

ALFREDIAN LEARNING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ALFREDIAN REFORM

IN THIS CHAPTER, I argue that the way Alfred learned and the way that he used texts in his individual quest for wisdom showed him how to disseminate his ideology to his people. That is, Alfred's personal quest not only taught him *what* he needed to impart to his people, but *how* to use texts in different ways to teach them. Alfred's personal search for wisdom did not revolve around sustained close study of a preset series of texts, as would be the case in a formal or monastic learning environment. Alfred learned through free-ranging discussion and debate, using texts as anchor points, to spark discussion and elucidate arguments. He expected that his elites would do the same, and that the Alfredian texts would be used to initiate and guide discussion about concepts central to Alfredian ideology. Alfred's bishops would be critical to this process.

I start the chapter by exploring the way that Alfred learned—collaboratively, interacting with a group of learned assistants. The Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* tells us explicitly how Alfred learned. Asser provides eyewitness corroboration. Asser's *Life* is a problematic source, given its hagiographic flavour.¹ However, Alfred's love of, and reflection upon, the *process* of learning is not a trope borrowed from the Carolingian or classical models of princely biography. Asser's depiction of Alfred's learning is consistent with the accounts in the prefaces, and therefore unlikely to be purely "hagiographical padding."² The Preface to the *Soliloquies*, traditionally attributed to Alfred (see below), imparts a similarly practical flavour to the task of learning. Adapting his own learning experience for his elites would give Alfred scope to shape what would be learned, as well as the opportunity to enhance his political authority through his role as the progenitor of the reorientation of the community back to God. This is an example of ideological power, which I mentioned at the start of chapter 3.

My argument has implications for both the longstanding debate about authorship of the Alfredian canon, and the place of the *Dialogues* within that

1 Abels, "Alfred and his Biographers," 63–65; Fulk and Cain, *History of Old English Literature*, 83–84.

2 DeGregorio, "Affective Spirituality," 133–35.

canon. I suggest a new way of conceptualizing the Alfredian canon, based upon Alfred's way of learning. I also suggest that the *Dialogues* may have played a pivotal role in the development of Alfred's plans to disseminate his ideology.

The Way that Alfred Learned: Alfred's Helpers

Asser says that Alfred deeply felt his lack in "divine learning and knowledge of the liberal arts," and that God remedied this deficiency by providing him with helpers on his path to wisdom.³ As Asser describes it, this was very much a personal quest. The picture Asser paints in the first part of chapter 76 is of a king striving to be the best that he can be in all respects, driven by a fundamental piety, and perhaps a very human competitiveness.⁴

Asser says further that the king's knowledge grew through the ministrations of his first advisors, the Mercians Wærferth, Plegmund, Æthelstan, and Wærwulf. Asser describes them all as learned men: Wærferth and Plegmund were higher clergy, Æthelstan and Wærwulf were priests and chaplains. They probably joined Alfred's court in the early 880s.⁵ The fact that Alfred deliberately chose these men, and from outside his own kingdom, suggests that they were regarded as learned men. Modern scholarship increasingly acknowledges the depth of learning in Mercian circles prior to Alfredian reform.⁶ The Mercian contingent appear to have been well able to impart principles of Christian wisdom to a level sufficient for most laity, and indeed for many clerics.⁷

However, Alfred subsequently sought out Grimbold and John the Old Saxon to join his circle of helpers. It is clearly significant that when Alfred's "royal greed" for wisdom (as Asser describes it) outstripped the capacities of the Mercian contingent, he sent not for additional *books* but for additional *scholars*.⁸ One implication from Asser's comment is that Alfred required assistants who could better engage in more complex and learned intellectual debate than his Mercian contingent.⁹ Alfred was prepared to look far afield for such tutors. Both Grimbold and John the Old Saxon were notable

³ Asser, chap. 76.

⁴ Yorke, "Alfred and Weland," 49.

⁵ Lapidge, "Scholars."

⁶ Rauer, "Early Mercian Text"; Brown, "Mercian Manuscripts."

⁷ Rauer, "Early Mercian Text," 6.

⁸ Asser, chap. 78; K & L, 93.

⁹ Rauer, "Old English Literature," 55.

scholars with international reputations.¹⁰ Grimbald's superior, Archbishop Fulk of Reims, certainly sang his praises.¹¹ These men could provide sophisticated and rigorous intellectual stimulus and challenge. Asser was himself recruited to join Alfred's circle of helpers. He was suitably modest about Alfred's reasons for selecting him, but he was a renowned scholar of the Welsh Church.¹² These scholars probably brought additional texts with them to discuss with Alfred, different from those already available to him.¹³ It may well be that these scholars collectively treated Alfred as they would a monk showing intellectual promise—providing mentorship and an individualized learning pathway tailored to that student's strengths.

The Way that Alfred Learned: Collaborative Learning

Asser says explicitly that at the start of his quest for wisdom, Alfred could not read for himself at all, and only became able to read Latin in 887.¹⁴ So there is a period of some years when Alfred's access to the wisdom he so fervently desired was necessarily mediated through others. Asser says that the Mercian contingent read books to him whenever there was an opportunity. Alfred was never without one or other of them; their presence was required.¹⁵ Asser says that he also was required to read to the king.¹⁶ This has important implications for how Alfred used texts. Reading per se presumably was not an important goal for Alfred on his personal quest, or Alfred could have devoted his energies to that task from the start. Solitary learning was not his chosen method of acquiring wisdom. Alfred chose a method of acquiring wisdom which was communal and interactive. In the *De gestis regum Anglorum* and in the *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, William of Malmesbury records Asser as not just reading to the king from the *Consolation of Philosophy*, but explicating the text to him.¹⁷ While modern scholarship is sceptical of William's historical accuracy, Whitelock suggests

10 Anlezark, "Which Books," 18.

11 *EHD*, no. 223, 883–86; Grierson, "Grimbald."

12 Asser, chap. 79; Anlezark, "Which Books," 18.

13 Keynes and Lapidge, "Introduction," 28.

14 Asser, chaps. 77, 87.

15 Asser, chap. 77.

16 Asser, chap. 81.

17 Giles, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle*, 2.4, 118; Winterbottom and Thomson, *William of Malmesbury, Gesta*, bk. 1, chap. 80, 279.

that his extensive research means that his accounts cannot be discounted as mere oral tradition.¹⁸

Significantly, the Mercian contingent were not dismissed as new scholars arrived; their input was still required. We know from charter evidence that sometimes individual members of Alfred's circle were away from court, but there is no evidence that only one individual was by his side at any moment in time.¹⁹ The presence of a group, however constituted, suggests discussion and debate, not the solitary application to prescribed texts, explicated by a tutor in a one-on-one setting. It is intrinsically unlikely that Alfred was content for his highly learned circle of advisors to sit passively and listen to texts (which probably would have been familiar to them) being read aloud to the king. Their passive presence would not assist Alfred to learn. The motor of this style of collaborative learning is interaction; discussion, and debate, between Alfred and reader no doubt, but presumably also between all those who were present. Nor is there any reason to believe that this was a closed circle, that other members of the court or scholars outside the court were excluded.²⁰

Asser does not tell us which texts were read aloud to Alfred. He describes the choice of texts this way: "in quibus recitavi illi libros quoscumque ille vellet, et quos ad manum haberemus" (during which time I read aloud to him whatever books he wished and which we had to hand).²¹ Asser's description has an ad hoc flavour which is inconsistent with a planned course of study, such as might comprise formal education in the Roman liberal tradition beloved of Alcuin and others in the Carolingian milieu.²² It is unlikely that Alfred or his coterie were unaware that such a program existed, or that it was entirely unavailable to Alfred, even given the Viking depredations. The picture Asser paints of relatively unstructured inquiry and instruction seems like a deliberate choice.

We do not know whether Alfred assiduously listened to one text in its entirety and then another, or whether specific passages were read to initiate or elucidate discussions. I suggest the latter rather than the former. It fits with the evidence for informality and the primacy of discussion in Alfred's quest for wisdom, according to Asser. It also fits with Alfred's depiction of his quest for wisdom in the Preface to the *Soliloquies*, discussed in detail later

18 Whitelock, "William of Malmesbury."

19 Schreiber, "*Searoðonca hord*," 196.

20 Clement, "Production of the *Pastoral Care*," 139.

21 Asser, chap. 81; K & L, 96–97.

22 McKitterick, "Carolingian Renaissance," 159.

in this chapter. Even when Alfred allegedly learned to read for himself, and to master Latin sufficiently to translate it competently, he did not dismiss his circle of advisors. He continued to inquire and to learn collaboratively. Alfred's collaborative model of learning is reflected in the friendlier tone of the dialogues of the *Dialogues*, *OE Boethius*, and *Soliloquies*, compared to the dialogues of the source texts.

It is helpful to conceptualize this learning circle as a community of practice. Timofeeva defines a community of practice as a small group mutually and self-consciously engaged in a specific task. The goals and the purpose of the task are understood by practitioners, and there is a chosen method to accomplish the task.²³ Scale distinguishes a community of practice from a social practice. Communities of practice are small, localized, and involve face-to-face interactions between members; social practices can be widely dispersed, with little direct contact between practitioners.²⁴ A textual community might be considered a subset of a community of practice.²⁵

The concept of a community of practice emphasizes the collaborative nature of the work undertaken by the group—a “corporate activity within the court.”²⁶ Faulkner proposes that the *OE Boethius*, the *Soliloquies*, and the *Prose Psalms* were the result of a collaboration between scholars who read and discussed the source texts and related writings between themselves over a period of years—although she leaves open the question whether this was “Alfred.”²⁷ Faulkner's argument supports Rohini Jayatilaka's conclusion that the translators of the *OE Boethius* and *Soliloquies* did not rely upon single source texts, but drew upon deep knowledge of a broad range of source texts and commentaries.²⁸ Translation as a process of distillation might well follow extensive discussion and debate between scholars.

Conceptualizing Alfred's learning as a community of practice assists my argument about how books were used by Alfred on his personal path to wisdom, and how he intended others to use the texts he provided—as integral repositories of wisdom to spark and inform discussion and debate. Alfred probably did not acquire Christian wisdom by ploughing through texts from cover to cover, by “the sustained act of reading.”²⁹ The prefaces to the *Pasto-*

23 Timofeeva, “Alfredian Press,” 232; Timofeeva, “Sociolinguistic Concepts,” 126–27.

24 Timofeeva, “Viking Outgroup,” 84; Shove and Pantzar, “Consumers, Producers.”

25 Stock, *Implications of Literacy*.

26 Irvine, “English Literature,” 231.

27 Faulkner, “Mind,” 602.

28 Jayatilaka, “Alfred and his Circle.”

29 Brown, “Strategies of Visual Literacy,” 72.

ral Care and the *Soliloquies* confirm that Alfred learned collaboratively, and that he anticipated that others could learn the same way.

The Prefaces to the *Pastoral Care* and the *Soliloquies*: Insights into Alfredian Learning

The Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* provides important clues, ostensibly in Alfred’s voice, about his learning process. “Alfred” says that he translated the text

hwilum word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgiete, swæ swæ ic hie gelior-
node æt Plegmunde minum ærcebiscepe ond æt Assere minum biscepe ond
æt Grimbolde minum mæsseprioste ond æt Iohanne minum mæssepreoste.
Siððan ic hie ða geliornod hæfde, swa swa ic hie forstod ond swa ic hie and-
gitfullicost areccean meahte, ic hie on Englisc awende.

(at times word for word, sometimes sense for sense, just as I had stud-
ied it with Plegmund my archbishop, and with Asser my bishop, and with
Grimbald my chaplain and with John my chaplain. After I had studied it, in
accordance with my understanding of it and as sensibly as I could render it
I translated it into English.)³⁰

Two points arise. First: this sounds like a reading group, with turn-taking. It is highly unlikely that such turn-taking was mechanistic, simply picking up where the last reader had left off, with no inquiry or discussion about what had been read and absorbed so far. Alfred was a man intent on the acquisition of wisdom, not a bored youth intent on getting to the end of a tedious schoolbook. Study, understanding, and meaningful rendition are discrete stages in Alfred’s learning process. They reflect the process of *enarratio* (*areccean*)—the spiritual as well as literal comprehension of scripture, often guided by the patristic texts, such as the *Regula pastoralis*.³¹

Second, three of the four men acknowledged by “Alfred” did not belong to the Mercian contingent, but were additional scholars Alfred had sought out, with learning beyond the Mercians. “Alfred” says explicitly that they *all* helped him to learn the text. This supports an inference of detailed discussion and debate. “Alfred” then says that he translated the text *after he had studied it and in accordance with his understanding of it*.³² It is possible that “study” means assured rote learning of the text—but that interpretation

30 *Pastoral Care*, 8–9.

31 Parkes, “*Ræden, Areccean*.”

32 I note that Keynes and Lapidge use the word “mastered” rather than “studied” in their translation.

is at odds with the description of this translation as “sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense” and the caveat “in accordance with my understanding of it.” “Study” (or indeed “mastery”) in the context of a “sense for sense” translation suggests a thorough understanding of the concepts and the way the argument unfolds, rather than a memorization exercise. Anlezark has drawn attention to the insistence in the Prose Preface that the goal is to understand the text, not simply to read it.³³ The description of the sequence—study and understanding followed by translation—explains an apparent inconsistency between the Prose and Verse prefaces which troubles Anlezark.³⁴ While the Prose Preface acknowledges the role of Alfred’s helpers, the Verse Preface says: “Ælfred kyning awende worda gehwelc” (Alfred turned every word).³⁵ If Alfred’s assistants helped him to gain a comprehensive understanding of the text for himself first, and thereafter he translated it for others, then there is no inconsistency between the prefaces.

A range of Latin sources inform the Preface, such as Bede, Isidore of Seville, and Chrodegang of Metz.³⁶ This supports Jayatilaka’s contention that a broad range of texts and commentaries underlie the translation of the *OE Boethius* and *Soliloquies*, rather than a single source text. The range of sources, and the fact that they are backgrounded and unacknowledged, is suggestive of discussion and debate which was not narrowly focused on the *Cura pastoralis* but encompassed other texts in the course of elucidating and understanding Gregory’s text. This is consistent with Alfredian “study” or “mastery”—in the sense of a thorough understanding of ideas. This interpretation is supported by similarities with another Alfredian text. The introductions to the individual psalms in the *Prose Psalms* owe much to commentaries and glosses by various late antique and early medieval authors such as Theodore of Mopsuestia, some of which were likely to have circulated only within learned clerical circles.³⁷ The implication, again, is of wide-ranging discussion focused on ideas. There are thus two separate indications of extensive discussion informing understanding of an Alfredian text. This suggests a consistent method in Alfred’s process of learning.

Learning and wisdom are intertwined in the Prose Preface. Learning and wisdom are symbiotic and practically oriented—learning obliges teaching and wisdom obliges action. “Alfred” talks about the roles of the

33 Anlezark, “Which Books,” 13; Anlezark, “Drawing Alfredian Waters,” 263n44.

34 Anlezark, “Which Books,” 4; Anlezark, “*OE Pastoral Care*,” 237.

35 *Pastoral Care*, 2–3.

36 Kläber, “König Aelfreds Vorrede”; Morrish, “King Alfred’s Letter,” 91.

37 Rowley, “Long Ninth Century,” 19; Butler, “Children of Israel,” 12.

clergy, “ægðer ge ymb lare ge ymb liornunga” (as to teaching and in learning); “he” reminisces “hu man utanbordes wisdom ond lare hieder on lond sohte” (how sagacity and education were sought out here in this country from abroad).³⁸ “He” cautions the audience to remember the punishments that were inflicted when they did not cherish learning or make the effort to teach others. “Alfred” urges his audience to take time from secular concerns in order to obtain *ðeawas*: (Christian) “practices.” The word “practices” emphasizes the active nature, the “doing,” not just the belief, which is at the core of being Christian in Alfredian ideology.

The practical value of learning and wisdom is also evident in the Preface to the *Soliloquies*. The preface to the *Soliloquies* is written in an anonymous first-person voice, but authorship is traditionally ascribed to Alfred—an ascription supported by the colophon at the end of Book 3.³⁹ I will use the collaborative form: “Alfred.” “Alfred” eschews the traditional analogy of acquiring wisdom as gathering flowers, such as Isidore of Seville uses in his *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum*, in favour of imagery of gathering wood and building cottages.⁴⁰ While the uncertainty of the times might well have influenced the choice of analogy—this was not a good time to stop and smell the roses—the goal is to build something useful. “Alfred” essentially argues for the *construction* of wisdom by each individual.⁴¹ A plethora of technical terms for building materials and the process of construction is used. The emphasis is on the need to select carefully the raw materials suitable for each phase of construction.⁴² The acquisition of Christian wisdom requires dedication and effort. This emphasis on the personal effort required to acquire wisdom and the imperative to use that wisdom was a fundamental component of Alfredian ideology.

The allegory of gathering materials with which to build a home is capable of working on at least two levels. It is probable that this was intentional. By the time these texts were produced, the king’s focus had shifted from a personal quest for wisdom to a reorientation of his community back to God. Alfredian ideology had to be couched in terms that both clerical and secular elites could understand and accept. To those men educated in the Latin tradition, the references to Augustine, Gregory, and Jerome would have suggested that the wood being gathered was the wisdom of the patristic texts,

38 *Pastoral Care*, 4–5.

39 Irvine, “Alfredian Prefaces,” 164.

40 St. Isidore, *Quaestiones*, cols. 207–16.

41 Treschow, “Wisdom’s Land,” 275.

42 Sayers, “King Alfred’s Timbers”; Irvine, “Alfredian Prefaces,” 165.

and the cottage was the orientation of self to the wisdom in those texts.⁴³ The references to aristocratic pursuits of hunting, fishing and fowling, and to *lænland* and *bocland*, Anglo-Saxon concepts of property-holding, would have been reassuringly familiar to the secular elites and provided a homelier sense of the task at hand—to construct and inhabit a moral framework.⁴⁴

The Preface thus emphasizes a self-aware and pragmatic approach to the task of acquiring wisdom. “Alfred” methodically surveys the material available to him and chooses the best that he can competently manage.⁴⁵ That too would have been reassuring to the audience—what was demanded of them was to do the best within their abilities. There is a close link between this part of the extended metaphor and the concepts of *cræft* and the tools of kingship, which I explored in the last chapter. Bintley details the close connection between Anglo-Saxon conceptions of dwellings and settlements and the social order.⁴⁶ To Alfred’s audience, this metaphor of building a dwelling reinforced those aspects of Alfredian ideology which dealt with proper social order—good kingship, loyalty, the role of worldly goods, and friendship. In using the metaphor of building a home, “Alfred” provided an easily understood parallel between work that prudently provides for an individual’s wants in this life, including his social self, and work that prepares an individual for salvation.

In this Preface, and in the Verse Epilogue to the *Pastoral Care*, “Alfred” uses other allegories which are innately practical. One builds, or one fetches water, being careful not to waste precious resources and with a concrete goal in mind. The Verse Epilogue urges the reader not to waste a resource (Christian wisdom) that has been provided by others. In the *Soliloquies*, I suggest that “Alfred” reused an effective strategy from the *Pastoral Care*, expressing a spiritual endeavour in practical language apt for a secular audience. The prefaces to the *Pastoral Care* and the *Soliloquies* provide valuable insights into Alfred’s learning process. Alfred provided a model of collaborative learning for both his clerical and lay elites to follow. I argue that Alfredian ideology was articulated, discussed, absorbed, and accepted in the context of textual communities. It follows that the translated texts were used in a fundamentally different way to their source texts.

43 Frantzen, *King Alfred*, 71–72.

44 Heuchan, “God’s Co-Workers,” 4.

45 Treschow, “Wisdom’s Land,” 275.

46 Bintley, *Settlements and Strongholds*, 136, 143.

The approach to texts within the church learning environment, exemplified by Gregory, was close study—reflective reading. Anlezark describes Gregory’s view of Scripture as food which must be thoroughly chewed before it is swallowed.⁴⁷ This was the approach in the monastic communities, where lengthy *ruminatio* and detailed discussion were encouraged, and where time was made for such activities. In order to inculcate Alfredian ideology, the texts needed to reach a much wider audience, and be usable in different ways and different contexts. Importantly, Alfred needed to get his bishops onside and actively involved in disseminating his ideology and persuading others to act. That is why the *Pastoral Care* was the flagship translation. It was particularly apt for his bishops, from whom Alfred had different and greater expectations of audience response. In distributing the *Pastoral Care*, Alfred reached out beyond his immediate circle of advisors, to the remaining bishops and (perhaps) abbots. Copies were sent to every bishopric in Alfred’s extended kingdom, not just Wessex.⁴⁸

Alfred needed his bishops because they straddled the ecclesiastical and secular worlds. They led the church community. They also commanded great landholdings and economic resources and were influential in secular matters. They were linchpins in the textual communities, through church *scholae*, fosterage, and the administration of justice. No doubt Alfred spoke about his ideology and his program, and sought to persuade his leading men through personal interactions—at court, in assemblies, in the administration of justice, and so forth. His bishops could, however, provide greater reach for his message, and they were obvious allies.⁴⁹

Those members of Alfred’s higher clergy who were familiar with the *Cura pastoralis* would have already understood the need to adjust teaching styles for different audiences. They would presumably have been alert to the benefits of adapting their use of different portions of the *Pastoral Care* to suit different circumstances of reception. The *Pastoral Care* may not have been independently consulted by Alfred’s ealdormen at all.⁵⁰ However, it is also possible that bishops referred to the text in informal discussions with their secular contemporaries, cited it at assemblies, or used the Preface in the *schola* as a stand-alone text for their students learning to read (in much the same way that university students new to Old English are frequently given the Preface to cut their teeth on). For these reasons, a translation of

47 Anlezark, “Gregory the Great,” 18.

48 Orton, “Alfred’s Prose Preface,” 143; Sisam, “Publication,” 374.

49 Karkov, *Ruler Portraits*, 35.

50 Anlezark, “Which Books,” 8.

the *Cura pastoralis* was a fitting text with which to start the dissemination of Alfredian ideology, to persuade the bishops to become actively involved. The Prose Preface started that process of persuasion.

The Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* opens with a loving greeting to a named bishop, an opening which subtly positions the relationship between reader and writer.⁵¹ The tone is friendly and earnest.⁵² The effect is to draw the reader in closely; this is not a harangue and not an edict. The ruminations on the cause of the community's woes and the solution are designed to elicit an emotional response: desire and eagerness, a sense of common cause, perhaps also a sense of pride in being chosen to participate in this reinvigoration, stemming from the acknowledgement that the reader is necessary for the king to accomplish this most important task. That sense of participation, of collaboration, is underlined by the changes in authorial voice, from "ic" to "ge" to "we" as "Alfred" progresses from investigation of a problem to a solution.⁵³

The persuasive effect of the collegial tone and language of the Prose Preface can be illustrated by comparing it to documents written in a very different tone. Foot notes the deliberately grandiose, indeed pompous, language of Æthelstan's later charters. She asks how much of that language his thegns could have understood "even if some kind (and highly educated) bishops standing nearby tried to translate the text for them, or at least paraphrase it sotto voce during its recitation."⁵⁴ Æthelstan's scribes chose dense language and inflated rhetoric to enhance the majesty of the king.⁵⁵ "Alfred" deployed tone and language to bring the audience closer to the king. The Prose Preface was a carefully crafted exercise in persuasion, not only in terms of the diagnosis of current misfortunes and their solution, but also as an acknowledgement that extensive collaboration between the king and his bishops was necessary. Selected members of the higher clergy had helped Alfred learn what he needed to know; now he and his extended higher clergy needed to embark on a communal endeavour to assist others to obtain and practise Christian wisdom.

51 Frantzen, "Form and Function," 126; Huppé, "Alfred and Ælfric," 272.

52 Szarmach, "Meaning of Alfred's Preface," 61–62.

53 O'Brien O'Keefe, "Listening to the Scenes," 18–19.

54 Foot, *Æthelstan*, 214.

55 Lapidge, "Hermeneutic Style," 99–101.

Production of the Alfredian Texts

Janet Bately postulates a collegial form of authorship for the Alfredian translations, which allows for input by a variety of assistants, in matters of substance as well as in form, subject always to the king's overriding discretion.⁵⁶ Yorke gives significant scope to the king's discretion in the flavour and emphases of the translated texts.⁵⁷ Trish Ferguson argues that in relation to the *Pastoral Care*, Alfred authored that part most nearly concerned with *anweald* (authority), leaving his mentors to produce the balance of the translation.⁵⁸ O'Brien O'Keefe suggests substantial discussion between Alfred and his advisors in relation to aspects of the translation of the *Regula pastoralis*.⁵⁹ The implication is that these compromises, or the king's final decision, were made during the process of composition of the OE texts. That puts the king very close to the actual work of composition, temporally and spatially. That may well have been the case for the *Pastoral Care*, but not necessarily true for the balance of the translations.

I suggest that the work of "hammering out" the king's position was done in the period in which he was learning for his own sake, with his advisors in close attendance. The OE translations reflect positions already reached, after discussion and debate, in a community of practice comprising Alfred and his assistants. This would reflect the dialogic form of some of the Alfredian translations, in which a common understanding is frequently reached through discussion and debate between the characters.

I argue that by the time the *Pastoral Care* was produced, the king and his inner circle had formulated at least the basic principles of Alfredian ideology. They had identified some pertinent texts to use as anchor points to educate and persuade others of their ideology. I analyzed these in the previous chapter. Those who undertook the work of manuscript production did not necessarily have to be closely supervised by the king, because the goals were already clear, and the way the texts were to be used was already familiar. Royal control did not have to be tightly exercised, after the production of the *Pastoral Care*.

Alfredian ideology was known with sufficient certainty that the translations could be done at a distance. Richard Clement suggests that Alfred and his helpers settled upon a series of "editorial principles" to guide the

56 Bately, "Alfred as Author," 117.

57 Yorke, "Alfred and Weland," 62–63.

58 Ferguson, "Case for Multiple Authorship."

59 O'Brien O'Keefe, "Inside, Outside," 343.

individual translations.⁶⁰ Konshuh characterizes Alfred's role as "conceptual director."⁶¹ Which texts were to be translated may not even have been settled very far in advance of their production. Alfred does not specify the texts which are "the most necessary for men to know" in the Preface to the *Pastoral Care*.

Anlezark argues that the category of "books most necessary" is unlikely to have been open-ended, and that this description is a reference to the sacred Scriptures.⁶² This narrow interpretation is consistent with his position that the intended audience of the *Pastoral Care* was confined to the bishops, and that the purpose of translating the text was to improve ecclesiastical education.⁶³ If, however, the *Pastoral Care* was intended to be accessed to some degree by a wider (secular) audience (even if mediated through the bishops), then the scope of the "books most necessary" need not be narrowly confined. For early medieval communities, knowledge of the Scriptures was fundamental. They also relied upon non-Scriptural texts to understand their world and to place it in a Christian context: Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* is an obvious example. In the Preface to the *Soliloquies*, "Alfred" explicitly encouraged others to choose materials that suited them in their quest for Christian wisdom. Individual flexibility is inherent in key components of Alfredian ideology such as the *modes eagan* and *cræft*. Flexibility and variability were carefully incorporated into the social practices used to disseminate Alfredian ideology. A rigidly defined set of texts is at odds with the emphasis on versatility which permeates Alfredian reform. I argue that the books most necessary to know were those which would inculcate Alfredian ideology most persuasively in different contexts and for different audiences.

If the individuals responsible for producing translated texts for the reform program had a degree of discretion in their choice of texts, and if there was no deadline for the production of texts, then we can open up space for the *OE Bede* and the *OE Orosius* to be reconsidered as part of the Alfredian canon, albeit with a far more attenuated connection than, say, the *Pastoral Care*. Bately suggests that the *OE Orosius* may have been produced as part of Alfred's broader educational program.⁶⁴ Greg Waite argues that the Preface to the *OE Bede* was written later than the translation, by a different

60 Clement, "Production of the *Pastoral Care*," 137.

61 Konshuh, "Constructing Early Anglo-Saxon Identity," 160.

62 Anlezark, "Which Books," 2.

63 Anlezark, "OE *Pastoral Care*."

64 Bately, "Old English Orosius," 343.

author.⁶⁵ He does allow for the possibility of a loose Alfredian connection, which fits with my argument for a dispersed mode of production.⁶⁶ Waite notes the absence of interpolations on Alfredian issues such as royal power in the *OE Bede*.⁶⁷ This may be a function of the close translation of the text, similar to the *Dialogues*. There are other possible explanations—the Merician origin of the texts or their hagiographic flavour.⁶⁸

It may well be that the king left it up to his assistants and his bishops to actually produce the texts which would contain the ideas he wanted to disseminate. That would be an attractive option for him. It would spread the significant cost of labour and materials necessary to produce the manuscripts. It would underscore the collaborative flavour of the reform program, and the emphasis on consultation and agreement in the prefaces to the *Pastoral Care* and the *domboc*. It would also evidence his bishops' commitment to his reforms, and encourage them to disseminate his ideas in discussions on the texts. This does not mean that any text would do. Rather, there was a general understanding of which texts contained the anchor points which the king had found useful, and which he would therefore want his people to use.

For example, the *OE Boethius*, with its historical narrative, could accommodate different kinds of textual communities: both an informal gathering of adults, and the formal setting of a *schola*. The Alfredian concepts embedded in the text were of equal relevance to ealdormen and their youthful sons, but using the text as an anchor point would have provided flexibility in how those topics were explicated and absorbed. The basic narrative, for example, may have been useful in teaching students to read in the classroom; discussion of the concepts could have followed on from a discussion of the historical context. I have already noted that the prefaces would have been useful as a short exercise in learning to read, for both adults and youths. The two different presentations of the *OE Boethius*, all-prose and prosimetrical, may have been designed to cater for different audiences, with varying intellectual standards and tastes, an example of *opus geminatum*.⁶⁹

Texts may have been selected not only for their material, but for their form. The *Consolation of Philosophy*, the *Soliloquia*, and the *Dialogi* (obviously) were dialogic in form. The dialogic format was a standard method

65 Waite, "Preface to the OE Bede."

66 Waite, "The Old English Bede," 3.

67 Waite, "Translation Style," 3.

68 Molyneux, "The OE Bede."

69 Weaver, "Hybrid Forms"; Irvine, "Protean Form."

of teaching in the early medieval period, another legacy from antiquity.⁷⁰ The Alfredian translations were therefore versatile—they were consistent with established pedagogic practices, and they could also be used in a style of learning based upon informal discussion between (more or less) equals.

My argument that there was flexibility, a degree of discretion allowed to those who would produce the texts to be used to disseminate Alfredian ideology (other than the *Pastoral Care*), may answer the objection that the *Pastoral Care*, the *OE Boethius*, the *Soliloquies*, and the *Prose Psalms* are too diverse to be attributed to one individual. This controversy revolves around Alfred's intellectual interests and his standard of Latinity, and the purpose of the individual translations and what their circulation might have achieved. Some scholars question whether there is a sufficient pattern in the translated texts to demonstrate a cohesive whole. Scholars like Discenza and Pratt have discerned a series of overarching themes and a sociopolitical purpose which, they argue, evidences a deliberate choice of these texts in furtherance of specific policy.⁷¹ Godden, in particular, is sceptical both of any discernible design and any attribution to Alfred.⁷² Others, like Anlezark, doubt the suitability and therefore inclusion of specific texts in the canon, while reserving judgment on the larger claim of a cohesive whole.⁷³

My argument that the king did not necessarily mandate specific texts to be produced and used by his collaborators in his reform program accounts for both the disparities between the texts we call the Alfredian canon, and also the commonalities between them, particularly where those commonalities derive from manipulations of the Latin source texts. I highlighted these commonalities in my analysis of Alfredian ideology in the previous chapter.

My argument thus provides a completely different way of conceptualizing these texts as a collection; a way which accounts for the diversity in content and intellectual sophistication of the individual texts while demonstrating sufficiently close connections between them to warrant their characterization as a canon. My argument leaves the door open for the *OE Bede* and the *OE Orosius* to be considered Alfredian texts, rather than “Alfrediana.”⁷⁴ The *ASC* and the *domboc* are also part of the Alfredian canon, thus conceived.

70 Dumitrescu, *Experience of Education*, 4–5.

71 Discenza, “Influence of Gregory”; Discenza, *King's English*, Introduction; Pratt, *Political Thought*, Part 2; Pratt, “Persuasion and Invention.”

72 Godden, “Did King Alfred Write Anything?”; Godden, “The Alfredian Project”; Godden, “Alfredian Prose”; see also Brown, *Transformation of Britain*, 111–19.

73 Anlezark, *Alfred*, 89.

74 “Alfrediana” is the rubric for these texts in the 2015 edited collection *A Companion to Alfred the Great*.

In choosing the texts and disseminating the ideas they contained, Alfred and his advisors were doubtless aware of their diverse audience—the adult bishops and ealdormen, and the youths to be educated in the court *schola* and under the auspices of the kingdom’s great men.⁷⁵ Some texts were more suitable for the classroom than for local assemblies or private discussions—some texts show signs of being modified in ways which indicate that a mature audience was anticipated. We should not assume that only the Alfredian translations were used in Alfred’s reform program. It may well be that other texts were also referred to from time to time.

The Alfredian translations thus reflect an ideology already settled upon within the core group, and a specific way of using the texts to promote that ideology. This explanation would account for the linguistic and stylistic differences between the texts, which have been used to cast doubt on Alfredian authorship. At the same time, this explanation accounts for consistent themes in the texts, particularly where those themes emerge from changes in the translation from the Latin source texts. Consistency in message and variation in form are not irreconcilable—they can be interpreted as evidence of a clearly understood and articulated ideology, disseminated in a decentralized manner. Alfredian discourse was not within the king’s sole control; like the Carolingian discourse, it was conducted by multiple actors with scope for individual agency in the promotion of that discourse. As Airlie puts it, that discourse was “articulated by many voices, not simply by the king’s voice shouting from his palace.”⁷⁶

Further, this explanation helps to quiet scholarly unease about the attribution of the work of translation to King Alfred in some of the prefaces. Godden in particular has argued that such attribution cannot be taken at face value—that attribution was an early medieval literary trope, a way of acknowledging patronage or claiming authority for a work.⁷⁷ Thomas Bredehoft argues that Bede’s characterization of Cædmon as an “author” demonstrates that for the Anglo-Saxons, a named author and textual authority were not necessarily coterminous, that Anglo-Saxon authorship could encompass looser associations than modern understanding of that term.⁷⁸ If the Alfredian texts reflect a settled ideology and an agreed means of disseminating that ideology under the aegis of the king (whether loosely or tightly supervised), then by early medieval criteria, the claim of Alfred’s authorship was

75 Discenza, *King’s English*, 14.

76 Airlie, *Making and Unmaking*, 8, 17.

77 Godden, “Alfredian Prose,” 133.

78 Bredehoft, *Authors, Audiences*, 39.

validly made. This explanation may also help to account for later claims of Alfredian authorship, such as Ælfric's attribution of the *OE Bede* to Alfred.

Finally, this explanation accounts for the differences in dialect, which has also been a point of contention in relation to authorship.⁷⁹ If the texts were produced under Alfred's aegis but in a decentralized manner, then the person responsible for an individual text's production might well have chosen the dialect with which his scriptorium or his audience was most familiar. I acknowledge that Alfred went to great lengths to portray a united kingdom and a single culture. Equally, he was alert to the sensibilities of the non-West Saxon peoples in his kingdom and assiduously avoided steps which might be construed as subsuming their culture. A text containing Mercian dialect, perhaps the project of Plegmund or Wærferth, might well have had much greater circulation among Mercian elites, and greater acceptance by them, because of those inclusions. Alternatively, such inclusions may evidence a corpus of pre-existing Mercian scholarship which influenced the Alfredian translations without being acknowledged.⁸⁰ The presence of a range of dialects is not a fatal flaw to Alfredian authorship, if that authorship was expansive and communal.

The Curious Case of the *Dialogues*: Harbinger of Alfred's Reform Program?

The *Dialogues* may have played an unusual role in the formulation of Alfred's reform program. Asser says that Wærferth translated Gregory the Great's *Dialogi* at Alfred's command.⁸¹ It is the earliest translation connected to Alfred, being dated to the mid-880s, before the *Pastoral Care*.⁸² The timing suggests that Alfred asked Wærferth to translate the *Dialogi* before the reform program commenced. The translation was done in the period when Alfred had embarked on his own quest for wisdom, but before he became able to read Latin (according to Asser).

The *Dialogi* was held in high regard in the early medieval period.⁸³ Bede quoted from it, and Ælfric recommended it in his *Catholic Homilies*.⁸⁴ The

⁷⁹ See, for example, Godden, "Did King Alfred Write Anything," 3.

⁸⁰ Rauer, "Early Mercian Text."

⁸¹ Asser, chap. 77.

⁸² Rowley, "Long Ninth Century," 12.

⁸³ Godden, "Wærferth and King Alfred," 48; Thijs, "Close and Clumsy," 21.

⁸⁴ Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*, 358; Johnson, "Why Ditch the *Dialogues*," 208–09.

format of the text is similar to that of both the *Soliloquies* and the *Consolation of Philosophy*—a dialogue, which allows gradual explication through questions and answers. The form suggests a didactic purpose, which is reinforced by the text’s content and style.⁸⁵ The source text emphasizes the process of teaching and learning, and the translation increases that emphasis. For example, the teaching role of several saints within their communities is highlighted.⁸⁶

The text recounts miracles performed by Christian men and women, elaborating upon Christian values and the power of those values to overcome otherwise insuperable obstacles. To modern eyes, these tales of miracles may stretch credulity, but early medieval audiences did not expect historical accuracy in the accounts of saints’ lives. Such *Lives* were read figuratively.⁸⁷ As Christine Thijs puts it, the stories in the *Dialogues* were concerned with practical morality and “the occasional portion of applied exegesis.” As with both the *OE Boethius* and the *Soliloquies*, the *Dialogues* favours more concrete imagery and a livelier narrative than its source text.⁸⁸ It was an apt text for an individual seeking to understand and identify the basic components of Christian wisdom, which is consistent with Alfred’s personal quest.

There are significant commonalities between the *Dialogues* and other texts in the Alfredian canon. These commonalities include: a highly regarded source text; a dialogic form; emphasis on the importance of teaching, which is dialled up in translation; the ultimate goal of acquiring Christian wisdom; and concrete examples of how that wisdom can defeat powerful enemies. The translator of the *Dialogi*, Wærferth, was one of the Mercian scholars summoned to Alfred’s side. I suggest that, logically, the *Dialogues* is linked to Alfred’s reform program, even though the translation precedes the start of Alfredian reform.

Irvine has suggested that the *Dialogues* may have been a catalyst for the use of translations.⁸⁹ I propose two possible scenarios. It is possible that in using this translation for his own purposes, it occurred to Alfred that translations would be a productive way of articulating his ideology and persuading his community of the urgent need to reorient themselves to God. That is, Alfred’s own use of the translation of the *Dialogi* prompted him to think about providing translations for his people to use, in order for them

85 Rowley, “Long Ninth Century,” 13; Thijs, “Wærferth’s Treatment,” 275.

86 Dekker, “King Alfred’s Translation,” 42.

87 Hill, “*Imago Dei*,” 46; Dekker, “King Alfred’s Translation,” 32.

88 Thijs, “Wærferth’s Treatment,” 275, 286.

89 Irvine, “English Literature,” 213.

to acquire Christian wisdom. It is equally possible that Alfred had already decided that translations were the way to go and that the *Dialogues* was produced as an experiment, a trial run.

Either scenario would explain the anomaly which Godden identifies in the Preface to the *Dialogues*. The Preface speaks of a private commission of a translation for personal use—but a preface would be unnecessary in such circumstances. A preface assumes a public audience and a wider circulation.⁹⁰ The Preface could have been written retrospectively, when Alfred decided to circulate the translation. There is a tantalizing link between the *Dialogues* and the prefaces to Alfred's flagship translation. Irvine argues that the preface to the *Dialogues* in London, British Library [BL], Cotton MS Otho C I contains a characterization of Alfred as a successor to Gregory the Great—a parallel drawn with greater force in the prefaces to the *Pastoral Care*.

The scenarios outlined above might also account for the discrepancies between manuscripts. MS Otho C I has a preface ascribing the commissioning of the text to Bishop Wulfsgie but the versions in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 322 and Bodleian, MS Hatton 76 have letters in Alfred's name.⁹¹ The stricter adherence of the translation to the source text also supports both alternatives. If the translation was initially conceived as a text for Alfred's use alone, then Alfred may well have required a faithful translation.⁹² The realization that he could use this and other translations to disseminate his ideology may have occurred later. If the translation was conceived as a prototype, again, stricter adherence to the source text makes sense, while Alfred and his advisors experimented with what was possible and what worked.

In terms of circulation, both Kees Dekker and David Johnson argue that this translation would have been used as a teaching tool, and both identify elite youths as the likely audience.⁹³ I suggest a wider circulation, in line with Irina Dumitrescu's observation that dialogues were standard tools for teaching in classrooms and more broadly.⁹⁴ This translation would have been apt for those learning to read, whatever their age, and the text may well have been used in Alfred's new social practice of lifelong learning. I deal with this further in chapter 6. The aptness of the source text as a teaching

90 Godden, "Waerferth and King Alfred," 38.

91 Yerkes, "Translation of Gregory's *Dialogues*," 335.

92 Thijs, "Early Old English Translation," 162.

93 Dekker, "King Alfred's Translation," 48; Johnson, "Why Ditch the Dialogues," 208.

94 Dumitrescu, *Experience of Education*, 5.

tool may explain why the *Dialogues* follows the source text more closely than other, freer, translations in the Alfredian canon.⁹⁵ It was not the concepts which were difficult for students, but the Latin. Translated into the vernacular, the concepts did not need to be tweaked to suit Alfred's purpose.⁹⁶

The *Dialogi* was eminently suitable for Alfred's reform program. Translation facilitated the acquisition of Christian wisdom, while the text was an exemplar of Christian behaviour. My argument that the *Dialogues* either alerted Alfred to the idea of using translations as a vehicle, or was a test run of the idea, proceeds on circumstantial evidence. However, the circumstantial evidence is coherent, and provides a plausible explanation for the otherwise anomalous Preface and the differences between manuscripts. My argument permits the *Dialogi* to be reconsidered as part of the Alfredian canon, albeit a special case.

We have cogent evidence as to how Alfred learned, in the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* and in the eyewitness account of Asser. It makes intrinsic common sense for Alfred to intend that others, particularly his adult elites, would learn as he had learned—with help, in a collaborative way, dipping into texts to provide authority and to promote understanding. Alfred's own path to wisdom gave him a precedent, a methodology which would facilitate others, particularly his adult ealdormen, to learn. Alfred's collaborative approach to learning meant that when the time came to produce the vernacular texts which would contain Alfredian ideology, its fundamental concepts were already known within Alfred's circle. This meant that Alfred could safely delegate authority to produce appropriate texts. Authorship was corporate, not individual. Alfred's delegation of production of the texts provides a plausible explanation for the diversity of texts in the Alfredian canon. The *Dialogues* may have played a crucial and hitherto unheralded role in the planning of Alfredian reform.

Having considered the content of Alfredian ideology, and the way that Alfred envisaged using texts to propound that ideology, it is time to turn to the issue of reception. This involves shifting the focus from the king to his elites, those whom he needed to learn and to act, if his community was going to avert catastrophe. We do not hear their voices in the sparse documentary record of Alfredian reform. Theories that do not rely solely upon documents—assemblage theory and social practice theory—illuminate the reception of Alfredian reform. The next chapter examines the “thing-power” of Alfredian text-bodies, the persuasive agency of Alfredian texts *as objects*.

95 Johnson, “Why Ditch the Dialogues,” 209.

96 Thijs, “Close and Clumsy,” 16–17.

In the following chapter, I analyze the way Alfredian ideology was embedded in new and modified social practices—routinized ways of doing things. I use each theory separately, to “unpack” the agency of text-bodies and social practices in inculcating Alfredian ideology and driving reform.

