

# The Use of Ambivalent *þæt* in the Homilies of Wulfstan

With Reference to the Vercelli Homilies and the Blickling  
Homilies

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## §1

The purpose of the present paper is to describe the use of ambivalent *þæt* in the language of Wulfstan (?-1023), Bishop of Worcester (1002-1016) and Archbishop of York (1002-1023). This paper forms a sequel to my two previous papers which examined the use of ambivalent *þæt* in two Old English homiliaries: the Vercelli Homilies and the Blickling Homilies.<sup>1</sup>

The construction discussed in this study involves *þæt* which allows two interpretations: as a relative pronoun with lack of concord in gender and/or number, or as a conjunction introducing a clause of purpose or result with ‘idiomatic’ (Mitchell, §2143) omission of a clause element, as in *Exodus* 10:25 *wilt ðu us syllan offrunge, ðæt we bringon urum Gode*. Here *ðæt* may be a relative pronoun with a feminine antecedent *offrunge*, or may introduce a final clause with unexpressed object.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars maintain that *þæt* had already developed its use as an indeclinable relative and see instances such as given above as proof of the development, but studies so far have shown that examples of *þæt* without concord are not so numerous as might appear (Kivimaa, pp. 39ff,

and Mitchell, §§2134-35).

This ambivalent use of *þæt* deserves attention because this construction may be 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).<sup>3</sup> Mitchell says that ambivalent *þæt* is observed ‘in prose and poetry of all periods’ (§2139), but its actual distribution in Old English is still unknown.

## §2

As part of an attempt to provide a detailed analysis of this somewhat problematic construction, my previous papers examined occurrences of ambivalent *þæt* in the Vercelli Homilies and the Blickling Homilies, two earliest surviving homiliaries dated at the end of the tenth century and two most important witnesses to the state of homiletic writing of the period.

The findings indicate that the construction does not seem to have been productive in the two homiliaries, considering the volume of the collections. There are only ten relevant examples in the Vercelli Homilies and nine in the Blickling Homilies, and the majority of the few examples are observed in ‘a rhetorical question demanding the answer “No” [ ... ], or a negative statement which in effect answers such a question’, a context referred to by Mitchell as ‘especially common’ with the construction in question (Mitchell, §2140). For example: Bl.Hom. V 59.33 *Hwylc man is þæt mæge ariman ealle þa sar & þa brocu ...?* and Verc.Hom. IX 106 ... *nis nænig man þæt mæge mid his wordum asecgan hu mycel þære fiftan helle sar is*.<sup>4</sup> There are nine examples of this kind with a masculine noun *man*, as shown just above, and three examples with the same rhetorical effect, which differ from the above only in that they have *æniges mannes gemet*, the head noun *gemet* being neuter, instead of simply having *man*. Verc.Hom. IV 315 ... *nis æniges mannes gemet þæt hit asecgan mæge* and Bl.Hom. V 61.34 ... *weana ma þonne æniges mannes gemet sy þæt hie ariman mæge*.<sup>5</sup> These examples combine to suggest that they are idiomatic expressions, paraphrased as ‘There is no one ...’. These account for well over half of the occurrences of ambivalent *þæt*. Another noticeable feature is that the verbs used

in the *þæt* clause are of limited variety, mostly verbs of telling or thinking. These expressions seem rather formulaic, all saying that things mentioned or situations are beyond one's understanding or description. This use is more observable in the Blickling Homilies.

### §3

After the use of ambivalent *þæt* in the two anonymous homilies were analysed, the target of the present paper is the language of Wulfstan, who was, along with his contemporary Ælfric, a great prose stylist of the late Anglo-Saxon period, perhaps a generation later than the Vercelli and the Blickling homilists (McC. Gatch, p. 8). By examining Wulfstan's English, it is hoped that we can get a clearer picture of the distribution of and the attitude toward this construction, as piece of evidence to show how the analogy of the conjunction *þæt* affected the development of the indeclinable relative *þæt*.

### §4

Wulfstan wrote at least twenty-one vernacular homilies at the beginning of the eleventh century.<sup>6</sup> His works were widely disseminated and imitated throughout the eleventh century, and copies of his homilies are contained in twelve manuscripts, ranging from the first quarter of the eleventh century to the third quarter of the twelfth century. The most important manuscripts are those copied by the scribe Wulfgeat at Worcester in the latter part of the eleventh century, known as the Worcester Manuscripts: MSS. E and G, and B, C, and I.<sup>7,8</sup>

Wulfstan is known for his highly idiosyncratic prose style: strings of two-stress phrases being linked by alliteration (Lapidge, p. 495). In terms of phonology and morphology, the Worcester Manuscripts show that Wulfstan wrote in conventional late West Saxon, although with a few dialectal features, which may represent Wulfstan's own language or that of the Worcester scriptorium (Bethurum, p. 50). Whitelock also finds the language on the whole to be 'the normal West Saxon standard of his day', judging from the entries in various

manuscripts in a hand probably Wulfstan's own (Whitelock, p. 37).

As to syntax and style, Wulfstan wrote in clear and careful English, and when he used Latin originals, he Anglicized the sources thoroughly, as his sermons were designed for public delivery. Among the features showing this are absence of participial sentences and the dative absolute, a rephrasing of mistakable expressions with *þæt is*, and pleonastic use of pronouns and pronominal adverbs (Bethurum, p. 54 and p. 89). These linguistic devices were employed for the sake of clarity, but his efforts often resulted in extremely complicated sentences, as Kinard (pp. 24-25) puts it: 'Sometimes the very means by which he endeavors to promote clearness produces an opposite effect'.

## §5

In what follows, Wulfstan's use of ambivalent *þæt* is examined. In collecting examples, I used Dorothy Bethurum's edition, which is mostly based upon MS. E.<sup>9</sup> This manuscript is the principal source of Wulfstan's extant homilies, copied at Worcester early in the 1060s.<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise stated, examples given below are from MS. E. References are by homily number followed by line number of her edition. For the abbreviated form of *and* or *ond*, the ampersand is used, while other manuscript abbreviations are silently expanded.

## §6

We start with a sole instance of ambivalent *þæt*. It is an example of 'idiomatic' construction mentioned in the second section; *þæt* occurs in a rhetorical question or a negated statement with a noun denoting a person or persons.

**IV 24** Forðam nis nan man þæt ne sy synful, & ælc man sceal sar ðolian  
oðþon her oðþon elleshwær be ðam þe he þurh synna geearnað.<sup>11</sup>

The following example (from MS. G) can be simply taken as example of a relative pronoun with a neuter antecedent *lif*.

**Xa 51** Ne beo æfre ænig canonic life þæt sundercræfta sumne ne cunne, ac began georne mynsterlice cræftas & gearnian mid þam þæs þe hig big beon & eac æt Gode sylfum ece mede.

However, it deserves attention that *canonic lif(e)* means in effect ‘a canonical person’ in this context, as Bethurum’s annotation suggests.<sup>12</sup> So this may be another example of ‘idiomatic’ use of *þæt*.

There is no example of a rhetorical question or a negated statement with the verb of telling or thinking. Examples collected from Wulfstan’s homilies suggest that he preferred using traditional *þe* to choosing ambivalent *þæt* in this context. The following is one of the examples with the relative *þe*.<sup>13</sup>

**VII 125** Nis se man on life þe areccan mæge ealle þa yrmða þe se gebidan sceal se þe on ða witu ealles behreoseð,

When we find *þæt* in this context, it is employed unambiguously as a conjunction without omission of any clause elements.

**VI 149** And nis æfre æniges mannes mæð þæt he þa godcundnesse asmeagan cunne;<sup>14</sup>

Thus, there is only one instance of ambivalent *þæt*, IV 24, in which *þæt* may be a conjunction which introduces an adverb clause with unexpressed subject, or a relative pronoun with faulty concord. The extremely sparse distribution may reflect Wulfstan’s meticulousness, and this makes an interesting comparison with the language of Ælfric, whose works, according to Mitchell, have no examples of ambivalent *þæt*. As to the absence of this construction in Ælfric, Mitchell says that Ælfric, as a grammarian, might have avoided ambiguity (Mitchell, §2143).

## §7

As we have seen, the use of ambivalent *þæt* involves either faulty concord between the relative pronoun and its antecedent, or element omission in the adverbial *þæt* clause. This section briefly sees whether these grammatical features are generally observed in Wulfstan's language, before concluding the present study.

There is one instance of faulty concord,<sup>15</sup> while element omission in the adverbial *þæt* clause is not attested. In the following example, the relative pronoun *þæt* refers to *þas halgan tid*, the head noun *tid* being feminine, with an unmistakable feminine demonstrative.

**XV 43** ... to þam þæt we hy þyder in eft lædan durran, ealswa we todæg þa don willað þe þas halgan tid geornlice bettan þæt hy ær bræcon.<sup>16</sup>

## §8

We have examined the use of ambivalent *þæt* in the Homilies of Wulfstan, with reference to my previous studies, which had concluded that the construction in question was not productive in the Vercelli Homilies and the Blickling Homilies, except for a few idiomatic expressions. The present study has revealed that the construction is almost absent in Wulfstan. This may be attributed to Wulfstan's attentive attitude toward writing, or it may be that this construction was not rooted in the tradition of homiletic writing in the late Anglo-Saxon period.

The investigation on Wulfstan's language has made only limited contribution toward disclosing distribution of ambivalent *þæt*. Further study of other works of Old English is needed to reveal more about the influence of the conjunction *þæt* on the emergence of the indeclinable relative *þæt*.

## Notes

1 Muraosa (2018) and Muraosa (2020).

2 This example is cited from Shearin (p. 86), who gives us eleven examples of this sort from

Old English prose texts.

- 3 For discussion so far as to the origin and the status of this construction, see Muraosa (2018).
- 4 There are nine examples of this kind: four in the Blickling Homilies and five in the Vercelli Homilies. References to the Blickling Homilies (Bl.Hom.) are by homily number followed by page and line numbers of Morris's edition, and those to the Vercelli Homilies (Verc. Hom.) are by homily number and line number of Scragg's edition.
- 5 The Blickling Homilies has one more example of this.
- 6 There has been much discussion about the number of his homilies. This paper takes up the twenty-one homilies which are printed in Bethurum's edition and which are listed in Cameron's 'A List of Old English Texts' as Wulfstan's homilies.
- 7 These are Hatton 113, Junius 121, Corpus Christi College 419, Corpus Christi College 201, and Cotton Nero A I. In referring to the manuscripts, I follow Bethurum's designation.
- 8 The manuscript of the late twelfth century (Bodley 343) is assimilated to early Middle English forms, and the other six manuscripts are either defective or contain only small portion of Wulfstan's language (Bethurum, pp. 49-50).
- 9 For Homs. Xc and XX, Bethurum chose MS. I, dated in the first quarter of the eleventh century, as better text. Not contained in MS E. are Homs. VIIa, VIIIb, Xa, XVIb, XVIII and XIX.
- 10 The dating is by N. R. Ker, quoted in Kubouchi (1999, p. 34) from Ker's 'Hemming's Cartulary: A Description of the Two Worcester Cartularies in Cotton Tiberius A. xiii', *Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke*, ed. R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin and R. W. Southern, revised edition (Oxford, 1969), p. 50.
- 11 The principal source of this homily is Ælfric's Preface to the first series of *Catholic Homilies* (Bethurum, p. 288), but there is no sentence in Ælfric which corresponds to this sentence. This homily is contained in two other manuscripts: MS. C and MS. H, a manuscript from the third quarter of the twelfth century. Both the manuscripts read the same as this example from MS. E.
- 12 *Ne beo æfre ænig canonic life*, 'Nor let there ever be any canonical person.' (Bethurum, p. 323)
- 13 Other similar examples are III 70, V 97, VII 152, XIII 89, and XX 14.
- 14 This homily is based on Ælfric's homily in the first series of *Catholic Homilies* (Bethurum, p. 293). Ælfric's version reads: *Ac wite ge þæt nán man ne mæg fullice embe God sprecan*, .... (Quoted from Thorpe, p. 286.)
- 15 In XII 7 *And sum wif hatte Uenus seo wæs Ioues dohtor*, *seo* may refer to *Uenus*, or to *sum wif*. It is also possible to read *seo* as a demonstrative pronoun. Although *wif* is a neuter noun, it is often referred to by a feminine pronoun, for a 'psychological' reason (Pyles and Algeo, pp. 154-55).
- 16 This homily is found only in MS. E.

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