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“FOOLISH SPEECH, FREQUENT JOKING, AND NAUGHTY CHATTERING”
HUMOR IN THE ANGLO-SAXON MONASTERY

IAN MORGAN
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Dr. Scott Thompson Smith
Assistant Professor
Thesis Supervisor

Lisa Sternlieb
English Honors Adviser
Honors Adviser

Dr. Thomas Beebee
Professor
Second Reader

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

Abstract

Conventional wisdom tells us that Anglo-Saxon texts are almost always somber in tone and serious in purpose. Marked by elegiac wanderers, honorable heroes, and severe homilies, one cannot doubt that the literate inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon England had a penchant for the austere. However, recent scholarship has been concerned with recognizing and analyzing some of the lighter aspects of the literature, as well as taking a fresh look at texts typically considered non-humorous. My thesis assumes this comedic perspective by considering the implications of the pedagogical text *Colloquies* by a little-known tenth century monk named Ælfric Bata. Though used as a Latin textbook, the quotidian and, at times, ridiculous nature of the text make it a significant departure from other works produced during the Benedictine Reform; in addition, it provides valuable insight into the relationship between author and audience in Anglo-Saxon texts. I examine the monastic culture of the Benedictine Reform, questioning some of the long-held positions that claim humor had no place in such a setting. Using this work to establish a contemporary readership, I also analyze some of the more dubious texts from this period, particularly the Old English gnomic catalogues found in the Exeter Book. I will add my voice to this debate by arguing that these poems could have been produced for the same audience as the *Colloquies*, and thus may contain semblances of humor that have gone overlooked by scholars.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
“Foolish Speech, Frequent Joking, and Naughty Chattering”: Humor in the Anglo-Saxon Monastery.....	1
Bibliography.....	35

Acknowledgements

Doctor bone, utinam uelles ostendere plane mihi uel aperte manifestare lectionem hanc, seu hoc testimonium, siue istam mysticam scripturam, quia hanc sententiam non possum intelligere sine doctore. Valde difficilis est mihi ad intellegendum, et non habeo tam profundam doctrinam, ut animaduerte ualeam haec sacra mysteria.

[Good teacher, I wish you would show me clearly or plainly reveal to me this reading, or this testimony, or this mystical scripture, because I'm not able to understand this text without a tutor. It's very difficult for me to understand. I don't have a deep enough learning to discern these holy mysteries.]— A pupil from the *Colloquies* of Ælfric Bata

I'd like to think that my pleas for help while I researched this thesis were not quite as desperate as the pupil's above, but that's probably not the case.

To my first and greatest teachers, thank you for always encouraging quirkiness, reason, compassion, and Blue Steel. To my brother, Evan, you're my best friend, but you may also be the sole reason that I am able to find humor in places nobody else can. To my sister, Emily, thanks for all the floor-picnics: I learned more than you know over falafel. To my sister, Natalie, thank you for talking me through every crises while juggling two of the scariest Vikings north of the Danelaw. To my family and friends, thank you for your support and patience; without it, I would surely have left you out of these acknowledgements.

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To Dr. Scott Thompson Smith, thank you for introducing me to and guiding me through the world of Anglo-Saxon literature. Your help researching, editing, and drafting this paper was invaluable. I'm not sure if you would or would not want to be compared to Ælfric Bata, but your contagious passion for learning and your ability to make even the longest tangent about Easter seem interesting begs the question.

And to Ælfric Bata, or as his students evidently called him, *Doctor bone*, thanks for making me laugh.

For modern readers, Anglo-Saxon literature can lend itself to sweeping generalizations. After all, the discipline is primarily concerned with texts written over a thousand years ago, with manuscripts murky and mysterious, and with scholars making audacious conjectures built on miniscule details. That is not to say, of course, that scholarship on Anglo-Saxon texts is misguided; rather, it goes to show the fickle interpretive nature of the literature and surviving evidence. Take the canonical pearl in the Old English corpus, *Beowulf*, as an example. As Seamus Heaney notes in the introduction to his excellent 1999 translation, the poem was regarded simply as an example of “a pagan Germanic society governed by a heroic code of honour” before J.R.R. Tolkien changed everything by treating the work as a legitimate piece of literature in his 1936 paper “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*.”¹ Tolkien’s essay redefined the text and spearheaded over seventy-five years of intense critical attention on the poem. Such a summation does not do justice to the vast amount of scholarship that preceded Tolkien, but the sentiment persists: fresh perspectives yield rich results.

An emergent area of Anglo-Saxon studies aims to stimulate a similar reanalysis of the literature by utilizing a novel approach. Humor and its generic relatives have long been ignored as meaningful critical starting points for any Anglo-Saxon text. While several later medieval texts, such as episodes from the *Canterbury Tales*, have been analyzed as definitively comic, Anglo-Saxon works are almost universally considered to be dry and severe. The reasons for this may not be as complicated as one might think. Just as *Beowulf* suffered from scholars imposing predetermined notions of heroism,

¹ Seamus Heaney, Introduction to *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), ix-xxx; J.R.R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936): 245–95; for a critical edition, see Michael Drouot, ed., *Beowulf and the Critics* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002).

paganism, and literature on the text, the entire Anglo-Saxon corpus has fallen victim to modern assumptions about tone, style, and intent. Furthermore, Anglo-Saxon texts were drafted almost exclusively within the walls of the monastery, today a symbol of the austere lifestyles we project onto the Anglo-Saxon period. Indeed, as the *Rule of St.*

Benedict states:

ne sceal he fela spreca, ne idele word ne leahtorbere; ne hleahter ne sceal he lufian.

[He must not speak much, neither idle words nor those causing laughter; he must not love laughter/sin]²

Why would a place that explicitly bars laughter ever produce a joke? While this question lies right at the crux of this paper, some light has already been shed on the issue by recent scholars.

In 2000 Jonathon Wilcox edited the first and, as of yet, only collection of essays devoted solely to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the presence of humor in Anglo-Saxon texts.³ Many of the included critics, such as John D. Niles and T.A. Shippey, begin their search for humor anthropologically by looking for the most obvious indication of such: laughter.⁴ Others, such as D.K. Smith and Nina Rulon-Miller, examine some of the bawdy *Exeter Book* riddles as examples of playfulness and jocularity in the literature.⁵ Still others, like Raymond P. Tripp, Jr. and Shari Horner, focus on the subtle wordplay

² Arnold Schröder, ed., *Die angelsächsischen Prosabearbeitungen der Benediktinerregel*, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa 2 (Kassel, 1888), 7-9.

³ Jonathon Wilcox, ed., *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000).

⁴ T.A. Shippey, "'Grim Wordplay': Folly and Wisdom in Anglo-Saxon Humor," *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Wilcox (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 33-49; John D. Niles, "Byrhtnoth's Laughter and the Poetics of Gesture" *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Wilcox (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 11-32.

⁵ D.K. Smith, "Humor in Hiding: Laughter Between the Sheets in the Exeter Book Riddles," *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Wilcox (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 79-98; Nina Rulon-Miller, "Sexual Humor and Fettered Desire in Exeter Book Riddle 12," *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Wilcox (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 99-126.

and linguistic cues that may have resonated with an Anglo-Saxon audience.⁶ These essays vary in their success at finding humor, but all utilize a diverse range of humor theories to begin a discussion about comedy in the texts.

Indeed, a manageable theory for creating and/or understanding humor has evaded philosophers for millennia, though not for a lack of trying. In fact, a litany of theories exists that the student of humor can draw from to better grasp the comedy of a situation. One of the oldest and most persistent theories focuses on the “pleasure of suddenly viewing ourselves as superior to others.”⁷ Superiority humor, or “sudden glory” as Thomas Hobbes referred to it, appears both as a concept and as a technique in a huge range of works.⁸ Shippey notes superiority theory in Anglo-Saxon texts as the “proverbially oriented tradition of wisdom finding grim amusement in folly”; likewise, Niles uses a similar model to explain Byrthnoth’s much debated laugh in the *Battle of Maldon*.⁹ Though the somber and fatalist nature of most Anglo-Saxon literature suggests that derisive humor may be the only possible outlet for comic expression, other scholars have shown this not to be the case.

Incongruity theory is perhaps the most widely accepted notion of humor, acting as a sort of catchall term for various theoretical paradigms. Supported by empirical data derived from psychological tests throughout the twentieth century, incongruity theory states that “the components of a joke, or humorous incident, are in mutual clash, conflict,

⁶ Raymond P. Tripp Jr., “Humor, Wordplay, and Semantic Resonance in Beowulf,” *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Wilcox (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 49-70; Shari Horner, “‘Why do you speak so much foolishness?’ Gender, Humor, and Discourse in Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*,” *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Wilcox (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 127-136.

⁷ Christopher P. Wilson, *Jokes: Form, Content, Use, and Function* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 132.

⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge UP, 1991), 43 [I.6].

⁹ Shippey, “Grim Wordplay,” 46; Niles, “Byrthnoth’s Laughter,” 11.

or contradiction.”¹⁰ Included in this definition are the syntax and diction choices normally considered humorous in literature: understatement, overstatement, juxtaposition and puns. Old English poetry is filled with kennings, or compound words, and litotes, a form of understatement. These examples of wordplay reveal a wry style of writing that relies on the reader to catch subtle turns in language. Several Anglo-Saxonists apply incongruity theory liberally to understand disparate elements of a text. While Tripp uses incongruity to explain the “contradiction [and] necessary suddenness” that accompanies the wordplay in *Beowulf*, Hugh Magennis calls on the theory to explain how inconsistencies in hagiographic works may or may not have been intended as humorous.¹¹

The final humor theory most commonly employed by Anglo-Saxonists and psychologists alike comes from Sigmund Freud’s landmark text *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.¹² Freud’s psychoanalytic theory focuses first on something he calls “joke-work,” or the basic elements of a joke. Freud identifies condensation, or a “composite structure made up of two components,” as the necessary facet of any joke.¹³ Under the umbrella of “condensation” we find the gamut of possible joking techniques such as punning, double entendre, double meaning, and displacement, among others. In addition to joke-work, Freud posits the existence of three separate forms of comedy in

¹⁰ Wilson, *Jokes*, 9. For empirical evidence, see S. Ertel, “Eine Psychologische Theorie des Komischen,” (Munster: Habilitationsvortrag, 1968); M. Godkewitsch, *Verbal, exploratory, and physiological responses to stimulus properties underlying humor* (University of Toronto: Unpublished Ph. D Thesis, 1974); and G. Nerhardt “Incongruity and funniness: Towards a new descriptive model,” *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, eds. A.J. Chapman and H.C. Foot (London: Wiley, 1976), 55-62.

¹¹ Tripp, “Semantic Resonance in Beowulf,” 49; Hugh Magennis, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Heaven: Humorous Incongruity in Old English Saints’ Lives,” *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Wilcox (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 137-158, 137.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960).

¹³ Freud, *Jokes*, 19.

“wit,” “comic,” and “humor.” Wilson summarizes these points as follows: “‘Wit’ is alleged to release energy from the inhibition of sexual and aggressive impulses, ‘humour,’ to offer relief by diverting energy from unpleasant emotion, and the ‘comic’ to save the effort of thought.”¹⁴ Freud’s categorization of humorous situations is important to literary humor because it identifies that “an urge to tell the joke to someone is inextricably bound up with the joke-work.”¹⁵ In other words, while something “comic” can be found in isolation, “wit” and “humor” are possible only in the presence of an audience. Furthermore, Freud’s analysis notes the existence of “innocent jokes,” or jokes for the sake of joking, and “tendentious jokes,” or jokes with a particular aim or target.¹⁶ As a result, tendentious joking can be used to indirectly address issues in a social setting that may otherwise be considered obscene, controversial, or perhaps for an Anglo-Saxon audience, heretical. As D.K. Smith points out in his Freudian analysis of the bawdy riddles, further discussed below, “Freud’s theory posits a society in which undisguised sexual images are unacceptable and sexuality is repressed: a society not unlike Anglo-Saxon England.”¹⁷ Though the Freudian theory has lost credibility in recent years due to inconsistent empirical testing, it persists as a basis for discussion around humor.

Despite the breadth of available theories about humor, imposing old and new conceptions of comedy on a dead society which survives only in scant archeological evidence and decaying manuscripts raises several problems. Does a psychoanalytic theory presuppose an individual mentality that is unique to the modern era? Does laughter always imply humor or is it culturally situated? Such questions are necessary

¹⁴ Wilson, *Jokes*, 18.

¹⁵ Freud, *Jokes*, 143.

¹⁶ Freud, *Jokes*, 90.

¹⁷ Smith, “Humor in Hiding,” 83.

and speak to the important, albeit challenging task of providing a richer context in which the literature can be evaluated. Perhaps the most lacking component of any discussion of humor in Anglo-Saxon literature is that of speaker and audience. With most manuscripts the authorship is difficult to trace positively, if it is possible at all. Scribes copied texts by hand in monastery classrooms and workshops, often with more than one scribe working on the same project. Modern researchers are able to pinpoint specific paleographic cues that indicate certain time periods and localities, but even this minute analysis is cause for much debate within the scholarly community. An analysis of social context would provide a necessary foundation for applying the aforementioned humor theories to Anglo-Saxon literature.

A new conversation about Anglo-Saxon literature invites new participants. I do not mean new critics necessarily, though I humbly accept this fringe benefit; rather, a humoristic approach enables a fuller interpretation of lesser-known texts that may complicate the standard view of Anglo-Saxon culture and literature. Both heroic and elegiac poetry have long commanded critical attention due to their narrative complexities and generic significance. Likewise, homiletic and hagiographic texts, which together form a sizeable chunk of the extant manuscripts available today, are among the most analyzed works from this period. However, many texts resist the thorough interpretation afforded to the heroic and elegiac poems and the formulaic homilies and hagiographies; relevant to the purposes of this essay is a selection of ‘wisdom-based’ poetry that appears in a tenth-century manuscript miscellany known today as the *Exeter Book*.¹⁸

¹⁸ Translations taken from T.A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1976); for a discussion of dating see Patrick Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: A Tenth-Century Cultural History* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1993), 48-94.

At a glance, these sententious poems¹⁹ seem surprisingly similar to more well-known elegiac works such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Many of the gnomic poems are found in the *Exeter Book* side-by-side with the elegiac poems, where they “jostle each other without compunction,” as Shippey puts it.²⁰ If nothing else, this shows that the *Exeter Book* scribes at least vacillated between and appreciated various poetic forms. Moreover, the sententious poems are structurally similar to the elegiac poems. Just as *The Wanderer* identifies a solitary speaker communicating with the reader, so does *Maxims I* open with a character engaging the audience:

Frige mec frodum wordum.

[Question me with wise words.]²¹

Similar instances of a character exhorting the reader can be found in *Precepts* and *Vainglory*.²² In addition, the sententious poems share some thematic similarities with the

¹⁹ The differences between the various phrases which connote ‘wisdom-based’ literature in general are vague and agreed upon by few scholars. Paul Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999) distinguishes between “gnome” and “maxim”; Carolyne Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense: Gnostic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) notes a further distinction between “maxim” or “gnome” and “precept”; Blanch Colton Williams, *Gnostic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon* (New York: AMS Press, 1966) regards all “sententious statements” as gnomes. Regardless of whatever semantic distinctions a particular scholar settles on, there is inevitably overlap between the terms. Despite this contention, however, most scholars agree that “proverbs,” though linguistically shifty in their own right, refer to statements which have been “disseminated,” to use Cavill’s phrasing, into colloquial or common speech. For the purposes of my analysis, there is no reason to rely heavily on some of the more arbitrary distinctions proposed by these scholars; though valuable in a rhetorical or linguistic analysis, the difference between a maxim and a gnome has little to do with the existence of humor. Nevertheless, the distinction between proverbs and gnomes, as I will refer to them from here, is significant to the detection of humor. The dissemination of gnomic phrases throughout a culture reflects an oral transmission of information that cannot be detected in the text. Thus, when a gnome becomes prevalent and repeated as to be coined a proverb, it at least proves that it has been circulated throughout a society in much the same way as a joke.

²⁰ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 3.

²¹ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 64.

²² In *Precepts*: “Dus frod fæder/ freobearn lærde/ modsnottor mon./ maga cystum eald./ wordum wifæstum./ Pæt he wel þunge” [This is how the father—a man of experience with an intelligent mind, a man who had grown old in good qualities—this is how he taught his noble son, giving him sensible advice, so that he would get on well] in Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 48-49; in *Vainglory*: “Hwaet, me frod wita/ on fyrndagum/ sægde, snottor ar./ sundorwundra fela!” [Listen, long ago I was told many extraordinary and astonishing things by someone both learned and experienced, a wise man with a message] in Shippey, *Old English Poems of Wisdom*, 48-49, 54-55.

elegies; notably, poems like *Vainglory* and *Fortunes of Men* are concerned with personal internal conflict and the severity of earthly life. Yet, whereas the elegiac poems possess at least some semblance of a narrative arc, the sententious poetry is lacking in story, “so much so as to indicate a difference of kind rather than of degree.”²³ Instead, the poems feature loosely strung together gnomic statements, often with little correlation between lines or even half-lines. Where structure is imposed on the text, such as with the speaker in *Maxims I*, it is brief and generally not sustained. The lack of a narrative arc constitutes perhaps the primary dissimilarity between the sententious poems and other works.

Scholarship around the sententious poetry varies widely. Almost all scholars agree that the gnomic poems have a didactic function, but what exactly they are trying to teach remains unclear. Proverbial statements, of course, are also fixtures of both the Old and New Testament. Anglo-Saxon audiences were familiar with these texts and would have looked to them for spiritual and moral guidance. R. Macgregor Dawson states that “gnomic knowledge seems to have had its place in early literatures: it would appear to have served, in the absence of a reference library, as a source of useful hints for the governing of men's lives in such fields as education, religion, morals, and warfare.”²⁴ By “early literatures” Dawson refers to the Bible, but other critics have also attributed the gnomic style to an orally based, Germanic tradition. Carolyne Larrington suggests that the poems are derived from Old Norse and Old Germanic sources which tended toward mysticism and “the mastering of magical knowledge.”²⁵ Larrington refers to the Old Norse *Havamal*, or *Sayings of the High One*, in the *Poetic Edda* as an example of similar

²³ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, preface.

²⁴ R. Macgregor Dawson, “The Structure of Old English Gnomic Poems,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 61 (1962): 14-22 at 14.

²⁵ Larrington, *Common Sense*, 120.

gnomic usage.²⁶ Likewise, Paul Cavill argues that the gnomic statements reflect a descending “stratum of poetry” in which the maxims shift in stages from a purely pagan influence to a Christian one.²⁷ Shippey notes the opening lines of *Maxims I* as evidence that the poems could possibly be “sportive tests” similar to the riddles; conversely, Shippey and Dawson also each recognize that the poems could just as soon be an Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the modern stream-of-consciousness style.²⁸ Perhaps Shippey puts it most honestly: “If they are intended as entertainment, one can only say that they neither amuse nor distract. If they were mnemonic poems, catalogues, then they have neither the completeness nor the ease of reference which one might hope for in such works. If they are didactic then they ought to come to firmer conclusions.”²⁹ As Shippey’s tone suggests, one can at least feel confident stating that there is no singular, convincing explanation for the existence of the sententious catalogue poems.

Despite the diverse range of scholarship that has accompanied the gnomic catalogues, there has yet to be a survey of the humor that may be embedded in these texts. Shippey comes closest when he identifies “sardonic amusement” in several prose proverbial collections; namely, the *Dicts of Cato* and the *Durham Proverbs*.³⁰ Shippey notes that Dickensian Wellerisms, which he describes as “an innocuous or uninteresting statement...transformed by inventing a fantastic, ridiculous, or obscene context in which it is to be said,” can be found in the *Durham Proverbs*.³¹ Though Shippey does not elaborate on the humor apparent in the *Dicts of Cato*, the text itself is among the most

²⁶ Carolyne Larrington, trans. and ed., *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 14-39.

²⁷ Cavill, *Maxims*, 134.

²⁸ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 19; Dawson, “Old English Gnomic Poems,” 15.

²⁹ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 18.

³⁰ R.S. Cox, “The Old English Dicts of Cato,” *Anglia* 90 (1972): 1-42; Olof Arngart, “The Durham Proverbs,” *Speculum* 56 (1981), 288-300.

³¹ Shippey, “Grim Wordplay,” 41.

persistent works from antiquity. Contrived sometime in the fourth century by an unknown Roman author, this collection of secular proverbial wisdom was translated extensively into the vernacular throughout the middle ages.³² Benjamin Franklin's 1735 reprinting suggests the longevity and continuing relevance of the work to modern audiences. In the Anglo-Saxon era, both the *Durham Proverbs* and the *Dicts of Cato* enjoyed widespread popularity as pedagogical devices in monastic education, as evidenced by the inclusion of both works in manuscripts alongside definitive instructional texts like Ælfric's *Grammar*.³³ Likewise, though the *Dicts of Cato* are obviously translated, there also exist shoddily executed Latin translations of the *Durham Proverbs*, which scholars generally attribute to school exercises.³⁴ Perhaps due to the moralizing nature of these collections, Anglo-Saxon teachers often turned to proverbial catalogues as reliable mediums for instruction.

Despite the general scholarly consensus about the educational purposes of the *Dicts of Cato* and the *Durham Proverbs*, this opinion does not extend to the *Exeter* gnomic catalogues. Due in part to the isolated nature of these texts—the *Exeter* gnomes appear enigmatically in the manuscript, whereas the placement of the *Dicts of Cato* and the *Durham Proverbs* provide some sort of context for understanding their purpose—and also to the perceived “pagan” elements of the gnomic catalogues, their classification as monastic teaching devices remains contested. Still, a pedagogical explanation would coincide with the critical perception of other proverbial catalogues and also explain the instructional tone of the gnomic poems. Despite the extensive speculation, we can be

³² Stephanie Hollis and Michael Wright, *Old English Prose and Secular Learning* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), 18.

³³ Hollis and Wright, *Secular Learning*, 37.

³⁴ O. Arngart, “Durham Proverbs 17, 30, and 42,” *Notes and Queries* 29 (1982): 199-201.

relatively certain of one thing: all of these texts were created in a monastic setting for a primarily monastic audience. Latin literacy in this era was limited to the clergy and a small, privileged segment of the lay population.³⁵ English literacy was likely more widespread, but the literature itself was produced in the monasteries. In addition, the *Exeter Book*, *Durham Proverbs*, and copies of the *Dicts of Cato* all stem from a common period within Anglo-Saxon history: the Benedictine Reform. Though remembered more for a lack of a sense of humor, the Benedictine Reform, beginning at the end of the ninth century and continuing through the Norman Conquest, actually provides us with one of the most outrageous insights into the Anglo-Saxon comedic mind. It is in the context of this literary revival that we can better understand the possible humorous elements and themes of the gnomic poetry.

By most accounts, the Benedictine Reform would stand as the ultimate enemy of comedy. As mentioned above, the Old English *Rule of St. Benedict* seems explicit in its prohibition of laughter. Yet even with such an unambiguous condemnation of jocularity there is room for interpretation. The Latin *Regula Benedicti* is specific in its instruction: “Risum multum aut excessum non amare” [Do not love great or excessive laughter]. As Barry Sanders points out in his book *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, such a rule “is silent on the question of moderate laughter; some might even suggest that, by focusing on excessive laughter, the church fathers even condone its moderate forms.”³⁶ Though dour at best, such a perspective affords the church at least some semblance of a sense of humor. Of course, the disparities between translations are meaningful, and

³⁵ For a more in depth discussion of literacy see Hugh Magennis, “Audience(s), Reception, Literacy,” in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 84-102, an essay which considers the oral component of Anglo-Saxon literature.

³⁶ Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 127-192, 135.

Wilcox points out that the Old English translation is “more absolute...where the constraint sounds the more pressing on account of the punning similarity between *(h)leahtor*, ‘laughter,’ and *(h)leahter*, ‘sin.’”³⁷ So where does this leave us? True to form, the Anglo-Saxons seem to stifle even the potential for joking by crafting a harsher version of an already strict rule.

However, just as Sanders notes that moderate laughter may be apparent by virtue of its absence from the *Rule*, so does Wilcox’s point operate twofold. The emphasis on barring laughter altogether may reflect an ongoing concern with “excessive laughter” in the monasteries. After all, what is the purpose of a rule if not to act as a check on subversive behavior? The Benedictine Reform has long been considered a response to the “misbehavior of the canons... [following] the Danish invasions and destruction of monasteries” in the ninth century.³⁸ In the wake of the perceived sacrilegious destruction and chaos of the Vikings and the Danelaw, the Benedictine Reform seems a return to civilization and Christian values. However, recent scholarly research has re-casted this viewpoint of the noble reform efforts as an example of early Christian propaganda, or at least bowdlerization. Catherine Cubitt points out that the “new norms of the Reform were legitimated by a contemptuous downgrading of the immediate past and the recreation of an earlier golden age...Reform rhetoric claimed that the pre-Reform church was degenerate, run by libidinous and impious clerks.”³⁹ Perhaps closer to the truth, as Cubitt

³⁷ Wilcox, Introduction to *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, 2: “ne sceal he fela spreca, ne idele word ne leahtorbere; ne hleahter ne sceal he lufian” [“He must not speak much, neither idle words nor those causing laughter; he must not love laughter/sin”].

³⁸ Frederick Tupper, Jr., “History and Texts of the Benedictine Reform of the Tenth Century,” *Modern Language Notes* 8, no. 6 (1893): 172-184, at 172.

³⁹ Catherine Cubitt, “Review Article: The Tenth Century Benedictine Reform in England,” *Early Medieval Europe* 6 (1997): 77-94, at 88 sheds light on a general movement toward political centralization, as well as the various cults of notable reform figures like Dunstan of Canterbury, Æthelwold of Winchester, and Oswald of York and Worcester.

shows, is that the Reform was brought on by a plethora of political, social, and educational factors that culminated in a cultural revival of sorts. While “impious clerks” may have been an issue, it seems that the proliferation of a negative monastic image from the ninth and early tenth-century was simply a vehicle for reformers to frame their movement as necessary and important.

Again, it seems we have come full circle. Regardless of the causes of the laughter prohibition, it was a reality in the monastic setting during the Benedictine Reform. While it may have been brought on by impious monks of the previous century, it persisted as a lifestyle choice up to and after the Conquest. And as the exclusive producers and audience of written language at this time, the clergy wielded absolute power over literary expression. The challenge is to reconcile the somber tone of the *Rule of St. Benedict* with an active sense of humor. Indeed, viewing the Benedictine Reform as a larger political movement instead of a singular response to monastic debauchery mandates a reanalysis of the so-called “libidinous” monks that caused all the trouble in the first place.

Though most of the critical works mentioned thus far on Anglo-Saxon literary humor focus on subtle wordplay or heroic superiority, there is some basis for the comic as a persona in an Anglo-Saxon context. Martha Bayless notes the possibility of comic professionals in Anglo-Saxon settings.⁴⁰ Just as the prohibitions in the *Rule of St. Benedict* reveal laughter and joking to have been a point of concern in the monastery, so also do the various condemnations of *scurrorum* (clowns) and court entertainers by Bede and others show at least the existence of such a class of people.⁴¹ Roman comic practices were well founded and surely appeared in Latin texts available during the period. Bayless

⁴⁰ Martha Bayless, “Humour and the Comic in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Medieval English Comedy*, ed. Sandra M. Hordis and Paul Hardwick (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 13-31.

⁴¹ Bayless, “Humour,” 19.

notes that the Old English term *scop*, or poet, seems to have been applied to a broad range of performance based individuals: “An early eleventh-century manuscript of the *Excerptiones de Prisciano*... glosses ‘tragedus uel tragicus uel comicus uel comedus’ as ‘unwurð scop’ (lowly *scop*).”⁴² Such translation confusion may indicate an unawareness of comic forms, but it may also point to a modern misreading of the term *scop* in many scenarios. Also, as mentioned above, several of the *Exeter Book* riddles are commonly pointed to as peculiar examples of play and downright bawdiness in the literature. Often used as a “schoolboy exercise,” riddles were a common literary device both in England and on the continent; yet, the *Exeter* riddles are crass when compared to other examples of the style.⁴³ Though no conclusion can be drawn from the riddles as they are purposefully left ambiguous, their enigmatic status is similar to that of the gnomic catalogues. Both the riddles and the clowns suggest a culture much more in tune with its absurd, comic side than previously thought.

More important, however, is the common theme that joins these disparate, possibly humorous texts: pedagogy. Be it the indistinct wisdom of the insular gnomic catalogues, the mnemonic potential of the riddles, or the Old English translations of ancient Latin proverbs, the art of teaching lies at the heart of these texts. Even the shoddy translation of *scop* bespeaks the educational setting that would have enabled a student to struggle with a gloss. This should come as no surprise. The Benedictine Reform was, first and foremost, an intellectual renaissance. Despite myriad political goals, the figures at the forefront of the movement were primarily educators concerned with teaching Latin, the language of the Church. Along with debauchery and general bad taste, one of the most

⁴² Bayless, “Humour,” 22-23.

⁴³ Bayless, “Humour,” 16.

damning admonitions against the pre-Reform monasteries was the decay of Latin learning. One can imagine the anxiety caused by a cleric mumbling his way through the last rites or a baptism in broken Latin. As such, the leaders of the Reform focused much of their energies on rejuvenating Latin learning. The most obvious example of this can be seen in the writing itself with the introduction of the imported Caroline Miniscule as the standard script used in Latin writing in England.⁴⁴ This technical difference points to an influx in continental influence that characterized the opening days of the Reform; moreover, these early shifts in pedagogy enabled later Reform leaders to develop effective and creative techniques for teaching their students. Though it took some time to ferment, humor eventually found a home among the teachings of the Anglo-Saxon Church.

The early leaders of the Benedictine Reform numbered three: Dunstan of Canterbury, Æthelwold of Winchester, and Oswald of York and Worcester.⁴⁵ Of these bishops, Æthelwold is most renowned for his influence on education through his school at Winchester. It was Æthelwold who translated the first Old English version of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, and as tutor and lifelong adviser to King Edgar and his son King Æthelred, he wielded considerable royal sway.⁴⁶ The Winchester School was a center of learning during and after Æthelwold's lifetime due in part to these political connections, but also to Æthelwold's distinctive style. Brian O'Camb notes in an insightful article on the subject that "Æthelwold ... actively promoted the study of Aldhelm's *De virginitate* as part of the monastic educational curriculum in late Anglo-Saxon England, and the

⁴⁴ Cubitt, "Benedictine Reform," 88-89.

⁴⁵ Cubitt, "Benedictine Reform," 88-89.

⁴⁶ Cubitt, "Benedictine Reform," 83; Brian O'Camb, "Bishop Æthelwold and the Shaping of the Old English Exeter Maxims," *English Studies* 90 (2009): 253-273.

hermeneutic style of Aldhelm's text thoroughly influenced Æthelwold's literary style and intellectual life."⁴⁷ The influence of Aldhelm, a popular Anglo-Saxon poet from the seventh century, on Æthelwold reflects exactly the Benedictine goal of recreating a "golden age." Through a mixture of sophisticated Latin and Old English teaching, the pseudonymous Æthwoldian style of education emerged to shape young kings and clergymen alike.

Among these young clergymen was the next great teacher of the Benedictine Reform. Ælfric of Eynsham, as he would later be known, studied under Æthelwold in the late-tenth century before ascending to an abbacy at Cerne in Dorset.⁴⁸ As an author Ælfric was among the most prolific of his day, producing a vast number (over 160) of mostly homiletic and hagiographic prose texts; more pertinent to our question, however, are his three pedagogical texts—his *Grammar*, *Glossary*, and *Colloquy*—that together form a curriculum of Latin learning. As Gwara and Porter point out, Latin was especially inaccessible to an English-speaking, as opposed to a Romantic-speaking audience. Due to marked and obvious differences in syntax, vocabulary, and grammar, English speakers were completely unfamiliar with Latin, and thus the language of the Church.⁴⁹ While Æthelwold understood the need for better Latin instruction, it was Ælfric who developed the methodology to teach it. *Grammar*, the first Latin grammar ever written in any vernacular language, instructed students in both Latin and Old English with a sophisticated style. As an indication of the ingenuity and longevity of *Grammar*, it should be noted that the Old English grammar book I consulted throughout my research was

⁴⁷ O'Camb, "Bishop Æthelwold," 268.

⁴⁸ Helmut Gneuss, *Ælfric of Eynsham: His Life, Times, and Writings* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009), 5.

⁴⁹ Ed. Scott Gwara, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations: The Colloquies of Ælfric Bata*, trans. and introduction David. W. Porter (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997), 16.

peppered with useful quotations from Ælfric's 1000 year-old text. Like the *Grammar*, his *Colloquy* reveals a teacher deeply concerned with impressing a thorough understanding of Latin on his students. Comprised of scripted dialogues, the *Colloquy* was an effort to instruct conversational Latin. Furthermore, Ælfric's Latin is a departure from the highly stylized hermeneutic form favored by Æthelwold; instead, Ælfric aimed to produce "clear, unmannered, and easily comprehensible prose" for his students.⁵⁰ Following Æthelwold's lead, Ælfric instigated a process of correcting grammatical, vocabulary, conversational, and pedagogical inconsistencies in Anglo-Latin learning.

While the feats of pedagogy performed by Ælfric and Æthelwold were remarkable, they weren't very funny. Based on his translation of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, Æthelwold's students likely remembered his lash as much as his hermeneutic style. Similarly, Ælfric's writings were, as Gwara and Porter succinctly put it, "sober, serious, and taciturn."⁵¹ Yet, the pattern that emerges from the schools of the Benedictine Reform is just that, reform.⁵² Æthelwold learned from the model of Aldhelm, but modified his approach; Ælfric studied under Æthelwold, but realized the need for clearly written lessons. Ælfric fostered his own constituency of students, better versed in Latin, perhaps, than any English-born citizen since the last Roman legion left the isle, or at least since the age of Bede. One of these pupils, a short man by the name of Ælfric Bata, proved to be an

⁵⁰ Gneuss, *Ælfric of Eynsham*, 18.

⁵¹ Porter, Introduction to *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 12.

⁵² It is important to remember that the Benedictine Reform was a period of intense intellectual interaction between a Latin and a Germanic tradition. Ælfric's textbooks for Latin learning are a microcosm for a larger cultural movement marked by bilingualism. Æthelwold's Old English translation of the *Rule* was the first vernacular version produced anywhere. That such interplay between texts and languages could have significant cultural ramifications is evident by the monumental effects of the Norman Conquest. The combination of Old French and Old English resulted in the emergence of Middle English and with it a literary and cultural renaissance of sorts. Though the Benedictine Reform lacked the social persuasiveness of a military invasion, the interaction between Latin and Old English enabled a cultural synthesis that allowed for similar literary innovation.

exceptional student of Latin as well as an enigmatic free thinker.

Though little is known of Ælfric Bata, we can be sure that he came from Ælfric's school and probably assisted his teacher with many of the great writings to which he is attributed today.⁵³ In addition, we know that Ælfric Bata continued Ælfric's tradition of educating young boys in Latin through the use of carefully constructed and surprisingly sophisticated textbooks on linguistics. The colloquy genre stems from a formulaic classical and insular tradition, but Ælfric and Ælfric Bata's texts provide vivid, personal accounts of daily monastic life.⁵⁴ Beyond these general details, however, the life and death of Ælfric Bata remains a mystery that probably perished with the Conquest. Nevertheless, Ælfric Bata's work remains as a sort of testament to his learning and intellectual milieu. While mirroring Ælfric in form, structure, and style, Ælfric Bata departs significantly in the areas of tone and content.

Scott Wilcox refers to Ælfric Bata's seminal work, *Colloquies*, as a "Cockayne-like world of boys in the monastery required to eat and drink to excess and learning to insult at length."⁵⁵ This synopsis, if anything, understates the peculiar episodes found in *Colloquies*. Ælfric Bata posits an image of the Benedictine monastery almost completely at odds with representations depicted elsewhere. The students are boys, roughly between the ages of eight and twenty, and they act the part. Quick witted and colloquial in tone, the speech of the students reflects immature sensibilities and adolescent anxieties. Always concerned with protecting their "hides," the boys betray and tattle on one another at every opportunity. When one boy beseeches his classmate to let him use a book,

⁵³ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 2, show that revisions performed on Ælfric's *Colloquy* share significant lexical similarities with Ælfric Bata's expansive style.

⁵⁴ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 15-24.

⁵⁵ Wilcox, *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, 3.

having forgotten his own, his classmate replies, “Cur precaris me sic? Certe nolo tibi commodare meum librum, nec curo si habeas uel non habeas tuum” [Why do you ask me this? I certainly won’t lend you my book, nor do I care whether you have yours or not].⁵⁶ This attitude of self-preservation violates several explicit elements of the *Rule*, yet is characteristic of the entire text.⁵⁷ Most Benedictine-era texts align with the conception of a strict monastic life, including Ælfric’s *Colloquy*; after all, these works were written by monks for monks, a point to which I will return shortly. Ælfric Bata’s work, with its portrayals of drinking, cursing, and general debauchery, seems in conflict with these stated goals of the Benedictine Reform.

For one, laughter is not only prevalent throughout the *Colloquies*, but encouraged. The senior monk is depicted as “sed sedet ibi cum germano suo, et rídet, et loquitur cum illo nescio quid” [sitting there with his brother, laughing and talking about something or other] while at other times the monks encourage the students to “Estote læti, et bibete gaudenter” [be happy and drink cheerfully!].⁵⁸ Much scholarship on humor in Anglo-Saxon contexts, such as the work done by Magennis, focuses on the presence of laughter as a fairly reliable indicator for humor.⁵⁹ This critical position is founded on the Benedictine prohibition and applies here as well. Errant laughter surely existed among the monks—otherwise there would be no rule to prevent it. The *Colloquies*, overlooked by Magennis because they are prose works written in Latin and not Old English poetry, are one of the only instances in which monks of the Benedictine order openly reject the

⁵⁶ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 83.

⁵⁷ Paul Delatte, *Rule of St. Benedict: A Commentary*, trans. Justin McCann (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne: 1921), 70; “Iram non perficere” [Not to gratify anger]; “Caritatum non derelinquere” [Not to forsake charity].

⁵⁸ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 132-133, 106-107.

⁵⁹ Hugh Magennis, “Images of Laughter in old English poetry, with particular reference to the ‘hleahtor wera’ of *The Seafarer*” *English Studies* 73.3 (1992), 193-204.

laughter prohibition.

However, as Magennis has also shown, laughter is not always indicative of humor. Across the Old English corpus, laughter seems to represent myriad emotional states including scorn, malice, joy, relief, triumph, and prosperity, among others.⁶⁰ When Grendel enters Heorot in *Beowulf*, he laughs “in gloating anticipation of his crimes” only to be mutilated in the ensuing scene.⁶¹ Comparing this instance to the “plega and hlehter” [laughter and amusement] of warriors playing dice in the *Rune Poem* and one gets an impression of the diverse scenarios the Anglo-Saxons deemed fit for laughter, even within the “mead-hall.”⁶² In light of such an analysis, it is reasonable to assume that laughter in Anglo-Saxon texts, as in any other corpus, is largely dependent upon context. Fortunately for the reader of Ælfric Bata, the context of his text is rich and detailed.

Indeed, it seems Ælfric Bata posits a world where laughter exists as an expression of joy and merriment, similar to the connotations it holds for a modern audience. Monks are portrayed laughing over their beers amongst friends. Colloquy 8 is devoted to eating and drinking, but descends into a riotous party of inebriation when a monk pressures a servant (pupil) to drink to excess, to which the pupil replies, “Faciam sicut iubes, et postea uolo cessare cum tua licentia. Pro amore Christi, permitte me modo ire ad lectum meum” [I’ll do as you ask, and then by your leave I’ll stop ... For the love of Christ, just let me go to my bed now].⁶³ Colloquy 9 follows with no presumptions as to its true nature: it is a spirited, drunken party with monks boasting “et porrige mihi ánaphum. Ego bibam usque ad profundum” [hand me the wine jug. I’ll drink it to the bottom!]. It seems

⁶⁰ Magennis, “Images of Laughter,” 204.

⁶¹ Magennis, “Images of Laughter,” 196. See Niles, “Byrnoth’s Laughter,” 11-32 for another example of laughter as an indication of future peril and the ironic implications this has for criticism on the *Battle of Maldon*.

⁶² Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 81-83; Magennis, “Images of Laughter,” 198.

⁶³ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 99.

redundant to mention that such behaviors were explicitly prohibited in the Benedictine Rule.⁶⁴ Then again, Ælfric Bata seems at once to disregard and revere the rules which guided his order.

In Colloquy 14, Ælfric Bata cites the *Rule* when admonishing a lazy student: “Sanctus quoque Benedictus in *Regula*, ‘Otiositas inquit, ‘inimica est animę’” [And likewise Saint Benedict says in *Rule*, ‘Laziness is the enemy of the soul.’]⁶⁵ Though Ælfric Bata and his students were obviously familiar with the text, such a passage proves beyond a doubt that it was very much ingrained in their minds at the time that this piece was written. It can be assumed, then, that Ælfric Bata wrote this text with a level understanding of the authority against which it obviously acted. Such a blatant disregard for institutional authority runs through the text and suggests some ulterior motives for the scripts. Ælfric Bata, in fact, addresses this issue in a roundabout way. In Colloquy 29, which serves as a sort of conclusion for the entire work, the teacher reflects on his own liberal methods, stating:

Ergo, sicut in hac sententia didicistis, pueri mei, et legistis in multis locis, iocus cum sapientiae loquelis et uerbis inmixtus est et sepe coniunctus. Ideo autem hoc constitui et meatim disposui sermonem hunc uobis iuuenibus, sciens scilicet quosque pueros iugiter suatim loquentes adinuicem ludicra uerba sepius quam honorabilia et sapientiae apta, quia aetas talium semper trahit ad inrationabilem sermonem et ad frequens iocum et ad garrulitatem indecentem illorum. Et carius est illis, si eis licitum erit ludere et iocare cum suis sociis et suis similibus insipienter et in hoc maxim letantur.

[As you’ve learned in this speech, my boys, and as you read in many places, joking is often mixed and joined with wise words and sayings. For that reason I’ve written and arranged these speeches in my own way for you young men, knowing that boys speaking to one another in their way more often say words that are playful rather than honorable or wise, because their age draws them to foolish speech, frequent joking, and naughty chattering. And if they’re allowed, they’d

⁶⁴ Delatte, *Rule of St. Benedict*, 71, 76; “Non vinolentum” [Not given to wine]; “Non multum edacem” [Not a glutton]; “Multum loqui non amare” [Not to love much speaking].

⁶⁵ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 113.

rather play and joke foolishly with their pals and peers, and in this they take great pleasure.]⁶⁶

This speech is significant for several reasons. Ælfric Bata acknowledges his own motives and explains a considerable portion of his own digressions. The buffoonery of the previous pages is explained away as a pedagogical tactic, and one cannot help but agree with Ælfric Bata's method. Himself a pupil of the more intense Ælfric, Ælfric Bata is the product of a still-developing teaching process. Æthelwold taught Ælfric, who in turn taught Ælfric Bata. From the teacher's speech in Colloquy 29, we can discern that Ælfric Bata saw a need for a more colloquial, relaxed teaching environment. To accomplish this, Ælfric Bata creates dialogues and scenarios which fly in the face of the *Rule*, but which also present a more enjoyable and teachable lesson. On one hand, his efforts seem heretical or anti-institutional; on the other, the text aims to effectively accomplish the *primary* goal of the Benedictine Reform: increased Latin literacy.

Perhaps the best example of this comes in Colloquy 25, when a disrespectful student argues with his teacher. Possibly the most peculiar passage in any Anglo-Saxon text, Colloquy 25 shows clearly the “foolish speech, frequent joking, and naughty chattering” of the students which Ælfric Bata attempts to replicate. After admonishing a student for being a “maliuole” [no-good], a teacher descends into near madness as he breaks several Benedictine rules in a single speech:

Potestatem habes, o mi inimice, et uoluntatem propriam dicendi et loquendi de me misero quicquid uís. Quid dicis aut quid lóqueris contra me?

Tu sochors! Tu scibalum hedi! Tu scibalum ouis! Tu scibalum equi! Tu fimus bouis! Tu stercus porci! Tu hominis stercus! Tu canis scibalum! Tu uulpis scibalum! Tu murícipis stercus! Tu gallinę stercus! Tu asini scibalum! Tu uulpicule omnium uulpiorum! Tu uulpis cauda! Tu uulpis barba! Tu nebrís uulpiculi! Tu uechors et semichors! Tu scurra! Quid uís habére ad mé? Nihil boni,

⁶⁶ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 170-171.

autumo.

Ego uellem, ut totus esses caccatus et minctus pro his omnibus uerbis tuis. ...

[Student 1: You have the upper hand, my enemy, so you can speak and say anything you please about my poor self. What do you say against me?

Teacher: You idiot! You goat shit! Sheep shit! Horse shit! You cow dung! You pig turd! You human turd! You dog shit! Fox shit! Cat turd! Chicken shit! You ass turd! You fox cub of all fox cubs! You fox tail! You fox beard! You skin of a fox cub! You idiot and halfwit! You buffoon! What would you have for me? Nothing good I think.

Student 1: I would like you to be totally beshat and bepissed for all these words of yours. ...]⁶⁷

In an effort to mimic the base speech of his students, Ælfric Bata depicts a wildly different presentation of the Master than anything before or after. Some of these insults even persist today, suggesting that Anglo-Saxon humorous tastes were not so far removed from our own. What is most interesting about this passage is the similarity between the teacher's speech and the student's. If anything the, teacher's words are infused with much more vulgarity than anything said by the student. Ælfric Bata even affords the student a rebuttal, further blurring the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' that is so prevalent in other monastic texts. The student declares that "Modo uerba tua uerum manisvestant, quod unus mimus et unus sottus es et insipiens et fatuus" [Now your words reveal the truth, that you are a buffoon and a fool and a silly blabbermouth]. He goes on to say, "Maledictus es et non benedictus, stultissimus et pessimus" [You're cursed, not blessed, very stupid and bad], using diction that echoes the *Rule* itself.⁶⁸ Despite the student's concession that, "Non sum sensatus adhuc, nec tam sapiens sicut tu és" [I'm not learned yet, or as smart as you], his speech is complex and filled with

⁶⁷ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 138-139.

⁶⁸ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 138-139; Delatte, *Rule of St. Benedict*, 71; "Maledicentes se non remaledicere, sed magis benedicere" [Not to render cursing for cursing, but rather blessing].

knowledgeable allusions. Obviously the script is contrived, but the intellectual faculty afforded to the student by Ælfric Bata indicates a role reversal similar to what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the “carnavalesque” in late-medieval folk humor.⁶⁹

One cannot forget the nature of the exercise Ælfric Bata is conducting. First and foremost, he seeks to teach his students in the language of Latin. In this respect, we see extended tangents about questioning (Colloquy 18) and long lists of numbers and nouns (Colloquy 13 and 22) which would have taught students vocabulary and grammar in a conversational form. There is a temptation to view the incongruity in these passages as humorous, but it seems more likely to have been pedagogical. Still, there are passages which seem too suggestive to be simply coincidental. During the raucous drinking party in Colloquy 9, for example, a brother goes into a long, grammatically and syntactically diverse speech about a drinking horn:

Cornu bibere uolo. Cornu habere debeo, cornu tenere. Cornu uocor. Cornu est nomen meum. Cum cornu uiuere, cornu quoque iacere uolo et dormire, nauigare, equitare et ambulare et laborare atque ludere. Omnes propinqui mei et amici cornua habuerunt et ebiberunt, et mori uolo cum cornu. Cornu habeant, qui mihi cornu implent et reddant. Cornu habeo modo. Cornu bibo. Omne bonum habeto, et cornu bibamus leti omnes. Sic iubet abbas noster et noster cellerarius, sed tamen hec letitia cellerario displicet, puto.

[I want to drink from the horn. I ought to have the horn, to hold the horn. I'm called horn! Horn is my name! I want to live with the horn, to lie with the horn and sleep, to sail, ride, walk, work and play with the horn. All my kith and kin had horns and drank. And I want to die with the horn! Let them have the horn, those who are filling it and are about to give it to me! Now I have the horn. I'm drinking from the horn. Have every good thing, and let's all be happy and drink from the horn! So our abbot and cellarer command, but this lightheartedness is making our cellarer unhappy, I think.]⁷⁰

There are obvious pedagogical benefits to this passage. In essence, the speaker is

⁶⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 1-59 discusses role reversal and parody in late-medieval folk humor. Though not the focus of this essay, the *Colloquies* would benefit from a Bakhtinian analysis of the grotesque and carnivalesque aspects of the text.

⁷⁰ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 102-103.

delivering a single thought which is captured in the first sentence: “Cornu bibere uolo” [I want to drink from the horn]; however, he uses over ten variations of the sentence to expose students to multiple syntactical forms to use in conversation. Ælfric Bata uses this method frequently and one can imagine a student growing weary of the extended lists. Yet, as Gwara and Porter note here, a pun is made on the Latin ‘cornu’ extending the “associations with alcohol and sex by giving ‘cornu’ the Anglo-Saxon meaning of drinking-horn.”⁷¹ Listeners would appreciate the sexual pun, made more humorous by the repetition, and be more inclined to continue listening as a result. Again Ælfric Bata seems to forsake the prohibitions of the *Rule* in favor of an effective teaching method.

Throughout this text, there is also something revealed about the nature of speaker and audience in an Anglo-Saxon monastic context. We can assume that the author, in the *Colloquies* at least, was a literate monk in a position of power over his students. What Ælfric Bata shows here, however, is that the audience was sometimes very different from the author; namely, snot-nosed, insolent, beer-loving youths. Immature and foolish, the pupils care little for the Benedictine restrictions on slander, laziness, theft, and boisterous laughter. Instead, these restrictions manifest in the general terror the pupils experience when breaking them, which they do often enough. When one student tells another to go to the master, who is waiting with “unum flagrum in dextera sua et multas uirgas in sinistra sua” [a whip in his right hand and a lot of rods in his left], the student replies:

Tunc uult flagellare, puto, aliquem ex nobis?
Nescio; noli timere
Timeo nimis, crede mihi, kare domine.

[Student 1: Then I suppose he’ll want to beat one of us?

⁷¹ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 103 n. 72 show that ‘cornu’ holds special significance as a reference to the ‘pagan god Liber, or Bacchus,’ and thus would have connoted fertility for an Anglo-Saxon audience.

Student 2: I don't know; don't be afraid.

Student 1: Believe me, dear sir, I'm very afraid.]⁷²

Though presented humorously, Ælfric Bata's teachers and students maintain the traditional corporeal relationship practiced until modern times in parochial schools. Nevertheless, the traditional critical image of monastic sobriety and the audience implied by this viewpoint is damaged by the existence of these rowdy, literate teenagers.

Turning back to the teacher's speech in Colloquy 29, there is another aspect that is of particular interest to our discussion. The teacher states that, "Ergo, sicut in hac sententia didicistis, pueri mei, et legistis in multis locis, iocus cum sapientiae loquelis et uerbis inmixtus est et sepe coniunctus" [As you've learned in this speech, my boys, and as you read in many places, joking is often mixed and joined with wise words and sayings]. My focus here is on Bata's admission that humorous texts were "read in many places," suggesting that this enigmatic text is not alone in its use of humor as a means for both entertainment and education. The field of scholarship on humor in Anglo-Saxon texts is, as it stands today, rather narrow. Perhaps due to the limited availability of extant manuscripts, there is little by way of comedic narratives remaining. However, Ælfric Bata's recognition of other joking texts suggests that there is some nebulous humorous genre which remains unaccounted for in Anglo-Saxon literature. While this is a useful hint, it is Ælfric Bata's identification of *sapientiae loquelis* as a vehicle for this comedic expression that is most pertinent to my argument.

It is possible that the *iocus* which captured the attention of school boys in the *Colloquies* is related to the 'wisdom-based' literature found in the *Exeter* gnostic catalogues. Indeed, Ælfric Bata's text seems to share at least one significant similarity

⁷² Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 132-133.

with the sententious sayings. Returning to Colloquy 25, in which a teacher and pupil perform what appears to be a monastic version of the flyting, or verbal sparring, we see the definite application of proverbial statements for humorous effect. Stating “*Mea stultitia mea sapientia est*” [My stupidity is my wisdom], the student launches into an allusion-heavy diatribe, quoting biblical proverbs liberally to buttress his foolish wisdom:

Numquam sapientia et stultitia ualent concordare. Et ‘qui erudit derissórem,’ sicut ego sum, ‘ipse sibi iniuriam facit, et qui arguit impium, generat maculam sibi. Item: ‘noli arguer derisorem, ne óderit té. ... ‘Stultus quoque, si tacuerit, sapiens reputabitur.’ Ergo, ‘non recipit stultus uerba prudentiae nisi dixeris éa, quáe uersantur in corde eius.’ Loquere mecum iuxta insipientiam meam. Hoc placet mihi, et sic poterimus amici inuicem et amicitiam simul habere et concorditer tenere.

[Wisdom and folly can never agree. And ‘he that teacheth a scorner,’ as I am, ‘doth an injury to himself, and he that rebuketh a wicked man getteth himself a blot... ‘Even a fool, if he will hold his peace shall be counted wise.’ Therefore, ‘A fool receiveth not the words of prudence, unless thou say those things which are in his heart.’ Speak to me according to my ignorance! This pleases me and this way we can be friends to one another and at the same time have friendship and keep it harmoniously.]⁷³

The student cleverly manipulates proverbial wisdom to suit the needs of his argument. Instead of a moral guide, the student uses the statements ironically as an authoritative voice that gives merit to his argument. One can imagine the scene in a classroom setting: after the mock-insolence of the “beshitting” scene, the students were likely rolling in hysterics during the proverbial recitation.

Though Ælfric Bata’s authorial statement in Colloquy 29 is evidence enough of the humorous intentions in the text, modern humor theories tell us that this material *should* be funny. From a Freudian perspective, the dialogue is a clear indication of tendentious “wit.” By expressing forbidden behavior through the medium of joking (i.e. telling your lash-ready professor “*habeto stercus in mento tuo!*” [Have shit in your

⁷³ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 140-143.

beard!)), the dialogues provoke a humorous response.⁷⁴ Likewise, the superiority-based humor that Shippey notes in heroic poetry applies in this situation in the form of the Master's condescending response.⁷⁵ After the student finishes his relatively brief monologue of proverbial wisdom, the master casually puts him down, stating: "Si uis amicus seu inimicus esse meus, non curo" [Whether you want to be my friend or my enemy, I don't care].⁷⁶ After some more verbal sparring, the teacher launches into his own sprawling and nearly complete recitation of the biblical proverbs. While the humorous effect seems to be lost in this section, it underscores the flexibility of the proverbial wisdom as both a pedagogical and a humorous device.

Regardless of the level of humor in this section, the technical application is significant. Ælfric Bata's manipulation of proverbial wisdom shows that the *sapientiae loquelis* to which he refers to in Colloquy 29 has some correlation with the modern conception of sententious poetry and statements. Some of the most poignant humor in this text, such as the 'cornu' sequence in Colloquy 9 and the flyting in Colloquy 25, comes from the presentation of repetitive lists, particularly proverbial. The inclusion of these comedic elements in textbooks shows that they were intended for a young, monastic audience that would have been aware of comic incongruity and been able to recognize it in a text; moreover, this audience would have identified orally transmitted gnomic or proverbial wisdom as particularly suitable mediums of comic expression. As such, the similarities between the gnomic catalogues and the *Colloquies* are significant and suggest that the poetry would benefit from a reanalysis from a comic perspective.

⁷⁴ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 142-143.

⁷⁵ Shippey, "Grim Wordplay," 46, notes that "amusement thrives... on the contrasting presence of the imperceptive, laughing confidently, failing to grasp the sense of proverbs, sure that surface meaning is all there is."

⁷⁶ Gwara and Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Conversations*, 142-143.

Perhaps the best place to look for comedy in the gnomic poetry, then, is at those poems which most closely resemble the rambling proverbial speech given in Colloquy 25. *Maxims I* is similar thematically and structurally, with an instructive authority figure using an eclectic, oral delivery; moreover, the poem contains several surprising passages that have evaded critical interpretation. One indication of a possible humorous statement comes in the opening section as the narrator discusses a cosmic explanation for infant mortality:

Ne sy þæs magutimbres gemet ofer eorþan
 Gif hi ne wanige se þæs woruld teode

[There would be no limit to the number of children on earth if he who established this world were not to make them fewer]⁷⁷

Typically, such a sentiment would be attributed by scholars to the stark worldview that seems to color much of Anglo-Saxon literature; however, from a humorous perspective, the gnomic statement can be seen for what it is: an absurd explanation for a tragic incident. Coming at the end of a paragraph explaining birth and death as inevitable parts of life, the statement seems superfluous, even gratuitous. Similar to a punch-line, the gnome makes an incongruous shift from the line of thought established in the “lead-up.” Indeed, the next paragraph begins immediately with:

Dol biþse þe his dryhten nat, to þæs oft cymeð deað unpinged

[The man who does not know his Lord is a fool]

The desired effect of opening this paragraph with *dol*, or ‘fool,’ could be to indicate the humor apparent in the previous sentence. If one places *Maxims I* in a performance context similar to the *Colloquies*, such a statement would surely suggest its own incongruity, especially to an audience of pupils already aware of possible joking

⁷⁷ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 64-65.

techniques.

Obscene joking, similar to the bawdy riddles, may also be apparent in the second section of *Maxims I*. During an explanation of the expected behavior for a Frisian sailor's wife the author makes several vague and suggestive comments that are potentially humorous:

Wif sceal wiþ wer wære gehealdan
 Oft hi mon wommum behlið.
 Fela bið fæsthydigra, fela bið fyrwetgeornra,
 Freoð hy fremde monnan, þonne se oþer feor gewiteþ.

[A woman must keep faith with a man. People often defame and blacken their characters; many are faithful, many are curious, they love strangers when their husband goes far away.]⁷⁸

The humor in these statements is derived from several areas. First, the topic is already loaded. As the *Colloquies* show us, some topics we find humorous today—poop jokes, swear words, peer pressure—were at least relatively funny to an Anglo-Saxon audience. As such, a philandering wife was likely a topic of humorous speculation. Freud notes that obscene joking, or “smut” enables a speaker to “intentionally [bring] into prominence...sexual fact and relations by speech” while simultaneously avoiding a direct confrontation with the subject.⁷⁹ Imposing a psychoanalytic reading on these texts can be tricky, but the concept seems to translate. In a monastic setting, such topics may have been taboo unless adequately cloaked in humor. In addition, this passage is rife with incongruity. Instead of condemning the cheating wives, as we would expect, the narrator simply states that they are “curious.” This nonjudgmental approach is out of line with the expectations established by the seemingly unwavering first sentence: “A woman must keep faith with a man.” To a monastic audience, the subject matter and presentation may

⁷⁸ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 68-69.

⁷⁹ Freud, *Jokes*, 97.

seem humorous.

The neutrality exhibited by the narrator in not directly condemning the Frisian wife is noteworthy within a style that is often concerned with recognizing the difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ and ‘wise’ and ‘foolish.’ Works such as *Precepts* and *Vainglory* are more in line with the typical dualistic nature of the poetry. Through contrasting images and themes, these poems serve a clearly moralizing purpose; however, inherent in this relationship is the potential for comic incongruity in the form of understatement and overstatement. *Precepts* features a father giving advice to his son “þæt he wel þunge” [so that he could get on well]; however, the advice provided is repetitive and usually amounts to “Do a þætte duge” [Always do what would be right].⁸⁰ Despite the overstatement, *Precepts* still seems straightforward and likely non-humorous. Comparatively, however, Shippey notes a passage from *Vainglory* that seems “almost comically unnecessary.”⁸¹ After the narrator goes to great rhetorical lengths to describe the actions of the sinner, he concludes with the following exhortation:

	Nu þu cunnan meajt:
gif þu þyslicne	þegn gemit test
wunian in wicum,	wite þe be þissum
feawum forðspellum	þæt þæt biþ feondes bearn
flæsce bifongen,	hafað fræte lif,
grundfusne gæst	gode orfeormne,
wuldorcyninge.	

[Now you can be sure: if you meet a man of this kind living among other people, know from these few plain statements that that is a child of the devil enclosed in flesh, that he lives his life perversely, has a soul destined for Hell and worthless to God, the king of glory.]⁸²

The incongruity stems from the narrator’s framing of the poem as “feawum forðspellum”

⁸⁰ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 48-49.

⁸¹ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 9.

⁸² Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 56-57.

[these few plain statements]. Rather, this paragraph acts as the conclusion to a longwinded, extended metaphor that casts the sinner as a proud, boastful, untrustworthy man, or what Shippey calls a “bubble of overconfidence waiting to be pricked.”⁸³ Of course this man is a sinner and anyone that needed this advice to recognize such is likely a poor clergyman. A monastic audience would find the characterization extensive; thus, the narrator’s overstated claim would seem obvious as to be funny. Also, by focusing on the sinner as the butt of the joke, so to speak, the narrator appeals to the superiority humor discussed above. There is perhaps no relationship more clearly stratified in Anglo-Saxon literature than that between the sinner and the pious man. The concept of the sinner as the perennial target meant that everyone in a monastic audience could rejoice in abusing him, even if, as the *Colloquies* proves, they themselves were not model Christians.

By virtue of their dubious authorship and isolated occurrence in the manuscript evidence, the sententious catalogues inevitably fall victim to scholarly speculation. In that respect, our attempt at shedding light on the poems is no different. Imposing comic intentions or ironic interjections on these anonymous authors can be a tricky business. One cannot forget that the most convincing explanation for the gnomic poems is not that they are primarily comic, but rather didactic. They aim to teach, first and foremost, in a style that would have been familiar to an Anglo-Saxon audience. Discerning the pedagogical goals of these texts is a more problematic question. Perhaps they are, as originally thought, some throwback to a recent heroic, Germanic past; or perhaps they are evidence of “sportive tests,” as Shippey hesitatingly suggests. The absolute answer to these questions likely did not survive the 1000 years of slow decay, innocent neglect, and

⁸³ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom*, 9.

purposeful destruction that claimed a majority of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts before they could be perused by modern scholars. However, what is clear from the slivers of insight afforded to us by the extant evidence is that Anglo-Saxon literature is rich and complex. Political agendas, aesthetic consideration, and intellectual creativity affected the literature in myriad subtle ways and writers from this period employed sophisticated techniques and styles to express themselves.

Ælfric Bata's *Colloquies* shows that humor was a part of the technical arsenal of at least one writer in this period. Though primarily pedagogical, it is clear that humor plays a central and stated role in the text. Ælfric Bata injects a surprisingly modern comic voice into his characters with jokes colored by humorous sensibilities not so far removed from our own. The most important contribution this text makes to our understanding of humor in Anglo-Saxon literature, however, is toward the issue of audience. "A joke," says Freud, "*must* be told to someone else."⁸⁴ The format of Ælfric Bata's text is evidence enough of his adolescent audience; moreover, his rare authorial interjections show that humorous text were "legistis in multis locis" [read in many places], primarily by students. With a definite audience, the search for humor can be specialized to those texts to which pupils would have been exposed. The gnomic poetry is especially ripe for reanalysis due both to its contested position among scholars and to its structural and thematic similarities with the *Colloquies*.

Indeed, if one thing can be said for certain at the conclusion of this paper, it is that the center of Anglo-Saxon literary life was a much more diverse place than is commonly assumed. The monastic life depicted in Ælfric Bata's *Colloquies* has been disregarded by

⁸⁴ Freud, *Jokes*, 143.

many scholars as “more fiction than fact,” and I have to agree.⁸⁵ Do I think most monasteries during the Benedictine Reform featured unending parties and frequent fecal quips? No. However, it seems that Ælfric Bata’s representation here is no more “fiction” than the propaganda-riddled homilies or hackneyed hagiographies that are often taken as “fact” by Anglo-Saxon scholars. For years, the Benedictine Reform was viewed by scholars exactly as it was billed by Æthelwold and his contemporaries: a return to a forgotten “golden age.” Yet, the image of such a noble monastic reform crumbles under analysis of political motives and movements. Enigmatic texts like the *Colloquies* are evidence of a different viewpoint, one that does not coincide with the ubiquitous piety typically projected onto this era. What emerges is surprisingly simple. A patchwork of characters, a litany of personalities, a pragmatic community that probably resembled our own, at least in terms of social dynamics and interactions. Goofballs and disciplinarians coexisted, probably butted heads, much as they do today. The *Colloquies* provides a literary precedent for something that should have been obvious: people joke.

⁸⁵ Rulon-Miller, “Sexual Humor,” 106.

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IAN MORGAN

500 Beaver Avenue • State College, PA 16801
idmorgan6@gmail.com • 814.688.4082

EDUCATION

Pennsylvania State University

B.A. English, Schreyer Honors College

- Minor: Anthropology
- Thesis: Humor in the Anglo Saxon Monastery

University College London

Study Abroad Program

- Coursework in English Literature & Anthropology

University Park, PA

Expected May 2012

London, UK

Sept-Dec 2011

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

After Hours, Student-run Late Night Talk Show, PSN

Senior Writer, Actor, & Set Assistant

- Co-authored and co-produced 4 independent out-of-studio segments
- Co-wrote jokes and in-studio segments on current events weekly for 4 seasons
- Operated cameras, teleprompter, graphics station, and sound board
- Performed stage manager duties in professional filming studio

State College, PA

Sept 2010-Present

Department of English, Pennsylvania State University

Editing Intern for Professor Cheryl Glenn

- Proofread chapters for the *Writer's Harbrace Handbook 5e*
- Compiled research and bibliographic material for annual faculty activity report

State College, PA

Jan-May 2011

Chautauqua County Surrogate Court

Legal Intern for Honorable Stephen Cass

- Documented and analyzed over 10 Integrated Domestic Violence courtroom proceedings
- Conducted research into case-law for 3 active domestic violence cases
- Co-wrote and edited 2 court decisions

Chautauqua, NY

June-Aug 2010

AWARDS

Penn State University

Paterno Liberal Arts Undergraduate Fellow

- Academic fellowship by invitation requires a minimum GPA of 3.4, rigorous honors coursework, on-going skill development, and a commitment to community service
- Fellows represent under 1% of the Penn State undergraduate student body

Dean's List

- Demonstrated superior academic performance throughout the semester

State College, PA

Jan '11- May 2012

Aug '08- Dec 2011

SKILLS

Computer Microsoft Office Suite, Minitab, Mendeley, Basic Programming

Broadcasting Script-writing, Acting, Filming