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Æthelred the Unready and William of Malmesbury: The Death of a Reputation¹

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Æthelred II of England could not have known he would have such an enduring presence in popular culture. The historical Æthelred ruled a newly-formed England in the tenth and eleventh centuries, reigning from 978-1013 and from 1014 until his death in 1016. In a strictly historical sense, Æthelred is notable for his long, but ultimately unsuccessful, struggle against viking² invaders like Thorkell the Tall, Sweyn Forkbeard, and Cnut the Great. Although Æthelred typically opted for military solutions first and foremost, he is better known for his use of tribute to secure peace with viking armies. A thousand years later, Æthelred is routinely depicted in popular culture. Although Æthelred is presented from many different angles, nearly all these appearances contain common material that can be traced back to one medieval writer: William of Malmesbury. William, a prolific English historian who wrote in the twelfth century, helped create the image of a slothful, sinful, inept king that remains so strongly attached to Æthelred today. Much earlier accounts make it clear that Æthelred's reign ended badly, but do not contain the vivid stories of a wicked king who could barely stay awake.

Historians of Æthelred and William have noticed that William disliked Æthelred to a remarkable degree, and Æthelred's biographers in particular feel that William is largely responsible for the king's poor reputation.³ In academia, William's view of Æthelred

¹ This article developed out of a conference paper I delivered in 2019, called "Æthelred the Unready: What Lies Beneath the Legends," at the Mid-America Medieval Association in Kansas City, MO.

² Although "viking" is often rendered as a proper noun, I have opted to leave it lowercase because "viking" does not refer to an ethnicity or nationality, but to someone who partakes in overseas raiding. For further discussion, see Richard Abels, *Æthelred the Unready: The Failed King* (Penguin, 2018), 37-8.

³ For William's perspective on Æthelred, see particularly: Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn, *William of Malmesbury and the Ethics of History* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 214; and John Gillingham, "The Ironies of History: William of Malmesbury's Views of William II and Henry I," in *Discovering William of Malmesbury*, ed. Rodney M. Thomson, Emily Dolmans, and Emily A. Winkler (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 37-48, 38-9, notes 11 and 17. For discussion of Æthelred's reputation, see particularly Ian Howard, *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions and the Danish Conquest of England 991-1017* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003), 6; Ann Williams, *Æthelred the Unready: The Ill-Counselled King* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), ix-xiii; Levi Roach, *Æthelred the Unready* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 6-7; Ryan Lavelle, *Aethelred II: King of the English* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004), 8-10; Ian Howard, *The Reign of Æthelred II: King of the English, Emperor of all the Peoples of Britain* (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2016), 78; Courtney Konshuh, "Anraed in their Unraed," *English Studies* 97, no. 2 (2016): 140-62, 158; and Brandon M. Bender, *England's Unlikely Commander: The Military Career of Æthelred the Unready* (Rounded Globe, 2019), 4.

survived well into the twentieth century, long after historians had abandoned such moralistic assessments of other figures.⁴ In popular culture, it never went away. With historians of both figures taking note of William's profound influence on the king's reputation, this then begs the question: why did William's account become the standard in popular culture, especially when it had to compete with much earlier sources and dramatic Norse sagas? A 2012 article examined the damage that William did to the reputation of Queen Ælfthryth, Æthelred's mother, while the salacious tales William told about Æthelred's father, King Edgar, have also been discussed, so perhaps it is time the same is done in more depth for Æthelred.⁵ Here, I aim to demonstrate how William has impacted Æthelred's depiction in popular culture, explain why this happened, and ask whether there is any hope for his reputation to recover in fictional portrayals.

Medieval Sources for Æthelred II

To understand how modern media interprets Æthelred, we need to examine the earliest sources for his reign and trace the development of his legacy through time. Our most prominent source, and among the earliest, is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which recounts Æthelred's reign year by year and survives in numerous versions.⁶ Æthelred obtained the throne as a child, after his half-brother was assassinated, but according to the Chronicle, the early decades of the reign were typical for an Anglo-Saxon king of this era: like his predecessors Eadred and Edgar, Æthelred attacked parts of his own kingdom when provoked, and, like Edmund I, he raided the neighboring territory of Strathclyde.⁷ He also attacked the Isle of Man, placing him firmly in line with his militarily aggressive predecessors.⁸ Diplomatically, he was also a typical king of his era, securing lasting peace with especially troublesome vikings. He became the Christian sponsor of Olaf Tryggvason in 994, just as Alfred and Edmund had become spiritual fathers to Guthrum and Olaf Sihtricson, respectively.⁹ He also turned one of his fiercest enemies, Thorkell the Tall, into an ally by hiring Thorkell as a mercenary.¹⁰ When he could not defeat vikings

⁴ Roach, *Æthelred the Unready*, 2-3.

⁵ Kirsten A. Fenton, "The Tale of Queen Ælfthryth in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*," in *Gender and Historiography: Studies in the Earlier Middle Ages in Honour of Pauline Stafford*, ed. Janet L. Nelson, Susan Reynolds and Susan M. Johns (London: University of London Press, 2012), 49-60. Barbara Yorke, "The Women in Edgar's Life," in *Edgar: King of the English, 959-975*, ed. Donald Scragg (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 143-58.

⁶ "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," in *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Whitelock (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968), 135-235. Hereafter "ASC," accompanied by the year(s) associated with the entry.

⁷ ASC 945, 1000.

⁸ ASC 1000; Howard, *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions*, 53.

⁹ ASC 994.

¹⁰ ASC 1012.

in the field or turn them into allies, he paid them tribute to leave, a policy embraced by his predecessors like Alfred and Eadred.¹¹ As the Chronicle's entries approach the late 1000s and early 1010s, the tone begins to change as viking incursions become more severe. Despite Æthelred's efforts to protect England, he was briefly ousted by the Danish king Sweyn. After a triumphant return and brief second reign, Æthelred was nearly replaced again, this time by Cnut. He died in 1016, controlling only London.

Scandinavians recounted Æthelred's reign in their own ways. Norse sagas depict Æthelred as a worthy opponent and prestigious ally. In *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent's Tongue*, he is "a good prince" who becomes a generous patron of the poet Gunnlaug. The saga even includes part of a praise poem for Æthelred.¹² In *The Saga of St. Olaf*, the exiled Æthelred hires Olaf Haraldsson as a mercenary and together they re-conquer England, retaking London and winning a "great battle" at a place called Ringmere Heath.¹³ The depiction of Olaf and Æthelred as co-leaders of a conquering army shows that, in Scandinavia, attacking Æthelred was not the only way to win fame and prestige; fighting alongside him was just as good.

In the mid-twelfth century, John of Worcester wrote an account of the reign that includes a description of Æthelred as an "illustrious atheling, elegant in his manners, handsome in visage, and glorious in appearance," drawing on a description in *Vita Oswaldi*, a text that also portrays Æthelred favorably compared to his half-brother Edward.¹⁴ Around the same time, William of Malmesbury wrote his own version of the reign. Even though William and John knew each other and were familiar with each other's work, William's depiction could not be more different.¹⁵

William of Malmesbury and Æthelred

Like John, William was a monk, and he wrote from the perspective of one, seeing history through the lens of morality. However, William's approach to history has won him admirers

¹¹ Richard Abels, "Paying the Danegeld: Anglo-Saxon Peacemaking with Vikings," in *War and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History*, ed. Philip de Souza and John France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 173-92, 174-5; Konshuh, "Anraed in their Unraed," 155. For Eadred, see charter S 1515 and Simon Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'The Unready': A Study in Their Use as Historical Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 202.

¹² "The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent's Tongue," in *English and Norse Documents Relating to the Reign of Æthelred the Unready*, ed. Margaret Ashdown (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 190-5.

¹³ "The Saga of St Olaf," in *English and Norse Documents*, 154-75; Lavelle, *Aethelred II*, 7-8, 154.

¹⁴ *The Chronicle of John of Worcester: Volume II*, ed. R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk, trans. Jennifer Bray and McGurk (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 430-1; Fenton, "The Tale of Queen Ælfhryth," 58; Roach, *Æthelred the Unready*, 62; Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, 165-7.

¹⁵ Rodney M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003), 74-5.

for centuries, partly because of a careful treatment of sources that bears an uncanny resemblance to modern source criticism.¹⁶ Even if William is not the originator of all his stories, his work became so well-known that he is often regarded as one of England's preeminent historians, mentioned in the same breath as his hero Bede.¹⁷ William's deceptively modern methods and the authority his name carries have sometimes obscured the fact that his approach to Æthelred's reign could be quite confused.¹⁸ More significantly for his influence on popular culture, he wrote in a noticeably "lively and engaging" way.¹⁹

William's Æthelred is arguably one of the most memorable figures in medieval writing: as an infant, he soils the baptismal font "by opening his bowels," which causes Archbishop Dunstan to remark, "By God and His Mother, he will be a wastrel when he is a man."²⁰ When Æthelred mourns his half-brother's assassination, his mother Ælfthryth beats him with candlesticks until he is "nearly dead," giving Æthelred a lifelong phobia of candles.²¹ At his coronation, Æthelred is scolded by Dunstan, who predicts that Æthelred's kingdom will fall because he "aimed at the throne through the death of [his] brother."²² William does not directly accuse Æthelred of the murder, calling him an "innocent child" and presenting him as genuinely distraught. Æthelred's guilt-by-association is relayed through Dunstan instead, who serves as William's mouthpiece for prophecy.²³ Even if Æthelred did not murder Edward himself, though, William sees him as an accomplice.²⁴ Later, Dunstan clashes with the teenaged king and is "astonished at his greed."²⁵ As a grown man, Æthelred fares no better: he brings "the royal majesty into disrepute by tumbling with

¹⁶ Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, 10-11, 14-39; Björn Weiler, "William of Malmesbury on Kingship," *History* 90, no. 1 (2005): 3-22, 3.

¹⁷ Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, 40; Emily A. Winkler and Emily Dolmans, "Discovering William of Malmesbury: The Man and his Works," in *Discovering William of Malmesbury*, ed. Thomson, Winkler, Dolmans (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 1-12, 1.

¹⁸ Niels Lund, "Why Did Cnut Conquer England?" in *Conquests in Eleventh-Century England: 1016, 1066*, ed. Laura Ashe and Emily Joan Ward (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020), 23-40, 33.

¹⁹ Dolmans and Winkler, "Discovering William of Malmesbury," 4.

²⁰ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: Volume 1: The History of the English Kings*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, Rodney M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 269. William appears to have borrowed the baptism story from Osbern of Canterbury, as did his contemporary Eadmer: see Ian Howard, *Reign of Æthelred*, 78; Roach, *Æthelred the Unready*, 62.

²¹ *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 269.

²² *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 269.

²³ Anne E. Bailey, "Gesta Pontificum Anglorum: History or Hagiography?" in *Discovering William of Malmesbury*, ed. Thomson, Dolmans, and Winkler (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 13-26, 17; Ryan Kemp, "Advising the King: Kingship, Bishops and Saints in the Works of William of Malmesbury," in *Discovering William of Malmesbury*, ed. Rodney Thomson, Emily Dolmans, and Emily Winkler (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 65-80, 69; Roach, *Æthelred the Unready*, 6.

²⁴ Fenton, "The Tale of Queen Ælfthryth," 58.

²⁵ *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 271.

concubines.”²⁶ William has Thorkell describe the king as “asleep and snoring; given to women and wine, he thought of nothing so little as fighting” which makes him a “laughing-stock.”²⁷ Crucially, William mentions that previous generations said Æthelred was neither foolish nor cowardly, something he admits is perplexing. He resolves his cognitive dissonance by reasoning that the king’s downfall must have been connected to the nobility’s disloyalty, which stemmed from Æthelred’s own pride.

We are left with a caricature of a ruler whose few redeeming qualities are mentioned just so they can be explained away. Even rulers who found themselves in similarly difficult situations are treated better than Æthelred, such as Henry IV of Germany, even though William heavily criticizes him and even gives him the same “neither uneducated nor idle” disclaimer.²⁸ The only figures nearly as poorly regarded by William are William Rufus and Vortigern, the latter of whom is given a nearly identical assessment.²⁹

William’s Æthelred in Popular Culture

In modern media, William’s grasp over Æthelred is so strong that some fictional accounts come directly from him, such as in Jayden Woods’ short stories:

When the Archbishop Dunstan had held him underwater and offered the holy sacrament, baby Ethelred had defecated in the water. Dunstan had pulled him out and handed him away, crying out with disgust. “By God,” declared the bishop, “this will be a miserable man!” Ethelred’s ears burned with embarrassment whenever he heard that story retold.³⁰

Woods, like William, also depicts Ælfthryth as a stereotypical wicked step-mother who uses Æthelred as a pawn and illustrates the dangers of female power.³¹ As in William’s

²⁶ *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 277.

²⁷ *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 301.

²⁸ Alheydis Plassman, “German Emperors as Exemplary Rulers in William of Malmesbury and Otto of Freising,” in *Discovering William of Malmesbury*, ed. Rodney Thomson, Eimly Dolmans, and Emily Winkler (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 139-52, 148-50.

²⁹ For Rufus, see Björn Weiler, “William of Malmesbury on Kingship,” 19-20. For Vortigern and Æthelred, see Emily Winkler, “William of Malmesbury and the Britons,” in *Discovering William of Malmesbury*, ed. Rodney Thomson, Emily Dolmans, and Emily Winkler (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 189-202, 197.

³⁰ Jayden Woods, “Ethelred the King,” in *The Lost Tales of Mercia*, ed. Malcolm Pierce (Los Gatos, CA: Smashwords, 2010), 15. Available as a PDF: https://www.jaydenwoods.com/Lost_Tales.php.

³¹ Peter Sigurdson Lunga, “Queens and Demons: Women in English Royal Genealogies, c. 1100-c. 1223,” in *Conquests in Eleventh-Century England*, ed. Laura Ashe and Emily Joan Ward (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020), 237-8; Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, 13; Fenton, “The Tale of Queen Ælfthryth,” 56-60.

account, she beats Æthelred with candlesticks and the king is scolded at his coronation with the same words William ascribed to Dunstan.³²

In another of Woods' stories, "Edmund the Aetheling," the adult Æthelred is a drunken, inert ruler who aligns perfectly with William's caricature. When Edmund, Æthelred's son, tries to warn the king of a plot against his life, he is unable to do so because Æthelred is preoccupied with more carnal activities, namely a drunken affair with a woman other than Queen Emma. Edmund attempts to alert his father again the next morning, but the king is ill and hungover. Another character, Eadric Streona, remarks that Æthelred is a laughing-stock: "Do you hear how people ridicule him?"³³ John of Worcester's "glorious" and "illustrious" king is nowhere to be found and neither is the Æthelred of the sagas.

William's influence on "bad king" archetypes may even go beyond depictions of Æthelred. For example, Prince John in Disney's *Robin Hood* checks nearly every box: he has an evil counselor in Sir Hiss, came to power following the ouster of a revered older brother but was not directly involved (Hiss takes credit), and suffers from unnamed childhood trauma associated with his mother. John also shows darker "adult" traits that run parallel to William's Æthelred, such as how John is one of the few Disney characters to be depicted in a state of implied drunkenness, walking around with an empty wine glass and a bottle of red liquid. He is greedy, shown sleeping among bags of gold. Finally, like Æthelred, John is simultaneously cruel and cowardly, such as when he attacks Robin, then begs for his life after being immediately disarmed. Disney's John is played for laughs, though, unlike the Æthelred in Woods' short stories.³⁴ In both cases, the dismal state of the kingdom boils down to the morality (or lack thereof) of its leader, such as how in *Robin Hood*, Nottingham returns to normal as soon as King Richard reappears. For William, once the more pious Cnut usurps the throne, stability returns—morality and the state of the realm are directly connected.³⁵

Moving back to depictions of Æthelred in particular, he is a major character in Patricia Bracewell's *Emma of Normandy* trilogy, where he has partially emerged from William's shadow.³⁶ Æthelred is shown as paranoid and humorless, although his laziness is largely

³² Woods, "Ethelred the King," 18-20.

³³ Woods, "Edmund the Aetheling," in *The Lost Tales of Mercia*, ed. Malcolm Pierce (Los Gatos, CA: Smashwords, 2010), 108.

³⁴ *Robin Hood*, directed by Wolfgang Reitherman (Disney, 1973). Andrew Lynch, "Animated Conversations in Nottingham: Disney's Robin Hood (1973)," in *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, ed. Gail Ashton and Daniel T. Kline (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 29-42.

³⁵ Weiler, "William," 20-2.

³⁶ Patricia Bracewell, *Shadow on the Crown* (New York: Penguin, 2013), *The Price of Blood* (London: HarperCollins, 2015), and *The Steel Beneath the Silk* (Longmeadow: Bellastoria Press, 2021).

absent. Bracewell follows William's lead in other ways: Æthelred is "haunted by the shade of his brother, demanding terribly the price of blood," as William puts it.³⁷ It is unclear whether Æthelred is haunted by a literal ghost or is mentally ill, but Edward's ghost paralyzes him at the most inopportune moments. The king is also promiscuous in the trilogy, a trait derived from William, but Bracewell takes things much further by portraying Æthelred as a rapist.³⁸

Woods and Bracewell's work provide clues about why William's version became so appealing in mass media. William supplies a fully-formed character that writers may directly import, as Woods does, or a character type that can be molded and exaggerated as needed, such as how Bracewell takes the king's sexual immorality to levels that William did not and was "hoping to find a villain" when researching the king.³⁹ The Æthelred of John of Worcester and the sagas are harder to find in these stories, perhaps because they provide few clues about the king's personality besides generalizations, and thus less incentive to adapt into historical fiction. William's colorful account, on the other hand, can be used to create characters who are sympathetic (Woods' "Ethelred the King"), unsympathetic (Woods' "Edmund the Aetheling" and Bracewell's trilogy), or comedic (*Robin Hood*)—whichever suits the needs of the story.

The Ceremony of Innocence, a 1968 play and eventual TV movie by Ronald Ribman, depicts England during the Danish Conquest and is a more unusual portrayal.⁴⁰ Ribman's Æthelred aligns with William's in some ways, but departs in many others: Æthelred's main flaw is again his reluctance to fight, but for moral reasons, not laziness. He dreams of exploration and the pursuit of knowledge, anachronistically attached to the idea of unlimited progress.⁴¹ He is the modern man in a pre-modern society, misunderstood by everyone.⁴² Also, avoiding bloodshed is not just a philosophical matter for him. It is personal due to his mother's abuse, which Æthelred confronts her about. This backstory and argument are achieved by keeping Ælfthryth alive this late in the narrative (she died around 1000, whereas the film takes place around 1013). Ribman says he faced criticism

³⁷ *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 273.

³⁸ Bracewell, *Shadow on the Crown*, 139-41.

³⁹ Patricia Bracewell, "Æthelred II: The Haunted King," *Patricia Bracewell.Com*, April 22, 2015, accessed April 2, 2021, <http://www.patriciabracewell.com/2015/04/aethelred-ii-the-haunted-king/>.

⁴⁰ *The Ceremony of Innocence*, directed by Ken Rockefeller and Arthur Allan Seidelman (Broadway Theatre Archive, 1970).

⁴¹ Richard Utz, "Academic Medievalism and Nationalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 119-34, 121.

⁴² Bettina Bildhauer, "Medievalism and Cinema," in *Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 45-59, 55.

for altering the timeline,⁴³ but that in itself is revealing: he is criticized for rearranging dates, not for using William's embellishments as Æthelred's backstory. However, Ribman's portrayal of a pacifistic Æthelred is unique in that it is "rare to see the use of medievalism to contest the basic association of fighting with goodness."⁴⁴ Although Æthelred in *Ceremony* is not a man of action, he is—in defiant contrast to William's view—hardworking and chaste. In one scene, Emma tells him to stop working and come to bed or she might not be awake when he arrives. Either not caring or not getting the hint, Æthelred ignores her and keeps working. Although *Ceremony* borrows some backstory from William, it was one of the first times Æthelred had been presented in mass media as something other than sleepy, drunken, or cursed. Even the choice of actor is telling: he is portrayed by Richard Kiley, whose baritone voice and confident body language give Æthelred a commanding presence, especially during flashbacks.

In 1992, Æthelred appeared in Richard Wilson's opera *Æthelred the Unready*,⁴⁵ which captures the desire to rehabilitate the king's reputation; by 1992, the academic effort to reassess Æthelred's reign was in full swing.⁴⁶ In Wilson's opera, Emma seeks out Clio, the Muse of History, to help undo the damage William has inflicted on Æthelred's reputation. Wilson's Æthelred is tamer than most because he is bumbling and sluggish, but never cruel. The opera catches Æthelred's reputation at a transition point, but, more importantly, illustrates just how dominant William's version is: the historical debate over Æthelred's reputation is the driving plot point, with William himself appearing on stage as an antagonist. Wilson achieves this through a free and ambiguous approach to temporality, something similar to the "dialogue between past and present" seen in other sources dealing with the medieval, if not quite as straightforward.⁴⁷ All of these characters can interact because the opera takes place in a realm somewhere beyond the notions of past and present, where if Æthelred can impress Clio, his reputation will change.

Finally, Justin Hill's 2011 novel *Shieldwall* might be the first mainstream portrayal to completely shun the influence of William, suggesting Hill is aligned with the modern

⁴³ John Gruen, "He Refuses to Be 'With It,'" *The New York Times*, June 7, 1970.

⁴⁴ Andrew Lynch, "Medievalism and the Ideology of War," in *Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 135-50, 148.

⁴⁵ Richard Wilson, *Æthelred the Unready: An Opera in Seven Scenes*, 1992.

⁴⁶ Some examples of reassessment: David Hill, ed., *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference* (British Archaeological Reports, 1978); Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred; In Search of the Dark Ages*, season 2, episode 3, "In Search of Ethelred the Unready," written and presented by Michael Wood, aired March 13, 1981 on BBC1.

⁴⁷ Stephanie Trigg, "Medievalism and Theories of Temporality," in *Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 196-209, 202-3.

scholarly view of Æthelred as an energetic, if unfortunate, ruler.⁴⁸ *Shieldwall's* main character, Godwin, grows up during Æthelred's reign, initially hearing that Æthelred is *unraed*: "the king has evil advisors and evil men see the world crooked."⁴⁹ But then Godwin sees the king in person and is surprised:

Ethelred was tall and fair, with shots of grey in his moustache. But there was nothing infirm about his eyes or manner. His look was hard and vital. He had a quick mind. It was hard to dislike Ethelred. Godwin was struck by how handsome the king was. The history of England flowed through his veins; his face carried echoes of the kings before him.⁵⁰

Hill's description is more in line with John of Worcester's: Æthelred is attractive and firmly in control of his own faculties, seemingly well-liked by those who encounter him in person. Godwin notices that the king speaks in "simple, direct speech," and many of Æthelred's sentences are indeed short, excitable imperatives that end in exclamation points ("Come! Sit!").⁵¹

Æthelred's right-hand-man Eadric is not obviously evil, as William has him, but a cordial advisor, while Æthelred is conventionally pious and eager to converse with his visitors. He is, however, depicted as somewhat removed from the earthy, martial origins of his dynasty.⁵² He also displays the calculating ruthlessness apparent in the Chronicle, willing to purge his rivals in underhanded ways. In *Shieldwall*, Æthelred only comes close to fulfilling his stereotypical role as an incompetent ruler when he is near death, becoming bedridden and senile—a product of illness more than character. William's Æthelred, perhaps for the first time ever, is nowhere in sight.

Conclusions

William's impact on the Æthelred of popular culture resulted from a perfect storm. His work was widely circulated and cherished by later historians, especially because his approach appears almost modern, meaning he is viewed as an authority. His writing gave characterization to a king who previously lacked it and provided a morality lesson for monarchs, where pious kings flourish and wicked ones are punished, a view that made the complicated Danish Conquest easier to understand. Finally, his account of Æthelred's

⁴⁸ Justin Hill, *Shieldwall* (London: Little, Brown, 2011).

⁴⁹ Hill, *Shieldwall*, 35.

⁵⁰ Hill, *Shieldwall*, 72.

⁵¹ Hill, *Shieldwall*, 72.

⁵² Hill, *Shieldwall*, 70-5.

reign dominated mass media because it is vivid, yet open enough to be used from different angles: this “type” of ruler can be used sympathetically, for comic relief, or as a villain. A writer like Bracewell, who needed a compelling antagonist, will naturally be attracted to some elements of William’s *Æthelred*.

With that said, more unorthodox depictions, like *Ceremony*, show that William’s grasp on the king’s reputation is not absolute, something the *Æthelred* opera knows well enough that it can be played with. Finally, *Shieldwall* shows that William does not have to be used at all if his version of the reign does not fit the goals of the story. Other accounts of the reign can indeed be used to create a nuanced, vivid character—something that *Æthelred*, if he is existing somewhere beyond the bounds of time, as in Wilson’s opera, will be glad to know.