The Use of Ambivalent *þæt* in the Blickling Homilies

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§1

It is well known that in Old English *þæt* is used in a way that allows two interpretations: as a neuter relative pronoun with lack of concord in gender and/or number, or as a conjunction introducing a clause of purpose or result with omission of a clause element. For example, in *Exodus* 10:25 *wilt ðu us syllan offrunge, ðæt we bringon urum Gode*,[1] *þæt* may be a relative pronoun with a feminine antecedent, or may introduce a final clause with unexpressed object.

This ambivalent construction, which eventually fell out of use, has attracted some scholars' attention and there has been much discussion as to the origin and the status of this construction. Some prefer to think of *þæt* simply as a relative pronoun, saying that *þæt* had already developed its use as an indeclinable relative. Studies so far, however, have shown that examples of *þæt* without regard to gender and/or number are not yet so numerous as might appear (Kivimaa, pp. 39ff. and Mitchell, §§2134-35). Mitchell says that omission of the subject or object in *þæt* clauses is idiomatic in Old English, and he regards this ambivalent construction as the outcome of gradual identification of the conjunction *þæt* with the relative *þæt*, which was helped by the existence of the indeclinable relative *þe* (Mitchell, §2143).

According to Mitchell, examples of this use are found in prose and poetry of all periods, but not attested in Ælfric's works (Mitchell, §2139 and §2143).

Mitchell says that Ælfric, as a grammarian, might have avoided ambiguity. Shearin gives us eleven examples from Old English prose texts: seven from the Old Testament, two from Orosius, one from the Gospels, and one from the Blickling Homilies (Shearin, p. 86). The range of his corpus, however, was not wide, and his examples do not always represent the texts he named. For instance, the example he gives as one from the Blickling Homilies: XVIII (S. Andreas) 247. 24 *Min Drihten Hælend Crist, send þinne þone Halgan Gast, <u>þæt</u> awecce ealle þa þe on þisse wætere syndon* is from a variant text in a later manuscript: Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 198, which was printed in the edition Shearin used, to supplement a missing part of the Blickling manuscript. Thus it has to be said that actual distribution of this construction in Old English is still unknown.

§2

As part of an attempt to provide a detailed analysis of this somewhat problematic construction, Muraosa (2018) examined ten instances of ambivalent *þæt* found in the Vercelli Homilies. The Vercelli Homilies is the earliest surviving collection of vernacular homilies, along with the Blickling Homilies: the target of the present study. The two homiliaries are dated at the end of the tenth century, and they are textually independent of each other (Scragg 1979, p. 224; Scragg 1985, pp. 308-309). By examining the two most important witnessess to the state of homiletic writing before Ælfric, it is hoped that we can get a picture, partial as it may be, of the attitude toward the use of ambivalent *þæt* in the language of this period.

§3

The Blickling Homilies is a collection of the eighteen homilies contained in the Blickling manuscript (now in Princeton University Library, W. H. Scheide Collection, MS 71). The manuscript consists of three parts: a late Medieval calendar, a selection of Gospel passages known as the Oath Gospels, also late

Medieval, and the homiliary. The homiliary occupies 139 folios of the manuscript, forming the second largest collection of anonymous homilies after the Vercelli Homilies.

Two scribes were involved in the compilation of this collection. Out of the 139 folios, 114 are by Hand A and 25 by Hand B. A close examination of the changes of the hands in the manuscript has shown that both scribes worked at the same time in the same scriptorium (Willard, pp. 26-27).[2]

Little can be said about the sources of the eighteen items. Scragg argues that they were taken from different sources and put together, probably over a period of time, to make an original collection; this makes it difficult to determine where the scribes were working (Scragg 1985, p. 315). Scragg, after minutely examining copies of the items in other manuscripts, says that few of the items can be associated with a particular centre and that '[i]t is probably safe to conclude that B[lickling Homilies] is not of south-eastern origin', suggesting the language's Mercian origin (Scragg 1985, pp. 315-16).

§4

In the following sections, examples of ambivalent *þæt* in the Blickling Homilies are examined, reviewing its use in the Vercelli Homilies. In collecting examples, the EETS edition by Richard Morris was used, with a facsimile version in EEMF occasionally being consulted.[3] In the citations below, 'þæt' represents the abbriviated form 'þ', and for the abbreviated form of *and* or *ond* the ampersand is used, while other manuscript abbreviations are silently expanded.[4]

§5

We start with three examples, in which *þæt* may be a relative pronoun with a masculine antecedent, or a conjunction introducing a subjectless adverb clause.

V (Dominica V in Quadragesima) 59.33　Hwylc man is <u>þæt</u> mæge ariman ealle þa sar & þa brocu þe se man to gesceapen is?

VIII (To Þam Forman Gangdæge) 103.17   Hwæt we nu gehyrdon of hwylcum hugu dæle secggan be þæm eadmodnessum & mildheortnessum, & hwæþre nis nænig man _þæt_ asecggan mæge þa miltsa & þa lufan, þe he wið þis mennisce cyn gecyþde;

XVII (To Sancte Martines Mæssan) 219.24   Ah seoþþan he þon bisceophade onfeng in Turnan ðære byrig, nis nænig man _þæt_ þa wundor ealle asecggan mæge, þa ðe God seoþþan þurh hine worhte.

These are examples typical of ambivalent _þæt_, as Mitchell mentions in reference to this use: 'Clauses of this sort are especially common with principal clauses which contain a rhetorical question demanding the answer 'No' […], or a negative statement which in effect answers such a question' (Mitchell, §2140). This applies also to the Vercelli Homilies, in which four out of ten examples examined are of this sort, all of them from the same homily: IX 29 _hwylc is ðætte hyne on helle andette_, IX 35 _nis nænig man þætte mæge his scippend herigan…_, IX 99 _nis nænig strengo þæt hine arære_, and IX 106 _nis nænig man þæt mæge mid his wordum asecgan hu mycel_ […].

While the examples from the Vercelli Homilies show some variations in terms of content, those from the Blickling Homilies, all saying that things mentioned or situations are beyond description, as a general statement in the present tense, may suggest that this use was rather formulaic, at least in this collection.

§6

The following examples are similar in content to the three examples above except that the noun, _gemet_, is neuter; there is no disagreement between the relative pronoun and its antecedent, if we take _þæt_ as a relative.

V (Dominica V in Quadragesima) 61.34   þær he hæfþ weallendene leg, & hwilum cyle þone grimmestan, eal sar & sace, hungor & þurst, wop & hream, & weana ma þonne æniges mannes gemet sy _þæt_ hie ariman mæge.

XI (On Þa Halgan Þurnes Dei) 117.20   frunan maran þinges þonne ænges mannes gemet wære her on eorðan, <u>þæt</u> hit witan mihte.

However, when compared with the examples in the previous section, *þæt* in these two may be better explained as a conjunction introducing an adverb clause without subject, and also as examples of a set expression.

The Vercelli Homilies has one example of this sort: IV 315 *nis æniges mannes gemet þæt hit asecgan mæge* […], which contrasts with an unmistakable example of adverb clause: IX 16 *Nis þonne næniges mannes gemet þæt he mæge asecgan þara goda & þara yðnessa* […].

§7

Apart from the three examples mentioned in §5, the Blickling Homilies has only two more examples in which *þæt* may be either a conjunction, or a relative pronoun the antecedent of which is not neuter singular: in one the antecedent is a plural, *englas*, and in the other a feminine, *duru*.[5] The example with a plural noun follows:

XVI (To Sancte Michaheles Mæssan) 209.22   Englas beoð to ðegnunge gæstum fram Gode hider on world sended, to ðæm ðe þone ecean eðel mid mode & mid mægene to Gode geearniað, <u>þæt</u> him syn on fultume ða þe wið þæm awergdum gastum syngallice feohtan sceolan.

The context with the idea of purpose or desired result may lead us to read the *þæt* clause as a subjectless adverb clause with the verb in the subjunctive, rather than assume it to be a relative clause without concord.

The other example with a feminine noun involves idiomatic non-expression of a verb of motion after the modal verb *magan*, which is followed by the particle *in*. In this example, *in* is reasonably described as an adverb, rather than a preposition.

XI (On Þa Halgan Þurnes Dei) 127.8   is þonne on westan medmycel
duru þ*æt* mannes heafod ge þa sculdro magan <u>in</u>, þæt man mæg to þæm
lastum onhnigan, & þa cyssan,

Here again, although two interpretations of þ*æt* are possible (þ*æt* being a
conjunction or a relative pronoun), it is probable that the first þ*æt* clause was
intended to be a part of the second þ*æt* clause, which is obviously adverbial.

Before concluding the sections that deal with possible examples of
disagreement between a relative pronoun and its antecedent, we need to see
how frequently disagreement is observed in the texts considered. In the
Blickling Homilies, only one example was found in which a relative pronoun and
its antecedent disagree and in which there is no possibility of reading þ*æt* as a
conjunction introducing an adverb clause: I (In Natali Domini) 3.1 *Ond wæs se
dom oncyrred Euan ungesælignesse þæt hire wæs togecweden, þæt heo cende on
sare & on unrotnesse þa hire bearn* […]. In the Vercelli Homilies, the number of
examples is not more than four.[6] It seems that þ*æt* had not yet established its use
as an indeclinable relative.

§8

The last examples are those that can be simply taken as examples of a relative
pronoun with a neuter antecedent: *leoht* and *fæt* respectively. One may prefer to
read þ*æt* as a conjunction, especially that in the first example.

II (Dominica Prima in Quinquagesima) 21.13   Þis leoht we habbaþ wið
nytenu gemæne, ac þæt leoht we sceolan secan þ<u>æt</u> we motan habban mid
englum gemæne, in þæm gastlicum þrymmum.

XVI (To Sancte Michaheles Mæssan) 209.4   Þonne wæs ongean ðyssum
wæterscipe glæsen fæt on seolfrenre racenteage ahangen þ<u>æt</u> ðæs
wynsuman wætan þær onfeng.

§9

We have examined the use of ambivalent *þæt* in the Blickling Homilies, with reference to the contemporary texts of the Vercelli Homilies. Considering the volume of the two collections, the number of the amibiguous examples is small, and the few examples are of limited variety. Thus this construction does not seem to have been productive in the texts studied in the present paper, except for a few idiomatic expressions. It is outside the scope of the present study to trace the origin of the ambivalent use of *þæt*, but some evidence indicates that the adverbial construction preceded and helped to develop a curious mixture of the adverbial and relative constructions.

Further study of other prose works will reveal more about the situation of and attitude toward this construction in Old English.

Notes

1   Cited from Shearin, p. 86.

2   The details of this scribal participation are given in Willard, p. 27.

3   References to the Blickling homilies are by homily number and title followed by page and line numbers of Morris's edition. In references to the last three items of the collection, I use the conventional homily numbers rather than Morris's. Morris prints a fragment after the fifteenth item as homily XVI, which is actually from a detached leaf of homily IV. Hence Morris's XVII – XIX are properly XVI – XVIII. The fragment has no examples relevant to the present study.

4   All the examples of *þæt* cited below from the Blickling Homilies appear in the abbreviated form 'þ' in the manuscript.

5   I did not count the following example: XVI (To Sancte Michaheles Mæssan) 207.36 *Þonne wæs þær eac of þæm ilcan stane þære ciricean hrofes on þa norðhealfe þæs weofodes swiþe wynsum ond hluttor wæta utflowende, þæt þa biggengan þe on ðære stowe stille wunodan*, because there is no verb in the *þæt* clause, so that the structure of the clause is not obvious enough.

6   Muraosa (2018) lists in an appendix four possible examples of disagreement found in the Vercelli Homilies, but they may allow other interpretations.

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