

*Be rihtre æwe: Legislating and  
Regulating Marital Morality in Late  
Anglo-Saxon England*

by

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# Abstract

This thesis examines some projects of moral regulation, implemented by the agents of the church and king in the late Anglo-Saxon period, which sought to modify and govern marital conduct. Theories of moral regulation are analysed in the Introduction, which also examines Germanic marriage practices, as far as they can be recovered, and the Anglo-Saxon church's inherited attitudes towards marriage. Manuscripts and texts are examined firstly as projects of moral regulation, and secondly as projects which attempted to alter marital behaviour.

In Chapter 1, moral regulation is situated within the context of the Benedictine reform through the examination of one manuscript – Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 201 – as a case-study in the cooperative efforts of the church and king to regulate society. In particular, the legislative and penitential texts which are compiled in MS 201 bear witness to the tendency in late Anglo-Saxon England for legislation to be moralised, and for morality to be legislated. MS 201 also includes the unique copy of the Old English translation of *Apollonius of Tyre*, and the marital morality inscribed therein perhaps accounts for its inclusion in this predominantly Wulfstanian manuscript.

In Chapter 2 the riddles recorded in the *Exeter Book* are interpreted as literary exercises in regulation. This chapter establishes the possible moral and regulatory agenda of the *Exeter Book* riddles by offering a new interpretation of, and solution to, one riddle. It also analyses the marriages made manifest in some of the so-called '*double entendre*' riddles, which regulate the moral relationship following Pauline exegesis: emphasis in these riddles is on the sanctity of marriage, wifely obedience, and the payment of the conjugal debt. Conversely, Ælfric, in his *Lives of Saints*, idealises marriage as characterised by the absence of all sexual relations. In his *Life of St Agnes* (examined in Chapter 3), and in his

*Lives* of married saints (SS Julian and Basilissa, SS Cecilia and Valerian, and SS Chrysanthus and Daria, examined in Chapter 4), Ælfric makes non-sexual, companionable, and loving marriage morally paradigmatic.

Whilst both marriage and morality have been studied by modern critics, neither topic has inspired extended, specific study (with a few, notable, exceptions), and the nexus between these two topics has been hitherto unacknowledged. Although new, and often profound, insight is gained into Anglo-Saxon texts by considering them in the context of moral regulation, the morality they propose, as well as the regulatory process used to impose that morality, varies across context, text, genre, and author. This conclusion is also true for marital morality, Anglo-Saxon perceptions of which differed in each of the texts chosen for evaluation. This thesis does not claim to be comprehensive; nor does it attempt to synthesise attitudes towards marriage and morality, since a synthesis does not do justice to the richness or complexity with which this topic was treated. It is hoped that this thesis will provide insight into not only individual Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards marriage but also processes of regulation and social control, and, indeed, into the intersection between attitudes and processes.

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# List of Illustrations

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Figure 1. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11, page 16: Fall of the Angels [*By permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford*]

Figure 2. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11, page 20: Temptation of Adam and Eve [*By permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford*]

Figure 3. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11, page 17: Fall of the Angels [*By permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford*]

Figure 4. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11, page 3: Lucifer's Transformation to Satan [*By permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford*]

# Preface

In examining marriage and morality, I have journeyed far from my original thesis topic, which was to have been a study of gender in Anglo-Saxon society. The transition from gender to marriage is explicable, especially since I had originally intended to focus primarily on gender as constructed in marital relationships. However, two external circumstances can best account for my final topic: firstly, contemporary Australian, and world, politics; secondly, my own wedding, eighteen months into my PhD candidature. In many modern societies, religion has a profound relationship with government, influencing political and cultural dialogue: the interaction of religion and politics informs the development and philosophy of both. Often the separation between church and state is ambiguous, if such a separation can be made at all. In this context, I have been particularly fascinated, and often horrified, by the ways in which modern Australian society increasingly moralises (and regulates through moral manipulation) politics, law, culture, and thought, often from a specifically Christian stance. Particularly in Australia and the United States of America, the ‘religionisation’ of politics, and the consequent politicisation of morals, is conspicuous, and this political trend struck me as disquietingly ‘medieval’. Yet my (admittedly only undergraduate) knowledge of issues of church-state division was restricted to the High Middle Ages. It struck me as both immediately relevant, as well as excitingly new, to investigate the regulation of morality through processes of governance and power in late Anglo-Saxon England. It has been both satisfying and dismaying to see immediate and profound correlations between Anglo-Saxon *governance*, and some contemporary *governments*: satisfying in that my evaluation of the quasi-medieval appearance of modern politics is, at least in Australia, not incorrect, and dismaying by the same token. On a happier note, my own wedding and marriage motivated and inspired me to study the institution into which I entered so exultantly.

Throughout this dissertation, quotations of Old English and Latin texts have not been normalised, and wherever possible are reproduced exactly from the editions consulted. I have not, however, replicated Skeat's metrical lineation of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, although I have retained his pointing which indicates manuscript punctuation. Any other deviations from this policy are mentioned in the notes. Except for word division, quotations directly from manuscripts have not been normalised or corrected (even when corrupt); common abbreviations have been silently expanded; minimal punctuation has been introduced to clarify sense only in cases in which the manuscript punctuation is unclear. Major or interlinear corrections in manuscripts are indicated by < >; major erasures or *lacunae* in manuscripts are indicated by { }. In quotations from both editions and manuscripts, italic type has been used to indicate emphasis; when the emphasis is my own and does not occur in the original, mention will be made in the notes. Modern English translations from Old English are nearly always my own; any translations from Old English which are not my own are referenced in the notes. English translations from Latin texts are generally not my own, except where noted. In Chapters 3 and 4, in which quotations from Ælfric's Latin sources frequently appear (occasionally at length) in a comparative context, no translations have been given, primarily in order to avoid over-burdening the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all definitions of Old English words beginning A-F are taken from the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English*; all definitions of Old English words beginning G-Z are taken in the first instance from Bosworth Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, and cross-referenced against Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

I would like to record my earnest thanks to the many people and organisations that made the completion of this thesis possible. I owe an especial debt to the tireless efforts of my supervisors: Margaret Clunies Ross, Antonina Harbus, and Jennifer Neville. Professor Clunies Ross's awesome knowledge of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse studies, and of the labyrinth which is 'academia', is both humbling and inspiring. Dr Harbus's meticulous approach to scholarship and supervision has afforded me indispensable guidance. Jenny



Neville has my continued and heartfelt appreciation: her friendship, dedication, enthusiasm, and enduring faith in me, as a person and as a scholar, are of immeasurable value to me. My thanks also go to Jane Page who read and commented on the final version of this thesis.

I am grateful to Royal Holloway College, the University of London, as well as to the University of Sydney's International Office which organised my exchange with Royal Holloway College: the eighteen months I spent at Royal Holloway College were some of the most beneficial of my academic career. I am also indebted to the Parker Library (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge), which granted me repeated and prolonged visits to study MS 201. A number of other organisations should be recognised for their financial assistance: the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies (King's College, the University of London), whose substantial scholarship facilitated my trip to the United Kingdom, and the Lynne Grundy Memorial Trust, the Teachers of Old English in Britain and Ireland, the International Medieval Congress and the University of Sydney (through its Grants-in-Aid and Postgraduate Research Support Schemes), all of which awarded generous bursaries to me. Without my University of Sydney Postgraduate Award I would not have been able to undertake this thesis.

My debt to the studies of previous scholars will be apparent from the notes, and is gratefully recognised. In particular, I am beholden to Dr Michael Drouot and Dr Mercedes Salvador, who both generously and graciously provided me with copies of their unpublished work. I have used the excellent *Fontes* online database extensively. The manuscript description which comprises Appendix 1 is dependent on the *Illustrated Catalogue* of the manuscripts in the Parker Library (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge) compiled by Mildred Budny, David Wilson, and Ray Page, and on Neil Ker's *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, as well as on my own study of the manuscript. Whilst reference to her work appears only infrequently in the notes, I am particularly

indebted to the late Professor Christine Fell, whose monograph, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, fired my enthusiasm for marriage and gender. The argument found in Chapter 2 regarding the *Exeter Book* riddle, number 4, is forthcoming in *Neophilologus*.

To my devoted friends and family, who have endured my prattling about all things Anglo-Saxon for more years than I, or they, care to count, I offer my thanks. Thanks especially to Pirkko Koppinen and Jane Page, whose companionship and collegiality during my time in the United Kingdom were invaluable. My Mum and Dad deserve particular mention because it was they who introduced me to the wonders of history, particularly English history; who inspired in me a lifelong desire to explore and share my explorations, and who have supported my initially imaginative, and later more scholarly, engagement with such explorations. Finally, I thank my husband, Lance, to whom this thesis is dedicated: his indefatigable encouragement and conviction in me have buoyed my flagging spirits over the past four years; my motivation has been his love, support, and friendship. I hope only that this thesis makes him proud.

# Abbreviations

## Manuscript Sigla

C Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 201

## Short Titles and Other Abbreviations

- ÆCH: Introduction* *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, ed. by Malcolm Godden, EETS SS 18 (London: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- ÆHom* *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, ed. by John C. Pope, EETS 259, 260, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1967-68)
- ÆLS* *Ælfric's Lives of Saints: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints' Days formerly observed by the English Church*, ed. and trans. by Walter W. Skeat, EETS OS 76, 82, 94 and 114 (London: Oxford University Press, 1881-1900; repr. in 2 vols, 1966)
- Atr* Law code of Æthelræd
- BT Joseph T. Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1882-98), with supplement by T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary...Supplement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908-21), and addenda by Alistair Campbell, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary...Enlarged Addenda and Corrigenda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972)
- CHI* *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series: Text*, ed. by Peter Clemoes, EETS SS 17 (London: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- CHII* *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series: Text*, ed. by Malcolm Godden, EETS SS 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979)
- Clark Hall John R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th edn

with supplement by H. D. Meritt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960; repr. by University of Toronto Press, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 14, 2000)

- Cn Law code of Cnut
- DOE *Dictionary of Old English*, ed. by Angus Cameron *et al.* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986-)
- EBR *Exeter Book Riddles*
- Ed Law code of Edgar
- EETS Early English Text Society
- Em Law code of Eadmund
- EHD I *English Historical Documents: I, c. 500-1042*, trans. by Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1979)
- Fontes *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: World Wide Web Register*, ed. by Fontes Anglo-Saxonici Project (available at: <<http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk/>>)
- Gesetze *Die Gesetze der angelsachsen*, ed. by Felix Liebermann, 3 vols (Halle: Niermeyer, 1898-1916; repr. Scientia Allen, 1960)
- 'Handbook' 'A Late Old English Handbook for the Use of a Confessor', ed. by Roger Fowler, *Anglia*, 83 (1965), 1-34
- Handlist Helmut Gneuss, *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A List of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 241 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001)
- HA *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri*
- HE *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (London: Oxford University Press, 1969; repr. 1972)
- MCH Metrical Calendar of Hampson
- MCR Metrical Calendar of Ramsey
- MCY Metrical Calendar of York

- Microfiche Concordance* Richard L. Venezky and Antonette diPaolo Healey, *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English*, Publications of the Dictionary of Old English, 1 (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English, 1980)
- Napier *Wulfstan: Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen Homilien nebst Untersuchungen über ihre Echtheit*, ed. by Arthur S. Napier, *Sammlung englischer Denkmäler in kritischen Ausgaben*, IV (Berlin: Weidmannsche, 1883)
- Niermeyer J. F. Niermeyer and C. Van de Kieft, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus: Lexique Latin Médiéval-Français/Anglais* (Leiden: Brill, 1976)
- Northu* *Northumbrian Priests' Law*
- OED* *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, 20 vols (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)
- PL* *Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, ed. by J. P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1844-1904)
- PMLA* *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
- Poetic Concordance* *A Concordance to the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, ed. by Jess B. Bessinger (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978)
- TOE* *Thesaurus of Old English*, ed. by Jane Roberts, Christian Kay and Lynne Grundy, 2 vols (London: Centre for Late Antique and Early Medieval Studies, 1995)
- TRHS* *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*