HUMOUR IN ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE

Edited by Jonathan Wilcox

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Humour is rarely considered in connection with the surviving corpus of Old English literature, yet the potential for interesting analysis in terms of humour is considerable. *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature* is the first book-length treatment of the subject. Scholars employ different approaches to explore humour in such works as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, the riddles of the Exeter Book, and Old English saints' lives. An introductory essay provides a survey of the field, while individual essays push towards a distinctive theory of Anglo-Saxon humour. Through its unusual focus, the collection provides a fresh perspective on both famous and lesser-known works of Old English literature.

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Introduction

JONATHAN WILCOX

> The first question of course was how to get dry again . . .
> At last the Mouse, who seemed to be a person of some authority among them, called out 'Sit down, all of you, and listen to me! *I'll* soon make you dry enough!' They all sat down at once, in a large ring, with the Mouse in the middle. Alice kept her eyes anxiously fixed on it, for she felt sure she would catch a bad cold if she did not get dry very soon.
> 'Ahem!' said the Mouse with an important air. 'Are you all ready? This is the driest thing I know. Silence all round, if you please! "William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the English, who wanted leaders, and had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest. Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria –" '
> 'Ugh!' said the Lory, with a shiver.
>
> <div align="right">[from Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
(1865; repr. New York, 1960), pp. 33–34.]</div>

Many consider Anglo-Saxon literature to be as moisture-sappingly dry as the mouse in Lewis Carroll's story thought Anglo-Saxon history. As the ever-popular *Norton Anthology* puts it, 'The world of Old English poetry is predominantly harsh.'[1] The reasons for such an assessment are obvious. Modern desire privileges the tiny corpus of Old English heroic literature, characterized by its obsession with loyalty in a world of violence, where there seems to be little scope for humor. (Real men don't laugh!) The far larger corpus of monastic material receives less attention but this, too, seems unpromising as a vein for much humor. (Real monks shouldn't laugh!) Frivolous literature or the literature of everyday people is unlikely to survive from an environment where putting quill to parchment required that exceptional resources be deployed by the tiny monastic elite trained in the technology of writing. No wonder that Old English literature, when it is admired at all, is admired for its earnest qualities rather than its laughter.

And yet the situation may not be quite so desperate. The heroic world

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[1] M.H. Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th edn, 2 vols. (New York, 2000), I, 5; see further Horner's essay below.

does allow for humor: Old Norse literature is full of it, and a number of the essays in this collection draw comparison with those northern analogues. In the violent world of saga literature, humor can establish the appropriate insouciance of a hero in the face of death, as when the character Atli in *Grettir's Saga* coolly observes 'Broad spears are becoming fashionable nowadays' as he is stabbed to death by one.[2] A minor character intrudes in the death scene of the hero Gunnar in *Njal's Saga* for the sake of comic effect. Gizur, the leader of the attackers, asks Thorgrim to establish whether Gunnar is at home. Thorgrim climbs onto the roof of the house and is stabbed through the thatch. He makes it back to the attackers:

> Gizur looked up at him and asked, 'Is Gunnar at home?'
> 'That's for you to find out,' replied Thorgrim. 'But I know that his halberd certainly is.'
> And with that he fell dead.[3]

Thorgrim's logical punctiliousness in a moment of extreme peril makes for a joke. Such joking is clearly compatible with violent action and the heroic ethos. Shippey's essay in the present volume suggests how such joking is undertaken by Hengest in the *Finnsburh Fragment* and at the expense of Weland in *Deor*; Niles focuses on the famously contentious case of Byrhtnoth's laughter in *The Battle of Maldon*; while Risden looks at how heroes joke in *Beowulf*.

Anglo-Saxon monasticism proves less inimical to humor than might be expected, too. It is true that the Benedictine Rule is hostile to joking and immoderate laughter, enjoining: 'Not to love much speaking. Not to speak vain words or such as move to laughter. Not to love much or violent laughter.'[4] This prohibition on immoderate laughter is made more absolute in the Old English version, where the constraint sounds the more pressing on account of the punning similarity between *(h)leahtor*, 'laughter', and *(h)leahter*, 'sin':

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[2] *Grettir's Saga*, trans. Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson (Toronto, 1974), ch. 45, p. 95. 'Þau tíðkast nú in breiðu spjótin', *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 7 (Reykjavik, 1936), p. 146.

[3] *Njal's Saga*, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth, 1960), ch. 77, p. 169. 'Gizurr leit við honum ok mælti: "Hvárt er Gunnarr heima?" Þorgrímr svarar: "Vitið þér þat, en hitt vissa ek, at atgeirr hans var heima". Síðan fell hann niðr dauðr', *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 12 (Reykjavik, 1954), p. 187.

[4] *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. and trans. Justin McCann (London, 1952), ch. 4, pp. 29–31; 'multum loqui non amare, uerba uana aut risui apta non loqui, risum multum aut excussum non amare.'

ne sceal he fela sprecan, ne idele word ne leahtorbere; ne hleahter ne sceal he lufian.[5]

(he must not speak much, neither idle words nor those causing laughter; he must not love laughter/sin.)

Despite such warnings, there is clear evidence that humor raised its mischievous head in the monasteries, as an Anglo-Saxon copy of the *Rule of St Benedict* graphically illustrates. MS Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 57, a manuscript written perhaps at Canterbury at the end of the tenth or beginning of the eleventh century, probably for the use of Abingdon Abbey, where it subsequently resided, gathers together a collection of monastic texts, opening with the *Rule of St Benedict*. Yet this high-minded and sober text comes with boisterous illustrations: faces drawn into the bow of capital letters, sometimes smiling, often tonsured to show that they are monks.[6] Such monks peering back from the page suggest a levity at odds with the proscriptions which the book contains and hint that life in the cloister was not as monolithically somber as the Rule might lead one to expect.

Monastic jocularity is in evidence elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon England. The Latin colloquies of Ælfric Bata envisage a Cokaygne-like world of boys in the monastery required to eat and drink to excess and learning to insult at length.[7] Here the humor presumably has a pedagogic point as a technique for keeping the attention of young monks, but its presence makes the monastery sound significantly less cloistered from a comic spirit than the rules prescribe. This may be reflected, too, in the copying of the famous Exeter Book riddles. Smith's and Rulon-Miller's essays in this volume both explore the operation of sexual humor in the riddles, pondering its presence in a monastic manuscript, while Horner and Magennis investigate the occasional use of humor within the literature of Anglo-Saxon Christian tradition.

[5] Arnold Schröer, ed., *Die angelsächsischen Prosabearbeitungen der Benedictinerregel*, Bibliothek der angelsächischen Prosa 2 (Kassel, 1888), ch. 4, 18/7–9.

[6] On the manuscript, see Mildred Budny, *Insular, Anglo-Saxon, and Early Anglo-Norman Manuscript Art at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge: An Illustrated Catalogue*, 2 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI, 1997), # 25 (I, 439–73), with this feature illustrated in vol. II, plates 297–320. Timothy Graham establishes that these faces are an early part of the manuscript's decorative pattern, pre-dating a yellow infilling of some initials, 'Cambridge Corpus Christi College 57 and its Anglo-Saxon Users', in *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts and their Heritage*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine M. Treharne (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 21–69, at 29.

[7] See *Anglo-Saxon Conversations: The Colloquies of Ælfric Bata*, ed. Scott Gwara, transl. with an introduction by David W. Porter (Woodbridge, 1997), esp. 'Colloquies' 8, 9, and 25.

Surviving Old English literature all comes from the world of the hall and battlefield or of the monastery and pulpit, whereas that from the field or the hostelry, assuming that it once existed, has been lost forever since it never was recorded. A further strand of humor was likely lost with it. Once again, the Old Norse analogues hint at what might once have been present in England. Excavations of the medieval town of Bergen in Norway yielded a wealth of runic messages written on wood, many of them ephemeral acts of communication such as are rarely preserved from the Middle Ages. One rune stave displayed in the Bryggens Museum at Bergen, measuring 25 cm long, and dated to 1248–1332, bears the runic inscription: 'Sett deg ned og tolk runene; reis deg opp og fis' ('Sit down and interpret the runes, then rise up and fart'), probably an early example of lavatory humor. While the Exeter Book riddles preserve numerous sexual riddles and perhaps a scatological one, all are far removed from this popular and ephemeral level.[8]

All these examples raise the question, of course, of what constitutes humor in literature, who viewed it as funny, and how we can tell they were amused. Such problems are particularly acute in contemplating humor from a long-past society. Here, humor theory is of some value. Incongruity is central as a necessary if not sufficient cause of humor in almost all humor theory. Psychological studies demonstrate how a sudden or simultaneous comprehension of appropriately divergent realities is necessary for a perception of humor.[9] Yet for the incongruity to seem funny there must also be a further level of humorous appropriateness. Freud proves useful for establishing why the perception of incongruity is funny.[10] He posits that a consistent deployment of psychic expenditure is required in polite society in order to maintain a single inhibited vision of the world and that a release in that application of psychic expenditure is made possible by the puncturing double vision offered by a joke. The value of Freud's model for investigating a culture from long before his time is ably demonstrated by the essays of Rulon-Miller and, particularly, Smith in this volume. Smith's deploy-

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[8] For the possibly scatological riddle, see Williamson's brilliant but contentious reading of the riddles conventionally numbered 75 and 76 (his Riddle 73): *The Old English Riddles of the 'Exeter Book'*, ed. Craig Williamson (Chapel Hill, 1977), pp. 110 and 352–55.

[9] Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee, eds., *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* (New York, 1972); Arthur Asa Berger, 'Humor: An Introduction', *Humor, the Psyche, and Society*, ed. Berger, *American Behavioral Scientist* 30.3 (1987), 6–15; Arthur Asa Berger, *An Anatomy of Humor* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993).

[10] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London, 1960); and 'Humour', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (1928), 1–6.

ment of Freud's theories suggests much about the inhibitions and taboos present in Anglo-Saxon England, available to be punctured through humor.

Some problems of humor analysis are peculiar to reading humor in historical literature. Detecting incongruity presupposes an understanding of congruity, which is itself a challenge in view of the small and fragmentary survival of Old English literature. The scholar who has done most to develop a sense of humor studies in relation to older literature is Bakhtin, whose alertness to the bodily, to Billingsgate language, and to carnival has been a useful stimulus for further study, even as his emphasis on the subversive potential of humor and his historical groundedness have been challenged.[11] Bakhtin, though, never turned his attention to Old English. Instead, a groundbreaking attempt to infer the peculiar nature of Old English humor is undertaken by Shippey in this volume. An alternative way of establishing the horizon of expectations from which the humorous launches is to take an anthropological perspective, as Niles's essay exemplifies. Niles demonstrates the careful attention necessary to acquire the cultural competence for reading even a single gesture related to humor. Yet another approach is to start from a sense of how language creates humor, with particular attention to puns, an approach pursued in Tripp's contribution.

Humor is a recurring preoccupation for scholars of later medieval English literature, where the canonical and most-studied text is a recognized comic masterpiece.[12] Indeed, humor abounds throughout Middle English literature and has been much discussed.[13] All such fun, though, apparently starts with the Norman Conquest: humor has been conspicuously absent as a focus for the study of Old English literature. The present volume is the first book-length treatment of Anglo-Saxon humor. Not many scholars have touched on the topic in any way: general surveys are rare and slight,[14] while specialist studies of humor in individual works are

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[11] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984); for a critique, see Martha Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition* (Ann Arbor, 1996).

[12] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Larry D. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Boston, 1987); for studies, see, *inter alia*, *Chaucer's Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Jean E. Jost (New York, 1994).

[13] Valuable studies include Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, 1950); Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1982); and Derek Brewer, *Medieval Comic Tales*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1996).

[14] Jean I. Young, '*Glæd Wæs Ic Gliwum* – Ungloomy Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe*, ed. Cyril Fox and Bruce Dickins (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 275–87; Beatrice White, 'Medieval Mirth', *Anglia* 78 (1960), 284–301; Jonathan Wilcox, 'Anglo-Saxon Literary Humor: Towards a Taxonomy', *Thalia* 14.1–2 (1994), 9–20.

surprisingly scarce.[15] Laughter in Old English has been the subject of some of the most successful studies, although, unfortunately for those interested in humor, they generally conclude there is little or no correlation between laughter and humor.[16]

The present collection, then, breaks new ground through its very focus on Anglo-Saxon humor. This book comprises all new essays in which the authors present original arguments about a range of Old English literature. Strong attention is paid to the traditional heroic corpus, demonstrating that fresh insights can be gained by looking at this literature with new questions in mind. Two essays present new readings of material long suspected of being funny, the sexual riddles in the Exeter Book. The two remaining essays take up the challenge of humor in Old English religious prose, and demonstrate that, if not packed full of laughs, the pursuit of humor at least opens important interpretive points.

Perhaps the most famous laugh in all Old English literature is uttered by Byrhtnoth in *The Battle of Maldon* after he despatches one of his Viking attackers and before he, too, is struck down. But what does that act of laughter mean? John D. Niles's essay, 'Byrhtnoth's Laughter and the Poetics of Gesture', offers a sophisticated extended response to that question. As with all gestures, Niles demonstrates, the act of laughter is culturally conditioned. Understanding that laughter requires understanding a total set of poetic gestures. Niles circles round Byrhtnoth's laughter, returning frequently to the doomed leader, as he builds an ever-richer interpretation of the poem and of the culture, centering on this one event. Humor plays a part in Byrhtnoth's laughter – as humor had been present in the earlier exchanges with the Viking spokesman – but it is only a relatively small part. Instead, understanding this gesture opens up the whole question of understanding Anglo-Saxon culture. The conclusion may be predictable – in some ways the Anglo-Saxons are strikingly like us and in some ways they are totally unlike us – but the repeated probing at this point of tension

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[15] Notable successes are Heinemann's structural readings of *Judith* and *Beowulf*: Fredrik J. Heinemann, '*Judith* 236–291a: A Mock Heroic Approach-to-Battle Type Scene', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71 (1970): 83–96; and '*Beowulf* 665b–738: A Mock Approach-to-Battle Type Scene', in *Perspectives on Language in Performance . . . to Honour Werner Hüllen*, ed. Wolfgang Lörscher and Rainer Schulze (Tübingen, 1987), pp. 677–94.

[16] Susie I. Tucker, 'Laughter in Old English Literature', *Neophilologus* 43 (1959), 222–26, makes a start; Laura Ruth McCord, 'A Study of the Meanings of *Hliehhan* and *Hleahtor* in Old English Literature' (unpubl. Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, Columbia, 1979), provides an exhaustive study of words for laughter and their usage; Hugh Magennis, 'Images of Laughter in Old English Poetry, with Particular Reference to the "Hleahtor Wera" of *The Seafarer*', *English Studies* 73 (1992), 193–204, provides an outstanding survey of laughter in the poetry.

leads Niles into a nuanced understanding of laughter in its relation to hubris and scorn.

The values of Anglo-Saxon culture might be different from those of modern culture. Baldly put, such an assertion seems laughably obvious, but it has major critical implications addressed in many of the essays in this collection. Niles's anthropological richness provides one critical response to such a state of affairs. T.A. Shippey is prepared to look those differences in the eye and make the resulting discomfort visible, as he does below in ' "Grim Wordplay": Folly and Wisdom in Anglo-Saxon Humor'. Anglo-Saxon humor, he shows, inclines to grim wordplay of a particularly subtle sort, 'rising out of pain and grief, using riddling and oblique statement, but most of all depending on the contrast between an obvious meaning and a deeper one, and demanding awareness of that contrast for full effect'. Shippey teases out this kind of humor in the heroic verse – most obviously in *Judith*, but also and more subtly in the laconic opening of the *Finnsburh Fragment* and in the painful first stanza of *Deor*. Loosening the supple sinew-bonds of these comic moments involves understanding proverbial humor, brilliantly explicated here in relation to the *Durham Proverbs*. Instances of laughter establish a sardonic quality, where the laugh is generally on the laughers since their unreflecting assurance meets its comeuppance as they become the butt of a joke. This proves as true of a Christian scene (the dwellers in Hell laughing, for example, at the moment of the Resurrection in *The Descent into Hell*) as of the heroic scenes that parallel the heroic Old Norse examples. Such an observation permits Shippey to test his theory with a stunning reading of a rarely considered brief Christian poem, *Bede's Death-Song*. Here, the expectations of proverbial wisdom, along with a tight reading of the poem, allow Shippey to see Bede as something he has rarely been seen as before: a joker, even at the very end, bowing out on a sardonic observation which he might have seen as funny even if we don't.

One reason *Beowulf* seems so unfunny is that such a critical stranglehold has evolved as to what the poem means and how it works. The fossilization of that view is evident in the hold that Klaeber's edition still retains some 75 years after it was first published.[17] One scholar who chooses to throw stones in this glass house is Raymond P. Tripp, Jr., who has been pursuing the idea of a comic *Beowulf* for some years.[18] Tripp's essay in this volume, 'Humor, Wordplay, and Semantic Resonance in *Beowulf*', takes punning in the poem seriously in order to build up an iconoclastic reading. He starts

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[17] Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Boston, 1922). The influential third edition with supplement was first published in 1950.

[18] See especially Raymond P. Tripp, Jr., *Literary Essays on Language and Meaning in the Poem Called Beowulf: Beowulfiana Literaria* (Lewiston, NY, 1992).

from easily accepted assumptions: that *Beowulf* is double-visioned in its sense of a pagan past and a Christian present and that punning is particularly possible where there are two frames of reference for words to resonate in. Tripp uses this critical leverage to explore a new vision of *Beowulf*. Surely, most readers will accept Tripp's initial premises and his initial examples, but beware! Once Tripp has completed his argument, the dignified towering epic edifice proves to have no windows left unsmashed and a red nose on to boot: the epic becomes a mocking account of heavy drinking sessions. This is the kind of iconoclastic criticism *Beowulf* needs if the poem is to retain its interest for another century of critical scrutiny.

One aspect of *Beowulf*'s humor has long been accepted and yet little explained: the presence of understatement. E.L. Risden works over the poem, exploring both the element of understatement and the flyting elements in his essay, 'Heroic Humor in *Beowulf*'. Risden demonstrates that both can be explained as violations of the economy of words, incongruities that can be understood through reference to the pragmatics of language as described by Grice.

The riddles are perhaps the only surviving Old English works readily accepted as funny, and yet, alas, nothing is known for certain about their performance context beyond their getting recorded in that vernacular miscellany, the Exeter Book. Particularly striking are the sexual riddles, since the very recording of their bawdy attention to the bodily on pages penned by celibate monks and usually reserved for refined contemplation of spiritual questions poses a massive incongruity that opens the door wide for humor. Yet the lack of a performance context makes a full understanding of that humor difficult. The difficulty is overcome by two essays in this collection which pay close attention to how particular riddles work.

D.K. Smith tackles the double-entendre riddles head on in 'Humor in Hiding: Laughter Between the Sheets in the Exeter Book Riddles', using the tools of the modern critic and humor analyst. In particular, he brings Freud's theory of sexual jokes to bear on the sexual riddles. This approach, surprisingly underutilized in the past, proves immensely fruitful, and that very fruitfulness demonstrates something about Anglo-Saxon society. The double-entendre riddles only work because there is a taboo on explicit thought about sex, an inhibition that is codified and constantly reinforced in the cloister, but also present in the rest of society. As Smith remarks, 'Freud's theory posits a society in which undisguised sexual images are unacceptable and sexuality is repressed: a society not unlike Anglo-Saxon England.' Smith works over Riddle 44 in detail, demonstrating the value of Derrida's structural insights and Bakhtin's social insights for explaining the mechanics of how an Old English riddler creates humor through repression. He generalizes his insight with briefer readings of Riddles 54 and 45.

Nina Rulon-Miller, on the other hand, gives serious attention in 'Sexual

Humor and Fettered Desire in Exeter Book Riddle 12' to a sexual riddle that has not generally been seen as a continuous double entendre. This essay, too, demonstrates the fruitfulness of a psychoanalytic approach. Rulon-Miller shows that the riddle operates through a mechanism similar to Freud's sense of a sexual joke centering on the sublimation of sexual desire. In the process of uncovering the ambiguous activity within the riddle, Rulon-Miller unpacks the status of the *wonfeax wale* – a dark-haired Welsh slave-woman – and reveals for the first time her probable innocent activity – the making of leather. Rulon-Miller's careful attention to the overtones of the riddle fully opens up the disparity that allows for humorous incongruity, namely that between an ox going about its business dead and alive and the expression of fettered desire. As well as offering notes toward a cultural history of leather-making, of English attitudes to the Welsh, and of masturbation, Rulon-Miller's essay exemplifies the wealth of understanding possible from a close reading of a single riddle.

The Benedictine Rule prohibits immoderate laughter to monks, and John Chrysostom famously pointed out that Christ is seen to weep on a number of occasions, 'but nowhere laugh, nay nor smile but a little; no one at least of the evangelists hath mentioned this'.[19] Nevertheless, in Anglo-Saxon literature, the laughter of saints is one of the few uncomplicatedly happy sounds of mirth, as even the painful death of a martyr is a happy transformation to eternal life when seen through the paradigm shift that accompanies the movement from this world to the next.[20] Two essays in this collection contemplate the world of Anglo-Saxon saints' lives, one centering on the works of Ælfric, the other on an anonymous life.

Martyrdom is a paradoxical event in that it involves the presentation of bodily torture as spiritual empowerment. The incongruity of the contrast between worldly and eternal strength is all the more apparent when the victim is a woman who nevertheless outsmarts her male and powerful-in-this-world torturer. Shari Horner investigates this incongruity in Ælfric's three female saints' lives in ' "Why do you speak so much foolishness?" Gender, Humor, and Discourse in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*'. Her reading of the incongruity both reveals the humor of these lives and their epistemological underpinnings. She shows that the powerful worldly

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[19] *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, homily 6; trans. Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10 (New York, 1888), p. 41. For a good survey of early Christian attitudes to laughter, see Joachim Suchomski, *'Delectatio' und 'utilitas': Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis mittelalterlicher komischer Literatur* (Bern, 1975), pp. 9–23.

[20] On the humor of saints' death scenes, see Jonathan Wilcox, 'Famous Last Words: Ælfric's Saints Facing Death', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 10 (1994), 1–13.