

The King's Speech: Wisdom, Politics, and Textual Culture in Anglo-Saxon England

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that kings were central to the formation of vernacular literary culture in Anglo-Saxon England. Kings typically served in early medieval textual culture as the recipients of clerical instruction, not as authors or educators in their own right. They were enjoined to rule wisely: to listen to advice and issue wise decrees. This limited notion of kingship, however, proved inadequate to the depiction of royal wisdom as it operated in history. In the course of exploring the distant past, when kings had no clerics to advise them, or the ongoing scenario of royal lawmaking, Anglo-Saxon authors constructed royal personae that could reflect wisely on their own actions and offer wisdom to others. These authors adapted instructive genres in textual culture, such as the sermon, the explanatory gloss, and the maxim, into the means of expressing a lay wisdom grounded in experience and reflection rather than formal instruction.

Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* is addressed to a royal reader, Ceolwulf of Northumbria, and kings sit at the heart of its plot as the primary subjects of conversion. Bede treats conversion as a problem of epistemology, rhetoric, and politics as he crafts a language of wise self-reflection for his convert-kings—a rational and lofty style with classical overtones. The unknown poet and scribes of *Beowulf*, meanwhile, staged an even more radical revision of intellectual authority in textual culture: they presented Christian readers with wise pagan characters who reflect at length on some of the central questions of early medieval ethics and theology, including the role of God (or “a god”) in altering the balance of earthly power. In the absence of clerical advisors or biblical authority, *Beowulf*'s wise kings judge their own actions by extrapolating from their knowledge of history. With the Old English *Boethius*, a translation of the late-antique *Consolation of Philosophy*, we arrive at a text purportedly authored by an actual king, Alfred of Wessex. The *Boethius* shifts the meaning of political action: rather than a distraction from wisdom, as it is portrayed in the original *Consolation*, it becomes the very means of attaining wisdom. By having the prisoner retain his self-conception as a ruler even after his downfall, the *Boethius* puts kingship at the center of the universal human drive for wisdom. Finally, English kings and their clerical, literate advisors developed the field of written law into an arena for the performance of political wisdom by adapting the essentially ecclesiastical genres

of the diploma (an instrument of pious land donation) and the sermon to the scenario of the king's legal speech. Within the kingdom as an imagined political community, the king was not simply the most powerful individual, but also a public intellectual who had the authority to interpret the state of affairs—a role that was contingent, however, on his success in protecting the nation.

My chapters cumulatively show that kings functioned in early medieval England as figures to think *as* and think *with*. By adapting the genres of textual wisdom to kingly voices and perspectives, Anglo-Saxon authors constructed a vernacular literary sphere with a distinctly political self-conception.

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Introduction: Political Power and Wise Speech	1
Chapter 1: Natural Wisdom and Prudent Kingship in Bede's <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>	16
Chapter 2: Wisdom and Action in <i>Beowulf</i>	42
Chapter 3: The Way of Wisdom in the Old English <i>Boethius</i>	71
Chapter 4: The King's Legal Speech	100
Epilogue	128
Bibliography	131