossed this book.’

Such supplications and prayers are a very old and common feature of colophons. In the Codex Amiatinus, for example, the basic formula *ora pro me* ‘pray for me’ is typographically highlighted by being presented in the form of a cross, showing the expertise of the scribe (see Gameson 2019, Figures 2 and 4). In a more elaborate form,²⁴ the Worcester scribe Wulfgeat asks for prayers for his faults:

23. These added texts, however, though ‘peri-textual’ since on blank spaces or margins ‘around’ the text (cf. Greek *περί* ‘about, around’), are not ‘peritexts’ in the sense of Genette. They have no relation to the text of the four gospels, do not negotiate meaning between the gospel text and its respective readers, but exploit the high esteem of the material object as a carrier medium.

24. The most elaborate Anglo-Saxon colophon informing about the production of a manuscript is certainly Aldred’s colophon in the Lindisfarne Gospels (London, British Library, Cotton Nero D. iv, fol. 259r) giving a ‘lengthy account, mainly in Old English, of the original manufacture of this copy (by Eadfrith, Æthilwald and Billfrith) and the subsequent activities and hopes of its glossator, Aldred’ (Gameson 2002, no. 14). For recent research on this complex colophon and its reliability, see the chapters by Brown and Roberts, in Fernández Cuesta and Pons-Sanz (2016). See also Scase, Chapter 4, this volume.

- (16) Me scripsit Wulfgeatus scriptor Wigornensis. Ora obsecro pro ipsius neuis cosmi satorem. Amen. Et qui me scripsit semper sit felix. Amen.²⁵
 ‘Wulfgeat scribe of Worcester wrote me. Pray, I beseech, to the Creator of the universe for his [the scribe’s] faults. Amen. And may he who has transcribed me be happy forever. Amen.’

In (17), Farmon explicitly refers to his responsibility for the Old English gloss²⁶ to the Latin gospel text of the Rushworth Gospels and closes his colophon with a prayer for the forgiveness of his sins and eternal well-being:

- (17) Farman presbyter þas boc þus gleosedede dimittet ei dominus omnia peccata sua si fieri potest apud deum.²⁷
 ‘Farmon the priest glossed this book thus. May the Lord set aside all his sins, should he come into the Lord’s presence.’

The self-identification of the scribe followed by a prayer of praise or supplication is most revealing when seen in the context of Ælfric’s and later authors’ recurrent imprecations to the scribes at the end of prefaces (see Section 3.3 above) and in particular warnings such as *gif he on Godes dome unscyldig beon wile* ‘if he will be guiltless at God’s doom’ (see (5) above). In manuscript contexts such as these, the supplications may be seen as an interactive and direct response to these warnings.

Apart from their functions in the immediate dialogic context of the production of books, such self-identifications of scribes may, however, be considered to serve even more general communicative functions – in particular in view of the prolific positioning of the book as a material speaking object through prosopopoeia in gospel books.

Considering the value the employment of prosopopoeia places on the material object as a carrier medium of the colophons, their functions should in my opinion – at least additionally – be seen similar to those characterizing many brief texts beyond the Old English manuscript culture, specifically the so-called maker formula attested in epigraphic inscriptions (nos. from Okasha 1971), which – as the scribal colophons – centre their attention on the material object they are written on and its producer:

25. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 121, fol. 101r; Old English ecclesiastical institutes and homilies; s. xi^{3/4}; Gameson (2002, no. 36).

26. The verb OE *gleosedede* probably refers to both the scribal and authorial activities of the glossator. The verb is only attested three times in Old English (in various manuscripts), two of them in the Rushworth Gospels (see DOE, s.v. *glēsan*).

27. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. D.2.19; s. x²; Gameson (2002, no. 16).

- (18) N.N. *me worhte* ‘N.N. made me’
 Cross (no. 17) s. x–xi + *Drahmal me worhte.*
 Carved stone sun-dial (no. 41) s. x–xi + *Loðan me wrohte.*
 Carved stone sun-dial (no. 64) s. x^{med} + 7 *Hawarð [:] me wrohte [:]*
 7 *Brand presbyter.*
 Bronze censer-cover (no. 100) s. x–xi + *GODRIC ME WVORHT.*
 Decorated iron knife (no. 109) x. ix^{ex}–x + *BIORHTELM ME WORTE.*
- (19) N.N. *me he(h)t wyrcean* ‘N.N. ordered me to be made’
 ‘Alfred jewel’ (no. 4) x. ix^{ex}–s. x + *Aelfred mec heht gevvyrcan.*
 ‘sigerie’ ring (no. 156) uncertain + *SIGERIE HEÐ MEA GEVVIRCAN.*

When viewed in this wider context of literacy beyond manuscript culture, our scribal colophons – and perhaps also the verse prefaces employing prosopopoeia – might perhaps be better not only solely be seen as paratexts, which inform us about the production circumstances of a book, but also as brief independent texts, which are attested in many different forms in Anglo-Saxon literacy (labelled ‘micro-texts’ in Lenker and Kornexl 2019; see Kornexl and Lenker 2019: 1–2). On valuable material objects, the maker formulae first of all invest these objects with the authoritative stamp of professionals in book production (a function we have also seen for paratextual material in manuscripts), but they may also be taken as an attempt to ensure that the name of the maker will be kept in remembrance. At least some of the Anglo-Saxon scribes have also been successful in this attempt: through their colophons they are known to us as individual scribes, so that these paratexts fulfil a much wider function than just accompanying or presenting other texts.²⁸

5. Conclusions

Viewing the prologues and colophons extant in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in the perspective of their Latin and Old English traditions shows that these framing texts are much more than just supplementary material. Even though both prologues and colophons are clearly modelled on classical or early Christian genre conventions, they still reveal specific characteristics of literary production and its presentation in the earliest phase of English literacy. While most Anglo-Saxon texts have come down to us anonymously, the prologues identifying vernacular

28. That scribes were aware of this function, at least in later times, is attested in the case of the scribe of the Anglo-Norman *Manuel des Pechiez*, who makes a point of omitting the name of the author from its prologue, when explaining *Mun nun ne vos voil ci nomer./ Car deu sul qeor luer* ‘I do not want to give you my name here, because I seek to praise God alone’ (example taken from Dearnley 2016: 101–102).

texts as produced during and after King Alfred's reign (871–899) or by Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 950–c. 1010) authorize these vernacular texts with an authority implicit in Latin literacy. As experts in manuscript production and literacy, also scribes must have been aware of the great potential of these initial and final framing positions for a display of the specific features of Anglo-Saxon literacy and their main agents (authors, scribes, books and readers). As a 'finishing touch', the scribes accordingly used this pronounced position for adding 'micro-texts' with the successful intention of keeping their names in permanent memory.

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