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Growing old among the Anglo-Saxons : the cultural conceptualisation of old age in Early Medieval England
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The merits of old age

The previous chapter has established, on the basis of the Old English lexicon, that the Anglo-Saxons had a variety of connotations with growing old. In brief, they were aware that there were two sides to old age: on the one hand, living a long life might gain the respect of others and increase your wisdom; on the other, age might lead to grief and could entail physical decrepitude. This chapter, on the merits of age, and the next, on its drawbacks, review how various Anglo-Saxon authors dealt with these two opposing sides to old age.

The manner in which writers represent old age is culturally defined: in gerontocratic communities, the elderly will usually be portrayed in a positive light, whereas societies that prefer the qualities of youth over age will generally devalue old age in their literature.[1] Texts have long since been studied as vehicles for the cultural construction of old age.[2] For instance, scholars of Modern English literature, such as Richard C. Fallis and Richard Freedman, have noted that old age is rarely depicted as something desirable, reflecting an overarching attitude of 'gerontophobia': the fear of old age.[3] These modern sentiments appear in stark contrast to what Burrow and Crawford proposed with respect to the literary evidence of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards senectitude. The former argued that the emphasis on the moral and spiritual superiority of the elderly was such that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other age categories. Burrow related this Anglo-Saxon predilection for agedness to the idea that "in a traditional society such as that of Anglo-Saxon England … men must have relied more than they do today upon the wisdom of experience".[4] Crawford followed Burrow's lead and also linked the apparent appreciation of the elderly in texts to their position in society:

> According to the majority of the Old English literary evidence, old people were idealised and venerated in Anglo-Saxon society. There is minimal indication within the literary accounts that old people were in any way maltreated, or pushed to the limits of the social framework. According to the literary evidence, the later Anglo-Saxon period was the golden age for the elderly.[5]

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[1] J. Hendricks and C. A. Leedham, 'Making Sense: Interpreting Historical and Cross-Cultural Literature on Aging', in *Perceptions of Aging*, ed. von Dorotka Bagnell and Soper, 6–9.

[2] E.g., Freeman, *Aging: Its History*; *De lastige ouderdom*, ed. Croon; *Perceptions of Aging*, ed. von Dorotka Bagnell and Soper.

[3] R. C. Fallis, '"Grow Old with Me": Images of Older People in British and American Literature', in *Perceptions of Aging*, ed. von Dorotka Bagnell and Soper, 37; R. Freedman, 'Sufficiently Decayed: Gerontophobia in English Literature', in *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology*, ed. S. F. Spicker, K. M. Woodward and D. D. van Tassel (Atlantic Highlands, 1978), 49–61.

[4] Burrow, 109.

[5] Crawford, 59.

In brief, both Burrow and Crawford have proposed an unambiguous appreciation for old age in Anglo-Saxon writings.

On closer inspection, however, their statements do not entirely hold up to scrutiny. For one, both Burrow and Crawford appear to have neglected the negative aspects of old age that will be the topic of the next chapter. In addition, even the analysis presented in this chapter, which takes into account only the potentially positive aspects of old age – respect, spiritual superiority and wisdom –, does not allow for an identification of the Anglo-Saxon period as a "golden age for the elderly". Although Anglo-Saxon writers often enumerated the positive qualities of old people, they did not do so without reservation: old age did not by definition result in respect, spiritual superiority and wisdom, nor was growing old always considered wholly desirable.

The literary evidence discussed in this chapter and the next consists primarily of pastoral texts and wisdom poetry. The first text type includes sermons and biblical commentary; these texts reveal how Anglo-Saxon scholars and priests discussed the theme of old age within the context of religious doctrine. While the ideas in these texts are mostly representative of the monastic milieu in which they were created, they also spread, in the forms of homilies and sermons, from the pulpit to the people. As such, these texts provide an insight into the kind of notions with regard to old age that circulated among the clerics and churchgoers of Anglo-Saxon England. Wisdom poetry is the second text type under consideration, poetry which aims "primarily neither at narrative nor at self-expression, but deal[s] instead with the central concerns of human life – what it is; how it varies; how a man may hope to succeed in it, and after it".[6] Morton W. Bloomfield has noted that the wisdom mediated by this type of poetry is not personal but representative of society as a whole:

> The speaker, or speakers in wisdom literature, is the poet speaking as prophet or teacher. He is mediating wisdom and is not speaking primarily of himself. His experiences are to be taken as representative experiences not personal experiences. … They [wisdom poems] are not self-expression but the communication of inherited wisdom to society at large.[7]

In another publication, Bloomfield claimed that wisdom literature constitutes "the world-view of most traditional societies and the source of its practical morality. It is

[6] Shippey, 1. The term covers a large variety of Old English texts, including instructional poems, such as *Precepts*, dialogues, such as *The Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn II*, moral reflective poems, such as *The Wanderer*, and collections of proverbial material, such as *Maxims II*. This list can further be extended by adding catalogue poems and parts of longer poems, such as Hrothgar's 'Sermon' in *Beowulf* and Cynewulf's epilogue to *Elene*. See also T. A. Shippey, '*The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* as Wisdom Poetry', in *Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. H. Aertsen and R. H. Bremmer Jr (Amsterdam, 1994), 145–58; E. Tuttle Hansen, *The Solomon Complex: Reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry* (Toronto, 1988), 5–11; C. Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense: Gnomic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford, 1993), 1–3.

[7] M. W. Bloomfield, 'Understanding Old English Poetry', *Annuale mediaevale* 9 (1968), 5–25, rpt. in *idem*, *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language and Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), 59–82, at 78–9.

the framework in which the world is viewed".[8] The contents of wisdom poetry, in this way, may reflect "the core-clichés" of the society in which it was produced; these clichés represent what Anglo-Saxons would take for granted and thus provides an insight into their views on the world around them.[9] As such, both text types considered in this chapter and the next can be used to reconstruct the way Anglo-Saxons tried to define the merits and drawbacks of age.

Before providing a detailed analysis of how the literary evidence reveals the Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards the potential advantages of age, this chapter will first consider the communal roles fulfilled by old people, since their place in society, as Burrow and Crawford have rightly argued, inevitably influenced the attitudes towards them.

Storehouses of knowledge: The communal role of the elderly

"When an old man dies, a library burns down", an African motto holds.[10] Anthropologists have discovered that old people function in various tribal societies as 'storehouses of knowledge' concerning matters of history, ritual and identity.[11] A similar role was played in early medieval societies by 'the wise man', who is "the vehicle of wisdom and preserves and disseminates it".[12] There is some evidence to suggest that, in Anglo-Saxon England, as in the tribal societies studied by anthropologists, this role was reserved for the elderly.

Indeed, older Anglo-Saxons were expected to teach and thus disseminate knowledge. Archbishop Wulfstan (d. 1023), for example, explicitly tasked the older members of communities to educate the young, in his canon law collection *Canons of Edgar* (1005–1008): "we lærað þæt ælc wurðige oðerne, and hyran þa gingran georne heora yldrum, and lufian and læran þa yldran georne heora gingran" [we instruct that each should honour the other, and that the younger should listen to their elders eagerly, and the elders should eagerly teach their youngers].[13] Similarly, Ælfric of Eynsham (c.950–c.1010) wrote in his *Grammar* that it befits the elderly to teach the young, as it is through learning that the faith is kept.[14] The Old English translation of *The Dicts of Cato* likewise encouraged old people to pass on their knowledge: "Ðonne þu eald sie & manegra ealdra cwydas & lara geaxod hæbbe, gedo hi ðonne ðam giongan to

[8] M. W. Bloomfield and C. W. Dunn, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies* (Cambridge, 1989), 106. For a similar approach to gnomic material in Old English poetry, see P. Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1999), 185.
[9] Bloomfield and Dunn, *Role of the Poet*, 24.
[10] Minois, *History of Old Age*, 9.
[11] J. Sokolovsky, 'Status of Older People: Tribal Societies', in *Encyclopedia of Aging*, ed. D. J. Ekerdt (New York, 2002), 1341–6.
[12] Bloomfield and Dunn, *Role of the Poet*, 110.
[13] Wulfstan, *Canons of Edgar*, ed. R. Fowler, EETS os 266 (London, 1972), 2. Wulfstan wrote similar admonitions in 'De regula canonicorum' and 'Her ongynð be cristendome', *Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Bethurum, hom. 10a, ll. 43–5, hom. 10c, ll. 176–8. Wulfstan's source is ch. 145 of Amalarius's *De regula canonicorum*. Wulfstan, *Canons*, ed. Fowler, 23, n. 2. A similar rule is found in ch. 80 of *The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. B. Langefeld (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), 327, ll. 29–31.
[14] *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar*, ed. J. Zupitza (Berlin, 1880), p. 2, ll. 24–5, p. 3, ll. 1–2.

witanne" [When you are old and have heard the sayings and learning of many elders, make them known to the young ones].[15]

This didactic role ascribed to the elderly by these monastic texts was also put into practice: various aged individuals appear in the historical record as teachers. A prime example is Alcuin of York (c.740–804), one of the leading scholars at the court of Charlemagne, who remained a teacher until the end of his life.[16] Despite suffering from the physical drawbacks of old age, a fact he often lamented in his correspondence,[17] Alcuin remained a motivated teacher. His unrelenting desire to teach is evinced by one of his letters to Charlemagne:

> I shall not be slow to sow the seeds of wisdom among your servants in these parts, as far as my poor talent allows. … In the morning, at the height of my powers, I sowed the seed in Britain, now in the evening, when my blood is growing cold, I still am sowing in France, hoping both will grow, by the grace of God.[18]

Alcuin regarded the situation of an elderly instructor in front of younger students as a natural one, since he described a school in his poem *De schola et scholasticis* [Concerning schools and scholars] as a place where "pueri discant senioris ab ore magistri" [boys learn from the mouth of an older teacher].[19] The Anglo-Saxon historical record also features other famous didacticians of a venerable age, such as Theodore of Tarsus (602–690), who was aged sixty-six when he established the famous school of Canterbury that he would lead for another twenty-two years.[20] According to Bede's account in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Theodore had been chosen as archbishop precisely because of his years of experience, being both "probus moribus et aetate uenerandus" [of upright character and of venerable age].[21] Bede himself, who died in his sixties, remained engrossed in teaching even on his deathbed, as recorded by his student Cuthbert:

> … his breathing became very much worse, and a slight swelling had appeared in his feet; but all the same he taught us the whole of that day, and dictated cheerfully, and among other things said several times: 'Learn your

[15] R. S. Cox, 'The Old English Dicts of Cato', *Anglia* 90 (1972), 6, no. 9.
[16] D. Dales, *Alcuin: His Life and Legacy* (Cambridge, 2012), 127–38.
[17] Alcuin frequently complained of his old age in his letters, see *Alcuin of York: His Life and Letters*, trans. S. Allott (York, 1974), lets. 6, 8, 67, 68, 69, 91, 104, 116, 133.
[18] *Ibid.*, let. 8.
[19] Alcuin, *De schola et scholasticis*, PL 101, col. 744.
[20] M. Lapidge, 'The Career of Archbishop Theodore', in *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence*, ed. M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1995), 26–9.
[21] According to Bede, *HE*, IV.1, the bishopric had first been offered to Hadrian of Canterbury (d. 710), who refused and "ostendere posse se dixit alium, cuius magis ad suscipiendum episcopatum et erudition conueniret et aetas" [said that he could point to another much better fitted both by age and learning to undertake the office of bishop].

> lesson quickly now; for I know not how long I may be with you, nor whether after a short time my Maker may not take me from you.'[22]

Even if there would have been younger tutors as well, the presence and fame of these vigorous elderly scholars may have lent credence to the stereotypical figure of the wise old man that can be traced in Anglo-Saxon wisdom poetry (to be considered below, pp. 87ff).

Next to their role as teachers, in historiographical and hagiographical works old people were also invoked as reliable witnesses. In his preface to his *Historia ecclesiastica*, for instance, Bede explicitly stated that his sources included the testimony of elderly men.[23] Throughout his historical narrative, he assigned particularly wonderful stories to the reports of old and venerable witnesses, such as the "ueracissimus et uenerandae canitiei presbyter" [a priest most truthful and of venerable age] who had heard from Ecgberht's own lips how that saint had been miraculously cured from pestilence through prayer.[24] Similarly, Ælfric's story of the death of King Edmund of East Anglia (d. 869) in the *Passion of St. Edmund* ultimately relied on the testimony of an elderly eye-witness, mediated by another aged individual and a third source, Abbo of Fleury (c.945–1004). The latter had heard the story from Dunstan (909–988) three years before Dunstan's death; Dunstan, in turn, had overheard the tale during a conversation between King Æthelstan (r. 924–939) and an elderly eye-witness, Edmund's own sword-bearer, "þa þa Dunstan iung man wæs, and se swurdbora wæs forealdod man" [when Dunstan was a young man and the sword-bearer was a very old man].[25] The complex origin of Ælfric's account of Edmund's death shows how the report of an event that took place in 869 was preserved over a period of over a hundred years by two elderly men: King Æthelstan's informant at least fifty-five years after the event and Dunstan aged over seventy, who told it to Abbo. As Semper has rightly noted, the old age of these witnesses seems to operate as "an index to their trustworthiness".[26]

In a similar vein, old people could be called upon to give testimony in court cases, exactly because of their senectitude and the fact that they remembered things long past. An exemplary case took place in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest: the Trial of Penenden Heath, a dispute over the restoration of pre-Conquest rights of the Church of Canterbury. King William I (d. 1087), according to one record of the case,

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[22] *Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, trans. B. Colgrave, in *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, The Greater Chronicle, Bede's Letter to Egbert*, ed. J. McClure and R. Collins (Oxford, 1994), 301.

[23] Bede, *HE*, preface, "seniorum traditione" [report of elderly men], translated in the Old English version as "ealdra manna gesægenum", *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. T. A. Miller, EETS os 95, 96, 110 and 111 (London, 1890–8), 2, l. 22.

[24] Bede, *HE*, III.27. Other stories for which Bede used the testimony of senior brothers of his monastery include *ibid.*, III.19 and IV.7.

[25] *ÆLS*, no. 32, ll. 3–7.

[26] Semper, 304. The use of elderly witnesses is by no means unique to the Anglo-Saxons: Gregory the Great similarly credits some of his stories in the *Dialogi* to the testimony of old men. For example, Gregory's remarkable story about Bonifacius, bishop of Ferenti, saving a vegetable garden by praying for all the caterpillars to leave, is ascribed to the testimony of "senex quidam clericus" [a certain old cleric]. Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. de Vogüé, I.ix.15. For more elderly witnesses, see *ibid.*, I.vii.1, I.ix.16, I.x.16–17, III.xii.2, III.xxi.1, III.xxxii.3.

proceeded to gather nobles and elders from all across the land, in order to "diligenter ab antiquis Anglorum juris perquisita veritas" [ascertain carefully from old Englishmen the truth of the law].[27] To this end, William also arranged for the elderly bishop of Chichester to be brought to Penenden Heath: "Egelricus episcopus Cicestrensis, vir antiquissimus legum ac consuetudinum Anglorum eruditus qui regis jussione in quadriga illuc advectus est" [Bishop Aethelric of Chichester (d. 1076), a very old man and learned in the laws and customs of the English who had been fetched there at the king's command in a chariot].[28] Another venerable old cleric to be called to the stand in the 1070s was Abbot Ælfwine of Ramsey (d. 1079/1080). In a dispute between Bishop Herfast of Thetford (d. 1085) and the abbot of Bury St. Edmunds over the latter's claim of exemption from episcopal jurisdiction, Ælfwine "tunc pleno dierum, ac sene" [then in the fullness of his days and an old man] provided testimony that went back to the time of King Cnut (d. 1035), over thirty-five years prior.[29] Thus, being called upon to provide their accounts of events and regulations in the past, these elderly witnesses instantiated the role of 'storehouses of knowledge' as identified by anthropologists.

Aside from authoritative teachers and reliable witnesses, the elderly are also associated with the role of councillor to the king, as part of his *witan*. Kazutomo Karasawa, for example, has noted that the *witan* often consisted "of old men with accumulated experience".[30] The basis for this observation is the use of the term "ieldstan witun" [oldest councillors] in the preface to the laws of King Ine of Wessex (r. 688–726) and the portrayal of Hrothgar's councillors in *Beowulf* as elderly men.[31] Although the term "ieldstan" in law codes can also be interpreted as 'chief, most important', the councillors of Hrothgar are undeniably old, described as they are as "blondenfeaxe, gomele ymb godne" [Grey-haired, the old ones around the good one (Hrothgar)] (ll. 1594b–5a) and, in the case of Hrothgar's favourite advisor Æscere, as "frodan fyrnwitan" [old and wise councillor] (l. 2123a). Furthermore, Karasawa points out that most of the royal advisers in a stereotypical depiction of a king surrounded by his council in the Old English Hexateuch can be identified as elderly on account of their white beards (see fig. 3.1).[32] Karasawa's evidence can be supplemented by the real-life examples of elderly councillors, such as the above-mentioned Dunstan, Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester (904/909–984), and the noble councillor Oslac (fl. 963–975), who is described in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as "gamolfeax hæleð / wis 7 wordsnotor" [a grey-haired warrior, wise and loquacious].[33]

The examples listed above show how elderly men could function in Anglo-Saxon society as 'vehicles of wisdom' or 'storehouses of knowledge' as teachers,

[27] *English Lawsuits from William I to Richard I. Volume I: William I to Stephen*, ed. and trans. R. C. van Caenegem (London, 1990), 14. The text is that of a late copy of a late eleventh- or early twelfth-century report.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] *Ibid.*, 27–8.
[30] K. Karasawa, 'Wise Old *Ceorl(as)* in *Beowulf* and Its Original Meaning', *English Studies* (forthc.).
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] London, British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv (s. xi$^{2/4}$, Canterbury, St. Augustine's; the 'Old English Hexateuch'); Kerr, *Catalogue*, no. 142; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 315.
[33] *The Death of Edgar*, ed. E. v. K. Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ASPR 6 (New York, 1942), ll. 26b–7a.

witnesses and councillors.[34] Given the presence of venerable and sagacious individuals such as these, it is of little wonder that Anglo-Saxon writers on the whole wrote respectfully of elderly individuals and praised the old for their spiritual superiority and wisdom, even if they did not do so without at least some restraint.

Fig. 3.1 Depiction of Gen. 40:20–2 (the Pharaoh hanging the chief baker) in the Old English Hexateuch, 59r, often regarded as reflecting a typical Anglo-Saxon king and his *witan*.[35]

"Honour the old man and fear your God": Respect and care for the elderly

Thane has noted that, according to popular belief, the 'past' was a time of great respect for the elderly. Because old people would be relatively scarce, they would be "culturally more valued and respected" than their present-day counterparts. This exceptional measure of respect towards the elderly would also have led to families taking good care of their aged relatives. Thane has rightly argued against this legendary time when elderly people were still unequivocally respected, claiming that "it is difficult to find in historical or anthropological studies of any place or time unambiguous respect for old age as such".[36] The literary evidence from Anglo-Saxon England supports Thane's claim: although various texts propagated the respect and care due to older individuals, old age did not automatically imply respect, nor were all old people cared for in the same measure.

"Arwurðe ealdne man 7 ondræd þe ðinne God" (Honour the old man and fear your God), the Old English version of the Heptateuch translates Lev. 19:32.[37] In a similar vein, several Old English texts demanded respect for the elderly. One of those texts was the translation of the *Theodulfi Capitula*, an instructional work for parish priests compiled by Theodulf, bishop of Orléans (c.760–821) which dictated that a good Christian should not only stay clear of pride and strife, but should also respect

[34] Notably, as will be discussed in chapter 8 below, the roles of teacher, authoritative witness and councillor were not reserved for elderly males; old women were no different in this respect.
[35] Karasawa, 'Wise Old *Ceorl(as)*'.
[36] Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 7.
[37] *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, ed. S. J. Crawford, EETS os 160 (London, 1922), 297.

old men.[38] Similarly, monastic rules advocated a respectful demeanor towards the elderly. The terms of address prescribed by the Old English translation of the Rule of St. Benedict are certainly indicative of courteous conduct towards the aged: the young had to call their elders “arwesa” [respected], while the old, in turn, were to call their juniors “leof” [dear].[39] In like manner, the Rule of Chrodegang evinces that priority seats for the elderly have a history that stretches back to the early Middle Ages, when young monks were expected to rise and offer their aged brothers their seat:

> And swa hwær swa ænig preost oðerne gemete, abuge se gingra, and bidde þæs yldran bletsunge. And gif se gingra sitte, and se yldra þær forðgange, arise se gingra, and beode þam yldran þæt setl, and ne geþristlæce he mid him to sittene, buton hine hate se yldra.[40]
>
> [And wherever a priest may meet another, the younger one shall bow and ask the older one for his blessing. And if the younger one is sitting and the older one passes by, the younger one shall get up and offer the old one his seat, and he shall not dare to sit beside him unless the older one orders him to do so.]

Thus, generally speaking, the old could expect a respectful treatment in Anglo-Saxon monasteries.

Not only were the elderly to be respected, they also needed to be taken care of in their old age. To this effect, Anglo-Saxon homilists appealed to the biblical commandment to honour one’s parents.[41] Another biblical text that was used to propagate the care for elderly parents was Tob. 10:4. Here, the parents of Tobias express their regret over sending away their child, since he was supposed to be “lumen oculorum nostrorum baculum senectutis nostrae solacium vitae nostrae spem posteritatis nostrae” [the light of our eyes, the staff of our old age, the comfort of our life, the hope of our posterity]. Alcuin used the phrase “baculus senectutis” [the staff of old age] in a letter to the young prince Ecgfrith of Mercia (d. 796), explicitly admonishing the latter to take care of his elderly parents.[42] The author of the *vita* of St. Cuthman also used phrases from Tob. 10:4 in his description of how this eighth-century Anglo-Saxon saint took care of his aged mother. According to the hagiographer, Cuthman became “baculus senectutis” [the staff of her old age] and “lumen oculorum” [the light of her eyes].[43]

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[38] *Theodulfi Capitula in England. Die altenglischen Übersetzungen, zusammen mit dem lateinischen Text*, ed. H. Sauer (Munich, 1978), 331, ll. 91–5.

[39] *Die angelsächsischen Prosabearbeitungen der Benediktinerregel*, ed. A. Schröer (Kassel, 1885), 115, ll. 15–9.

[40] *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 175, ll. 13–6; cf. *Prosabearbeitungen der Benediktinerregel*, ed. Schröer, 117, ll. 1–13.

[41] Exod. 20:12, Deut. 5:16 and Eph. 6:1–3; e.g., *ÆCHom II*, hom. 19, ll. 189–90, hom. 25, l. 89; *Eleven Old English Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. J. Bazire and J. E. Cross (Toronto, 1982), hom. 7, l. 176; cf. Shahar, *Growing Old*, 88–97.

[42] Alcuin, *Epistolae*, PL 100, col. 215a.

[43] *Vita s. Cuthmanni*, ed. Blair, ‘Saint Cuthman’, ch. 3–5. The source of the text is the *Acta Sanctorum* but the work has been related to the mid-eleventh-century revival of Anglo-Latin hagiography.

Care for the elderly was not only the responsibility of the next of kin, however, since monastic rules also advocated the care of the old and sick as one of the prime duties of monasteries.[44] Indeed, even when physically disabled, a monk could reach an advanced age, as the striking example of Eilmer (b. c.985–d. after 1066), monk at Glastonbury, demonstrates. In his youth, Eilmer had been inspired by the tale of Daedalus to fashion himself a pair of wings; he jumped from a tower and broke both his legs, causing him to be lame for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, he grew old enough to remember seeing Halley's comet in 989 when, over 76 years later, the comet flew by again in the spring of 1066.[45] By and large, then, needy elderly could find care among their kinsfolk or at religious institutions.

However, the obligation of care did not extend to all elderly in equal measure, nor did old age per se guarantee a position of respect. The Rule of Chrodegang, for instance, made a notable distinction between ordinary elderly and those elderly who, despite their old age, were able to do some good for their brothers and the monastery:

> And hæbbe gymene seocra manna and mid ylde gehefogodra and þara <mæst> þe geornlice ymbe mynstres neode wæron þa hwile þe hi for ylde oððe for unhæle mihton.[46]
>
> [And care should be taken of all sick people and of those afflicted by old age, and especially those who diligently worked for the common good of their minster whilst they were able to do so in their old age and sickness.]

In the eyes of this rule, not all elderly were equal and the provisions for them depended, in part, on their actions rather than their old age alone. Likewise, respect did not depend solely on age. In fact, monastic rules repeatedly emphasised that the elderly were not per se superior to the young, referencing the biblical stories of Samuel and Daniel: "forði Samuel and Daniel cildgeonge forealdædum mæssepreostum demdon" [because the infants Samuel and Daniel measured the aged mass priests].[47] As a consequence, the old and young were to be treated on equal terms and the elderly were to be given no privileges. This principle of equality suggests that old age alone was no guarantee for respect. Instead, the degree to which an old person was respected or cared for depended on circumstances other than age, such as reputation, character and ability. Even for the Anglo-Saxon elderly, respect was something to be earned rather than to be expected.

[44] E.g., *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 179, ll. 26–8.
[45] William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 1998–9), ch. 225.
[46] *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 179, ll. 26–8.
[47] *Prosabearbeitungen der Benediktinerregel*, ed. Schröer, p. 12, ll. 7–10, p. 13, ll. 3–7, p. 114, ll. 5–16, p. 115, ll. 5–19. On Samuel and Daniel, see Burrow, 96.

“Venerable old age is not that of long time”: The spiritual superiority of the elderly

According to Burrow, the Anglo-Saxons particularly associated old people with spiritual superiority. At the basis of Burrow’s claim lies the *puer senex* motif: “a medieval literary motif which telescoped old age and childhood in a single figure”.[48] Various Anglo-Saxon authors ascribed to children the qualities of old age, such as wisdom, a desire for religious instruction and abstaining from childish pastimes. Burrow argued that the transcendence of these saints from one age category to the other implied a “consistent bias” towards the age categories involved. In his analysis, Anglo-Saxon authors show a clear preference for transcendence in the upward-sort (i.e. the youth with qualities associated with old age), which would indicate that old age was regarded as the ‘transcendence ideal’ and, consequently, the most highly regarded age of man.[49] While Burrow’s analysis of Anglo-Saxon saints’ lives in this respect is not wholly accurate,[50] his main conclusion that old age was associated with those spiritual qualities that were typically lacking in youth holds some truth. Nevertheless, Anglo-Saxon writers did not attribute spiritual superiority to all old people alike.

In fact, at least one reference to a *puer senex* posits the virtuous qualities of a young saint against aged men who, apparently, lacked the virtues appropriate to their tally of years. When the young St. Oswald was ordained a deacon at Winchester, according to Eadmer of Canterbury, he was selected to be an example for the elderly canons, who were stuck in their wicked ways:

> … decanus factus, adolescens praeponitur senibus, quatinus canities sensus illius et immaculata uita illius maculatam senum uitam emacularet, ac pueriles sensus illorum studio disciplinae caelestis euacuaret. Sed illi, magis antiqua prauae senectutis itinera tenere uolentes.
>
> [… and he was made deacon, and though an adolescent, he was placed in charge of men older than himself so that his maturity and his pure life might purify the impure lives of the old men, and he might rid those men of immature thoughts with the study of heavenly teachings. But those men preferred to stick to the well-trodden paths of their corrupt old age.][51]

Oswald’s “canities sensus” and “immaculate uita” recall the definition of venerable old age in Wisd. 4:8–9 (“senectus enim venerabilis est non diuturna neque numero annorum conputata cani sunt autem sensus hominibus et aetas senectutis vita inmaculata” [For venerable old age is not that of long time, nor counted by the number of years: but the understanding of a man is grey hairs and a spotless life is old age]).[52]

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[48] T. C. Carp, ‘*Puer senex* in Roman and Medieval Thought’, *Latomus* 39 (1980), 736–9.
[49] Burrow, 105–7.
[50] See the full discussion of the *puer senex* motif in chapter 5 below.
[51] Eadmer of Canterbury, *Vita s. Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. A. J. Turner and B. J. Muir, *Eadmer of Canterbury: Lives and Miracles of Saints Oda, Dunstan, and Oswald* (Oxford, 2006), ch. 5.
[52] Also noted by Burrow, 101.

Put differently, the qualities normally associated with age were not restricted to individuals who had lived a long time; *vice versa*, not all aged individuals were by definition devout people, as illustrated by the aged canons of Winchester.

The observation that not all old people were pious is found in various pastoral texts. One such explicit distinction between those who lived piously in old age and those who did not was made by Bede, in his commentary on the phrase *bona senectute* 'in good old age' in Tob. 14:15:

> For he [God] finds such as these in good old age when he rejoices that by his grace they have devoted themselves to good works for so long. By contrast, he sees in a bad old age, and so will pass by, those who though living longer are still childish in their judgement, not to be venerated for the lustre of their good deeds like one is for gray hair, but are doubled up under the weight of their vices. Of such as these Isaiah says "A boy shall die after a hundred years, a sinner of a hundred years shall be cursed" [Isa. 65:20]. Those who have lived childishly for many years and have never sought to put off a spirit of levity will justly be subject to condemnation for their sins.[53]

Bede here referred to the *puer centum annorum* 'child of a hundred years': a figure derived from Isa. 65:20 and the antithesis of the *puer senex*, telescoping the negative qualities of youth into an old man. Ælfric, too, appealed to the *puer centum annorum* in his Homily 'De doctrina apostolica', noting that old men should not persist in youthful foolishness:

> Eft cwæð sum witega, *Puer centum annorum maledictus erit* : Hundteontigwintre cild byð awyrged. Ðæt is on andgite, Se mann ðe hæfð ylde on gearum, and hæfð cildes þeawas on dysige, þæt se byð awyrged. Ælc treow blewð ær þan þe hit wæstmas bere, and ælc corn bið ærest gærs. Swa eac ælc godes cinnes mann sceal hine sylfne to godnysse awendan, and wisdom lufian, and forlætan idelnysse.[54]
>
> [Again, a certain prophet said: *Puer centum annorum maledictus erit*: a hundred-year-old child is cursed. That is in the sense: the man who has old age in years, and has the customs of a child in foolishness, let him be cursed. Every tree blooms before it bears fruit, and every grain is first grass. Likewise every man of good pedigree must turn himself to goodness and love wisdom and forsake frivolity.]

Ælfric's admonition to show behaviour appropriate to one's age reflects his awareness, along with Bede, that whereas some children rise above the rest of their generation through the display of behaviour generally associated with older individuals, some old men persevere in the follies of youth. In other words, virtuous behaviour was expected of old men, but this was by no means a foregone state of affairs.

[53] *Bede: A Biblical Miscellany*, trans. W. Trent Foley and A.G. Holder (Liverpool, 1999), 78.
[54] *Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. Pope, hom. 19, ll. 19–25.

In fact, some homilists worried about elderly individuals who rejected religious life altogether. Such a *senex sine religione* ‘old man without religion’ was one of the twelve abuses listed in the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin text *De duodecim abusiuis* [On the twelve abuses], along with, among others, the young man without obedience, the lord without strength and the wise man without good works.[55] This text was vastly popular and influential in medieval England and its ideas concerning the old man without religion were picked up by Ælfric and at least one other Anglo-Saxon homilist.[56] The former produced a vernacular version of the text and, for the *senex sine religione*, he followed his Latin source closely, though excluding the original’s list of physical symptoms of age:[57]

> Se ealda mann þe byð butan eawfæstnysse byð þam treowe gelic, þe leaf byrð and blostman, and nænne wæstm ne byrð, and byð unwurð his hlaforde. Hwæt byð æfre swa stuntlic swa þæt se ealda nelle his mod to Gode awendan mid goodum ingehyde, þonne his lima him cyðað þæt he ne byð cucu lange? Iungum mannum mæg twynian hwæðer hi moton lybban and se ealda mæg witan gewis him þone deað. Ðam ealdan is to warnigenne wið þa yfelan geþohtas, for þan ðe seo heorte ne ealdað, ne eac seo tunge, ac þas twegen dælas deriað oft þam ealdum. Wite forþi se ealda hwæt his ylde gedafenige and þa þing forseo þe his sawle deriað.[58]
>
> [The old man who is without religion is like the tree which bears leaves and blossoms and does not bear any fruit and is worthless to its lord. What is ever so foolish as that the old man should not wish to turn his spirit to God with a good intention, when his limbs show him that he will not be alive for long? It can be a matter of uncertainty for young people whether they may live but the old man can know that death is certain for him. The old man must guard against evil thoughts, because the heart does not grow old or the tongue either, but these two parts often harm the old. Let the old man know therefore what may be appropriate for his old age and let him abandon those things which harm his soul.]

In brief, an old man’s irreligious behaviour is all the worse, since he should be aware that death is inevitable. On the verge of the afterlife, an old man would be foolish not to devote himself to good works. The warning against “se ealda mann … butan eawfæstnysse” was issued by Ælfric in two further homiletic tracts.[59] As part of a list of abuses, without further explanation, it was also used by the eleventh-century

[55] *Two Ælfric Texts: The Twelve Abuses and The Vices and Virtues*, ed. and trans. M. Clayton (Cambridge, 2013), 34–48.

[56] For the popularity of *De duodecim abusiuis* in England, see *Two Ælfric Texts*, ed. and trans. Clayton, 52–6.

[57] On the relation between Ælfric and Latin source, *ibid.*, 58. For the list of physical symptoms, which may have inspired other Anglo-Saxon authors, see Chapter Four.

[58] *Ibid.*, 114–5, ll. 23–31.

[59] *Ibid.*, 156, ll. 113–21; *ÆLS*, no. 13, ll. 116–20.

composer of a Rogationtide homily.[60] The appearance of the *senex sine religione* in these Anglo-Saxon sermons and tracts clearly contradicts Burrow's claim that Anglo-Saxon homilists unequivocally regarded the elderly as spiritually superior. Instead, Ælfric appears to have been worried that some old men, even on the brink of death, had not yet fully committed themselves to the Christian faith.

More specifically, Ælfric expressed his concern over the unrelenting sexual appetite of both elderly women and men, both in his letter to Sigefyrth and his homily for the second Sunday before Lent:

> Hit byð swyþe sceandlic, þæt eald wif sceole
> ceorles brucan, þonne heo forwerod byð
> and teames ætealdod, ungehealtsumlice,
> forðan ðe gesceafta ne beoð for nanum oðran þinge astealde
> butan for bearnteame anum, swa swa us secgað halige bec.[61]
>
> [It is very shameful that an old woman should have sex with a man, when she is worn out with age and too old for childbearing, unchastely, because sexual relations are not meant for any other thing but procreation only, just as holy books tell us.]
>
> Hit is swiðe ungedafenlic and scandlic þæt forwerode men and untymende gifta wilnian, ðonne gifta ne sind gesette for nanum ðinge buton for bearnteame.[62]
>
> [It is very improper and shameful that old and unfruitful men should desire marriage, since marriage is not meant for anything but procreation.]

As Semper has correctly noted: "[e]vidently advanced age does not necessarily result in godly living, since such exhortations to change remain necessary".[63]

The concerns over impious elderly prompted some homilists to extend invitations to old people to convert and repent; others, by contrast, viewed such late

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[60] *Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. Bazire and Cross, hom. 7, ll. 171–3. This homily is a compilation of various homiletic texts by Ælfric

[61] Assmann, hom. 2, ll. 157–61.

[62] *ÆCHom II*, hom. 6, ll. 128–31. The exact source for these remarks about abstinence after child-bearing age has not been identified, although Ælfric himself cites Augustine as his source. Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 392. Possibly, Ælfric based his ideas on Augustine's *De civitate Dei* XVI.28, where Augustine notes that an old man and an old woman are unable to bring forth children together, but that this would be possible if either partner was young, see Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge, 1998), XVI.28. This passage of Augustine was well-known in Anglo-Saxon England. Bede, *On Genesis*, trans. C. B. Kendall (Liverpool, 2008), 294–5, cited it in his commentary on Gen. 18:11, discussing the birth of Isaac, son of the elderly Abraham and Sarah; the same passage is also found in a miscellany from St. Gall, dated to c.800, which was probably copied from an Anglo-Saxon exemplar. For the latter, see R. H. Bremmer Jr, 'Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Vossianus Latinus Q. 69 (Part 2): Schoolbook or Proto-Encyclopaedic Miscellany?', in *Practice in Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. R. H. Bremmer Jr and K. Dekker (Paris, 2010), 47.

[63] Semper, 301.

acts of reconciliation with some apprehension. The first approach to elderly converts is exemplified by the homilies of Bede and Ælfric on Christ's Parable of the Three Vigils (Luke 12:36–8). The gist of these homilies is that it is never too late to turn to Christ, even for those who have already reached old age.[64] In like manner, Wulfstan reassured his audience that "[n]e sceamige ænegum cristenum men for his ylde" [no Christian man should be ashamed of his old age] and that, although it was preferable to be baptised as a child, old men could and should still be baptised.[65] By contrast, the anonymous author of a Rogationtide homily warned against those who delayed their religious responsibilities until old age. One should not be so bold, this homilist said, following the *Liber exhortationis* of Paulinus of Aquileia (d. 802/804),[66] as to persist in the lusts and sins of youth and only plan to do truthful repentance once old age is reached: "Hwæt mæg beon mare dysignes þonne æni mann þis on his mode geþence?" [What can be a bigger folly than any man who thinks this in his heart?].[67] More damning still was the author of *Instructions for Christians*, a collection of versified instructional sayings. He held that those who turned to God in old age could never truly be good Christians:

> Næfre ic ne gehyrde þæt wurde laford god
> eft on ylde, se ðe ær ne was
> Gode oððe monnum on iugoð þeowa,
> ne huru on ylde æfre gewurðan
> wel geþeignod, þonne wolde ær
> on his tale mette tale wel þeignan.[68]
>
> [I have never heard that he who had not been a servant to God or men in youth became a good lord afterwards in old age, nor indeed shall he ever become well served in old age lest he wished before to serve very well according to his measure.]

In other words, according to some, redemption was beyond reach for those who only desired it in old age.

To sum up, while good, pious behaviour was certainly expected of the elderly, especially given their proximity to death, there is no reason to assume, as Burrow argued, that the elderly were always held up as religious role models. While Anglo-Saxon homilists certainly praised the spiritually superior elderly and the *puer senex*, they also voiced their concerns over their antitheses: the *senex sine religione* and the *puer centum annorum*. In the end, what mattered was not the age of a man, but his religious devotion, as St. Brendan reassured the young St. Machutus after the latter had expressed doubts as to whether he was worthy of the position of priest, given his youth: "Nelle þu þe tweogean forþon þe seo geonglicu eld nænigum ne deraþ gif he

[64] For a discussion of these homilies, see chapter 1 above, pp. 28ff.
[65] *Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Bethurum, hom. 8c, ll. 144–6.
[66] *Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. Bazire and Cross, 125.
[67] *Ibid.*, hom. 10, ll. 27–35.
[68] J. L. Rosier, '*Instructions for Christians*: A Poem in Old English', *Anglia* 82 (1964), 15, ll. 235–40; for the translation, see *ibid.*, 21.

fulfremed biþ on his mode. Ne seo ealdlicu eld nænigum ne frameþ gif he biþ on his mode gewemmed" ['Do not doubt since a young age harms no one if he is virtuous in his heart. Nor does old age benefit anyone if he is corrupt in his heart'].[69]

"Often there is cunning in a sooty bag": The wise old man in Old English wisdom poetry

Like respect and spiritual superiority, wisdom was by no means the sole prerogative of the elderly. Nevertheless, the connection between senectitude and wisdom was such that those who showed sagacity before their years would be called 'old in wisdom'. For example, an Old English note on various Old Testament figures described Sem, the third son of Noah, as "heora geongost… þeh hwæðere on wisdome yldost" [he was their youngest though the oldest in wisdom].[70] The idea that people could be 'old in wisdom' without being old in years also underlies Ælfric's explanation of the word *eald-wita* 'priest, lit. old-knower' in his letter to Wulfsige: "Presbiter is mæssepreost oððe ealdwita. Na þæt ælc eald sy, ac þæt he eald sy on wisdome" [A presbyter is the priest or the *ealdwita*. Not that each of them is old, but he is 'old' in wisdom].[71] In a similar passage in a letter to Wulfstan, Ælfric claimed that the priests were called *eald-wita* because of "þam wurðscype" [the worthiness, dignity] and "þæm wisdome" [the wisdom] which came to their position, regardless of their actual age in years.[72] Beowulf, too, is a young man who displays intelligence in spite of his young years, as noted by Hrothgar:

> 'ne hyrde ic snotorlicor
> on swa geongum feore guman þingian.
> Þu eart mægenes strang ond on mode frod
> wís wordcwida.' (ll. 1842b–5a)
>
> ['I have not heard a man so young in life speak more wisely. You are strong in might and old and wise in mind, wise in speeches.']

In other words, Beowulf, like a true *puer senex*, shows wisdom beyond his years, proving that young men may be wise and old in their minds.[73] In the end, the idea of being 'old in wisdom' suggests that, while the elderly may not have had a monopoly

[69] *The Old English Life of Machutus*, ed. D. Yerkes (Toronto, 1984), 13, ll. 8–12.
[70] Found in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A. iii (s. xi med., Canterbury Christ Church); Ker, no. 186; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 363. A. S. Napier, 'Altenglische Kleinigkeiten', *Anglia* 11 (1889), 2–3, ll. 53–5.
[71] *Die Hirtenbriefe Ælfrics in altenglischer und lateinischer Fassung*, ed. B. Fehr (Hamburg, 1914), 11, ll. 40–41.
[72] *Ibid.*, 108–11, ll. 109–10. Ælfric follows Isidore's definition of Greek πρεσβύτερος 'elder, priest' in the latter's *Etymologiae*, VI.xii.20: "*Presbyter* grecum nomen est, quod latine senior dicitur, non pro aetate [...] sed propter honorem et dignitatem ut sit senex in moribus et sapientia" [Priest, *presbyte*r in Greek, is translated *senior*, elder, in Latin. They are called presbyters not from years or decrepit old age, but because of the honor and rank they received]. Latin quotation provided by *DOE*, s.v. *eald-wita*; trans. Throop.
[73] Cf. Burrow, 131–2.

when it came to sagacity, old age and wisdom were certainly connected in the mind of the Anglo-Saxon.

It is of little surprise, then, to find that old men played an important role in Old English wisdom poetry. In fact, one of the recurring clichés in this type of poetry, identified by T. A. Shippey, is the "image of the Ancient Sage, the fiction of an old, wise man talking".[74] That is to say, old men appear in Old English wisdom poems as disseminators of knowledge, as both narrators and teachers, reflecting, perhaps, the social role of old people as 'storehouses of knowledge', as established above (pp. 75ff).

Various wisdom poems, such as *Vainglory*, *The Riming Poem*, *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, are narrated from the point of view of an elderly narrator.[75] Each of these poems has traditionally been regarded as an 'elegy', a song of lament, but since they all share characteristics with other wisdom poems, such as the lack of narrative and the use of gnomic generalisations, it has become common practice to treat them as part of that broader group of 'wisdom poetry'.[76] In all four poems, knowledge is imparted to the audience by means of a monologue by an elderly speaker. This speaker is typically elevated to a position of authority through references to his lived experience. In *Vainglory*, to begin with, the poet invokes a "frod wita on fyrn-dagum" [old and wise sage in days gone by].[77] This old and wise man then starts a religious meditation on the difference between the children of God and the children of the devil in poetic form.[78] *The Riming Poem*, too, is a dramatic, reflective monologue by an elderly speaker.[79] Having lived for a long time – "lif wæs min longe leodum in gemonge" [my life was long in the company of people] – the now aged narrator looks back at the successes and delights of his youth, meditating on the transience of life.[80] Two further reflections on the temporal nature of earthly happiness, *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, also feature wise and experienced speakers, advanced in age.[81] The speaker in *The Wanderer*, in particular, is explicitly described as "frod in ferðe" [old and wise in mind] (l. 90a) and he himself notes how "ne mæg weorþan wis wer, ær he age / wintra dæl in woruldrice" [a man cannot become wise before he has had a share

[74] Shippey, '*The Wanderer*', 145.

[75] All are found in Exeter, Cathedral Library, 3501 (s. x^2; the 'Exeter Book'). Ker, no. 116; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 257.

[76] Shippey, '*The Wanderer*', 145–58.

[77] *Vainglory*, ed. Shippey, l. 1.

[78] The meditation is based on 1 John 3; J. McKinnell, 'A Farewell to Old English Elegy: The Case of *Vainglory*', *Parergon* 9 (1991), 67. McKinnell identifies the old speaker as Bede, on the basis of the poet's use of Bede's *In Epistolas Septem Catholicas*. However, following conventions of similar poems in the Old English corpus, the poet does not name his speaker but, rather, presents him as nameless sage, old and wise.

[79] R. P. M. Lehmann, 'The Old English *Riming Poem*: Interpretation, Text and Translation', *JEGP* 69 (1970), 439.

[80] *The Riming Poem*, ed. Klinck, l. 41.

[81] The narrator in *The Seafarer* is not explicitly called 'old', but does seem acutely aware of the emotional and social drawbacks of old age: *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 91-3. Another indication that both poems feature an elderly speaker is the recurrent imagery of winter in these poems: *The Wanderer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 47, 77, 102–5; *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 8–9, 17, 31–3. Winter is traditionally linked to old age and the imagery, therefore, may symbolise the narrator's advanced age, cf. Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Jones, trans. Wallis, ch. 35; Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Baker and Lapidge, I.1, ll. 117–23.

of winters in the worldly kingdom] (ll. 64–5a). Thus, each of the speakers in these sapiental poems possesses the wisdom of experience, allowing them to convey their messages with authority. Although Corey J. Zwikstra has noted that the '*frod* wisdom' shared by each of these speakers is presented as unambiguously positive,[82] it is worth noting that in *The Riming Poem*, *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, at least, the speakers appear to have gained their wisdom through adversity – a notion I will return to in chapter 4.

Furthermore, elderly men are cast in the role of teacher in two Old English instructional poems identified by Elaine Tuttle Hansen.[83] In both poems, the wise old man is posited against a young figure lacking in experience.[84] The first of these poems is the long speech by Hrothgar addressing the young Beowulf in *Beowulf*, ll. 1700–84, a section commonly known as Hrothgar's 'sermon'. Tuttle Hansen interprets this passage as a "'set piece' of wisdom literature", which depends on the characteristics of this type of writing.[85] Following the conventions of the other poems discussed so far, Hrothgar's sermon features an admonitory address with gnomic content, delivered by an aged speaker. Hrothgar's advanced age is stressed throughout the poem, as is his wisdom;[86] even in this sermon, Hrothgar reminds the young Beowulf that he speaks from lived experience three times: he introduces himself as "eald eþelweard" [old guardian of the homeland] (l. 1702a), notes "ic þis gid be þe awræc wintrum frod" [old and wise from winters, I tell this tale for you] (ll. 1722–4) and, finally, declares that he has ruled the Danish kingdom for fifty years.[87] Hrothgar's message to Beowulf, to be weary of pride and that nothing is eternal, is conventional and stated in the manner that also characterises other wisdom poems:

'Bebeorh þe ðone bealonið,   Beowulf leofa,
secg bet[e]sta,   ond þe þæt selre geceos,
ece rædas;   oferhyda ne gym,
mære cempa.   Nu is þines mægnes blæd
ane hwile;   eft sona bið
þæt þec adl oððe ecg   eafoþes getwæfeð
oððe fyres feng,   oððe flodes wylm,
oððe gripe meces,   oððe gares fliht,
oððe atol yldo;   oððe eagena bearhtm
forsiteð ond forsworceð;   semninga bið
þæt ðec, dryhtguma,   deað oferswyðeð.' (ll. 1758–68)

['Guard yourself against pernicious enmity, dear Beowulf, best of men, and choose for yourself the better thing, eternal benefits. Do not care for arrogance, famous champion. Now for one moment is the glory of your strength; yet immediately it will be that either sickness or edge will deprive

[82] Zwikstra, '*Wintrum frod*', 146.
[83] Tuttle Hansen, *Solomon Complex*, 46.
[84] Semper, 298.
[85] E. Tuttle Hansen, 'Hrothgar's 'Sermon' in *Beowulf* as Parental Wisdom', *ASE* 10 (1981), 61.
[86] E.g., *Beowulf*, ll. 1306, 1307, 1318, 1397; for a further discussion of the *Beowulf* poet's use of epithets for Hrothgar, see chapter 7.
[87] *Beowulf*, l. 1769b.

> you of strength, or the fangs of fire, or the surging of the flood, or the attack of the sword, or the flight of the spear, or terrible old age, or the brightness of eyes will diminish and grow dark; at last, death will overpower you, warrior.']

Hrothgar's reference to "atol yldo" [terrible old age] once more emphasises his own senectitude and reinforces his authority as a 'vehicle of wisdom', much like the aged speakers in *Vainglory*, *The Riming Poem*, *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*.

The second instructional poem in Old English to feature an old man as a teacher is *Precepts*, once more found in the Exeter Book.[88] *Precepts* employs as its framing device an elderly father who teaches his son in the form of ten instalments of advice. No fewer than eight times, the poet emphasises that the father is old and that his authority derives from his lived experience: "frod fæder" [old and wise father] (l.1a), "mage cystum eald" [old/experienced in the customs of kinsmen] (l.2b), "fæder … frod" [old and wise father] (l. 15b), "frod guma" [old and wise man] (l. 53a), "eald fæder" [old father] (l. 59b), "se gomola" [the old one] (l. 65b), "eald uðwita" [old sage] (l. 66a) and "eald" [the old one] (l. 77).[89] Throughout his teachings, the old man admonishes his son to respect his teachers:

> Wes þu þinum yldrum arfæst symle,
> fægerwyrde, ond þe in ferðe læt
> þine lareowas leofe in mode. (ll. 11–3)
>
> [You must always be respectful to your elders, fair-worded, and you must allow your teachers to be in your heart, dear in spirit.]

Similarly, the son is told to choose an advisor who is "spella ond lara ræd-hycgende" [resourceful in stories and learning] (ll. 25b–6a) and, finally, to "gemyne / frode fæder lare ond þec a wið firenum geheald" [remember the wise teachings of your father and always keep yourself from sins] (ll.93b–4). Michael D. C. Drout places *Precepts* in a monastic context and suggests that the poem does not depict a generic father/son interaction, but rather an "image of 'spiritual fatherhood'".[90] This proposed monastic context makes sense in the light of the didactic duties assigned to older monks in monastic rules. In fact, one of those rules even made the pseudo-paternal role of elderly monks explicit:

> Þa yldran mid godum bysnum and mid gelomlicre mingunge læron þa gingran, and lufion swa heora bearn, and þa gyngran wurðion þa yldran swilce heora fæderas, and mid ealre glædnysse hyrsumion heora hæsum.[91]

[88] E. Tuttle Hansen, '*Precepts*: An Old English Instruction', *Speculum* 56 (1981), 1–16.
[89] All references to *Precepts*, ed. Shippey.
[90] M. D. C. Drout, 'Possible Instructional Effects of the Exeter Book 'Wisdom Poems': A Benedictine Reform Context', in *Form and Content of Instruction in Anglo-Saxon England in the Light of Contemporary Manuscript Evidence: Papers Presented at the International Conference, Udine, 6–8 April 2006*, ed. P. Lendinara, L. Lazzari and M. A. D'Aronco (Turnhout, 2007), 460.
[91] *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 327, ll. 29–31.

> [The older ones shall teach the younger ones through good examples and frequent admonitions, and love them as if they were their own fathers, and obey their instructions with complete willingness.]

As such, the old and wise father in *Precepts* may reflect the typical role and status of senior monks in Anglo-Saxon monasteries specifically, although the cultural association between old age and wisdom is very likely to have stretched beyond the confines of the monastery.

Illustrative of the widely held link between sagacity and senectitude are two Old English proverbs. Proverbs are a specific branch of wisdom literature that, according to Paul Cavill, "reflect[s] the world view of the ordinary Anglo-Saxon, they are the common store of everyday knowledge which the Anglo-Saxon would take for granted".[92] The first of these two proverbs that link age to wisdom is part of *Maxims II*, a collection of versified articulations of general truths: "[G]omol snoterost, / fyrngearum frod, se þe ær feala gebideð" [the old man [is] the wisest, old in years gone by, he who has endured many things before].[93] The second proverb that assigns wisdom to the elderly is one of the *Durham Proverbs*, a collection of forty-six Old English proverbs, some metrical, accompanied by Latin versions.[94] Number 7 of this collection reads:

> *Sepe in [u]ile sacculo fulget aurum.*
> Oft on sotigum bylige searowa licgað.[95]

While the Latin proverb can be translated as 'Often gold shines in a cheap purse' and hence expresses the general sense 'do not judge by appearances', the Old English proverb is best translated as 'Often there is cunning in a sooty bag'. The sooty bag, in this case, is someone who sits by the fire all day, hence: an old person.[96] As such, both proverbs encapsulate the idea that, typically, an old man would be wise. Still, the characterisation of the old man in *Maxims II* as having endured much and the elderly individual in the *Durham Proverbs* as a sooty bag implies that while they may have increased their knowledge, they had to suffer to attain it and have also grown physically inactive and unsightly. This other side of the coin will be explored in the following chapter.

Overall, it is safe to assume that the Anglo-Saxons did, indeed, generally equate old age with wisdom, even if not all wise men were old, nor all old men wise.[97] The elderly certainly appear in Old English wisdom poetry in the stereotypical roles of

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[92] Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, 185.

[93] Found in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. i (s. xi med., Abingdon); Ker, no. 191; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 370. *Maxims II*, ed. Shippey, ll. 10–3.

[94] Found in Durham, Cathedral Library, B. III. 32 (s. xi[1] – xi med., Canterbury); Ker, no. 107; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 244.

[95] O. S. Arngart, 'The Durham Proverbs', *Speculum* 56 (1982), no. 7.

[96] This interpretation is reinforced by Old Norse analogues. For a full discussion of this proverb and an exact precursor of its Latin equivalent in the ninth-century *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, see T. Porck, 'Treasures in a Sooty Bag? A Note on *Durham Proverb* 7', *NQ* ns 62 (2015), 203–6.

[97] For examples of old men lacking wisdom, see the examples of the *senex sine religione* and the *puer centum annorum* mentioned above, pp. 83ff.

wise man and teacher; references to their lived experience, accumulated in their long lives, rendered their advice and knowledge authoritative. The connection between senectitude and sagacity was also expressed in proverbs, suggesting that this was not mere poetic fancy but a widely held cultural notion. On the whole, Anglo-Saxons in search of wisdom, it would seem, expected to find it in a sooty bag: an old man by the fire.

Conclusion: Longing for longevity?

Given its general, albeit not wholly unambiguous, associations with respect, spiritual superiority and wisdom, the prospect of growing old may have sounded alluring to some Anglo-Saxons. Indeed, Brihtwold, archbishop of Canterbury (692–731), wished a long life upon his friend Forthhere, bishop of Sherborne (709–737): "May Jesus Christ our Lord preserve your Reverence unharmed to an advanced age".[98] St. Leoba (d. 782) did something similar when she wished Boniface (672x5?–754) to remain "ever the happier in life as the older in years".[99] In a like manner, longevity was one of the blessings for a new bride in a nuptial benediction in the *Durham Ritual*:

> *sit in ea iugum dilectionis et pacis fidelis et casta nubat in christo imitatrisque sanctorum permaneat feminarum sit amabilis ut rachel uiro sapiens ut rebecca longeua et fidelis ut sarra* sie in ðær iwocc lvfes 7 sibbes gitriwa 7 hygdego gimvngia in criste ðu sie giliced æc halgawara ðerhwvnia vifmonna sie lufsvm svæ rah' vere snottor svæ rebec' longlif' 7 gileaffvll svæ sar'.[100]
>
> [May in it (i.e. matrimony) be the yoke of love and peace, may you, faithful and chaste, marry in Christ and also remain an imitator of holy women, may you be as lovely to your husband as Rachel, as wise as Rebecca, as long-lived and faithful as Sarah.]

Ællfric, too, observed that people longed for longevity. However, he objected strongly against this desire, retorting:

> Gehwær is on urum life. ateorung 7 werignys 7 brosnung þæs lichaman: 7 þeahhwæþere wilnað gehwa þæt he lange lybbe. Hwæt is lange lybban buton lange swincan? Feawum mannum gelimpð on þyssum dagum þæt he gesundful lybbe hundeahtatig geara: 7 swa hwæt swa he ofer þam leofað hit

[98] *English Historical Documents. Volume 1: c.500–1042*, ed. and trans. D. Whitelock (London, 1955), 731. This letter is dated 709–731.

[99] *Ibid.*, 735. This letter is dated soon after 732. In his *Propositiones ad acuendos iuvenes* [Problems to sharpen the young] (c.800), Alcuin has a father wish his son a long life, in a rather cryptic manner: "A son greeted his father: 'Hello father'; to which his father replied: 'Hello son. May you live long, as much as you have lived. If you triple that number of years and add one of my years you will have 100 years' How old was the boy at that time?" (The answer: 16,5 years). Alcuin, *Propositiones ad acuendos iuvenes*, trans. J. Hadley and D. Singmaster, 'Problems to Sharpen the Young', *The Mathematical Gazette* 76 (1992), no. 44.

[100] *Rituale ecclesiae Dunelmensis: The Durham Collectar*, ed. U. L. Lindelöf (Durham, 1927), 109.

> bið him geswinc 7 sarnys. swa swa se witega cwæð: “Yfele sind ure dagas” 7 þæs þe wyrsan þe we hi lufiað.[101]
>
> [Everywhere in our life is faintness and weariness, and decay of the body, and yet every one desires that he might live long. What is to live long but to suffer long? It happens to few men in these days to live over eighty years in health, and whatever he lives beyond that age, it is toil to him and pain, as the prophet said: “Evil are our days” (Eph. 5:6), and the worse that we love them.]

Why do people want to grow old, Ælfric asks, if all they will get in return is toil and pain? Ælfric's remark is hard to reconcile with Burrow's claim that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other age categories and Crawford's notion that the Anglo-Saxon period was ‘a golden age for the elderly’. Not only were the Anglo-Saxons well aware that the merits of age were not for everyone, they also observed that there were serious downsides to growing old. These downsides and their expression in the Anglo-Saxon literary record is the topic of the next chapter.

[101] *ÆCHom I*, hom. 32, ll. 213–9. Ælfric appears to be following Augustine here, see Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 274.