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

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The drawbacks of old age

One might be eaten by a wolf, die of hunger, perish of thirst, be killed by the hand of an aggressive drunk or fall, featherless, from a tree. The first fifty odd lines of the Exeter Book poem *The Fortunes of Men* consist of a depressing list of the various ways in which a young person might die. From line 58 onwards, the poem takes a more joyous turn:

> Sum sceal on geoguþe mid godes meahtum
> his earfoðsiþ ealne forspildan,
> ond *on yldo eft* eadig weorþan,
> wunian wyndagum ond welan þicgan,
> maþmas ond meoduful mægburge on.

These lines have been translated by Shippey as follows:

> Another, through the power of God, will in his youth obliterate all his harsh experience, and then be fortunate *in old age*, living happy days and enjoying prosperity, riches and the mead-cup in the home of his family.[1]

Translated thus, it seems as if the Anglo-Saxon poet posits youth, filled with dangers, against old age, a time characterised by joy and prosperity. S. A. J. Bradley, however, rendered "on yldo eft" in a different way: "in his maturity";[2] apparently translating "yldo" not as 'old age' but with the more general sense 'age, stage of life' and "eft" as 'afterwards', hence 'in the stage of life afterwards, the next stage', that is: maturity or adulthood, the stage of life after youth.[3] This alternative translation, which has also

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[1] *The Fortunes of Men*, ed. and trans. Shippey, ll. 58–63.

[2] Bradley's translation reads: "One, through God's powers, shall expend all his misfortune during his youth, and in his maturity he shall become prosperous again and live out days of happiness and indulge in his wealth, treasures and the mead-flagon, in his family's midst". *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. and trans. S. A. J. Bradley (London, 1982), 342–3.

[3] A similar construction occurs in *Beowulf*, ll. 20–4: "Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean, / fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme, / þæt hine *on ylde eft* gewunigen / wilgesiþas, þonne wig cume" [In such a way must a young man with liberality bring about, with splendid costly gifts in his father's lap (during his youth), so that when he comes of age close companions will stand by him, when war comes]. It is worth noting that various translations interpret the phrase "on ylde eft" as meaning something other than "in old age". E.g., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*, ed. and trans. H. D. Chickering Jr (New York, 1977), 49, and *The Beowulf Manuscript: Complete Texts and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. and trans. R. D. Fulk, DOML 3 (Cambridge MA, 2010), 87, give "in his later years" and "later in life", respectively; *Beowulf*, ed. and trans. M. Swanton (Manchester, 1978), 35, and *Beowulf and Its Analogues*, ed. and trans. G. N. Garmonsway and J. Simpson (London, 1980), 3, both interpret the phrase as referring to the time when the young man "comes of age", i.e. reaches adulthood.

been suggested by Sánchez-Martí,[4] is preferable for two reasons. Firstly, the remainder of *The Fortunes of Men* is a list of occupations a man might fulfil as an adult and does not seem to be concerned with life as an old man. Secondly and more importantly in the context of this chapter, there is little to no other literary evidence that Anglo-Saxons expected to celebrate "wyndagum" [days of joy] in their old age. Rather, old age was associated primarily with physical, social and emotional drawbacks that rendered joy impossible.

These downsides of growing old are the central topic of this chapter, which reviews their representation in the poems and homilies of the Anglo-Saxons. The frequency and potency with which these drawbacks occur in the literary record illustrate that the conclusions drawn by Burrow and Crawford that the Anglo-Saxon period was somehow a 'golden age for the elderly' is one-sided at best. In representations of old age in poetry and homiletic literature, the physical and emotional repercussions take central stage; growing old was associated with loss of physical aptitude, loneliness and sadness. As a consequence, the old man became a symbol of the transience of worldly pleasures and old age was framed as a prefiguration of the torments of Hell.

'My poor weak body deteriorates': Anglo-Saxon experiences of old age

A declining health is part and parcel of the biological process of growing old and the physical ramifications of age were as inescapable for the Anglo-Saxons as they are for us. Indeed, bio-archaeological research into the skeletal remains in Anglo-Saxon graves has found that elderly Anglo-Saxons were prone to suffer from multiple diseases, including osteoarthritis, chronic dental diseases and the development of malignant cancer tumors.[5] Medical texts of the time also exemplify that the elderly were susceptible to certain ailments. In the ninth-century *Leechbook* of Bald, for instance, the aged feature as typical sufferers of poor eyesight, indigestion and the "healfdeade adl" [half-dead disease].[6] The last ailment is described as an affliction which involved the paralysis of one half of the entire body and mainly affected the elderly: "Gif he bið cealdre gecyndo þonne cymð æfter feowertigum, elcor cymð æfter fiftigum wintra his gærgetales" (If he be of a cold nature then it [the disease] comes after forty (years), otherwise it comes after fifty winters of his age).[7] In their treatments of the correspondences between the four ages and the four bodily humours, Bede and Byrhtferth, too, linked old age to physical ailments, specifically those associated with phlegm. The former noted that the elderly were typically "tardos, somnolentos, obliuiosos" [slow, sleepy, and forgetful];[8] the latter described them as "ceald and snoflig" [cold and rheumy].[9]

As sufferers of bad health, the aged were also exempt from certain regulations or were forced to give up their responsibilities. The Old English Rule of Chrodegang,

[4] Sánchez-Martí, 'Age Matters', 223–4.
[5] C. Lee, 'Disease', in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ed. H. Hamerow, D. A. Hinton and S. Crawford (Oxford, 2011), 704–23.
[6] *Leechdoms*, ed. Cockayne, II, 197, 284.
[7] *Ibid*., II, 284.
[8] Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Jones, trans. Wallis, ch. 35
[9] Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. Baker and Lapidge, I.1, ll. 131–3.

for example, held that the elderly were to be spared from corporeal punishment: if a brother was too old to be physically chastised, he should be punished instead with public reproof, separation from his fellow priests and continuous fasting.[10] On occasion, the elderly were even excused from the last, as is demonstrated in a homily by Archbishop Wulfstan (d. 1023). During Lent, he wrote, everyone was required to hold the fast, except those who were unable to do so on account of their youth, ill health or old age.[11] On a practical level, aged individuals sometimes saw no other way than to discontinue their occupations. Bede reported in his *Historia abbatum* how the elderly Abbot Ceolfrith of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow (c.642–716) resigned from his abbacy, because he no longer considered himself up to the task:

> uidit se iam senior et plenus dierum non ultra posse subditis, ob impedimentum suppremae aetatis, debitam spiritalis exercitii, uel docendo uel uiuendo, praefigere formam.
>
> [Now he (Ceolfrith) saw that, being old and full of days, he could no longer prove to be an appropriate model of spiritual exercise for those under him either by teaching or by example because he was so aged and infirm.][12]

In the same year, Ceolfrith went on a pilgrimage to Rome, where he died at the age of 74. A reasoning similar to Ceolfrith's can be presumed to have underlain the decision of King Ine of Wessex (d. ?726), who abdicated after a reign of thirty-seven years and left his kingdom to 'younger men'.[13]

Epigraphical evidence reveals some of the personal struggles of older individuals. Alcuin's correspondence, to cite a striking example, is rife with references to his ill health. While his bodily state did not force him to lay down his responsibilities, he did on occasion use his poor condition as an excuse for his absence from Charlemagne's court, preferring to stay at St. Martin's in Tours instead:

> I beg humbly, meekly, devotedly that I may be allowed to say my prayers daily at St. Martin's. For being so infirm of body, I cannot travel or do any other work. All my physical powers have lost their strength and will surely grow weaker day by day, nor, I fear, will they return in this world. I hoped and wished in days past to see your Majesty's face once more, but as my poor weak body deteriorates I know well that that is quite impossible. So I implore your infinite goodness that in goodwill and kindness you should not

[10] *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 273, ll. 35–43.
[11] Napier, hom. 50, p. 284, ll. 28–9, p. 285, ll. 1–14.
[12] Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ed. and trans. C. W. Grocock and I. N. Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford, 2013), ch. 16; cf. Bede, *Vita Ceolfrithi*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth*, ch. 21: "Namque ubi longo iam senior defessus uidit se ultra non posse exemplum pristini uigoris suis praemonstrare discipulis, inuenit utile consilium ut, relicto iuuenioribus regimine monasteriali, ipse apostolorum limina peregrinaturus adiret" [Now when he (Ceolfrith) saw that he could no longer set an example of his vigour of old to his pupils, being already exhausted through extreme old age, he decided that a suitable plan would be to leave the rule of the monastery to younger men, while he himself would set off on a pilgrimage to the abodes of the apostles (Rome)].
[13] Bede, *HE*, V.7. Elderly kings are discussed in chapter 7 below.

> be vexed with my infirmity, but in compassion allow the weary to have rest.[14]

Similarly, the letters of Boniface (c.672–754) bear witness to the physical decrepitude which this Anglo-Saxon missionary must have experienced in his later years. In one of his letters, he mentions his failing eyesight when he requests a book "in clear letter written in full", being no longer able to read "writing which is small and filled with abbreviations".[15] These specimens of first-hand experiences of age show that growing old could be an arduous road, paved with physical complications.

Another personal account of the ills of old age has come down to us in the form of a Latin prayer with a partial Old English gloss by an anonymous eleventh-century scribe. He added his prayer on a folio and a half that had intentionally been left open by the original scribe of the Lambeth Psalter.[16] The added prayer, written in the first person, addresses God and recalls sins committed in youth. The speaker seeks redemption now that he has grown old:

> Iam pertrahit me deuictum senectus ad occasum, floret uertex, hebet uisus, crescit dolor capitis, ruunt dentes, [t]remunt membra, decident tote uires.[17]
>
> [Now binding old age drags me to my end, the crown of my head is blooming (i.e. growing white), my vision is fading, headache is increasing, my teeth are falling out, my limbs are trembling, my powers are completely diminishing.]

Unlike similar lists of symptoms of age found in Anglo-Saxon homilies,[18] this list has no known source and may, therefore, reflect the scribe's own experience.[19] The prayer continues with the speaker's fear of death and his prayers to God to redeem him, slacken the bonds of his sins, heal his wounds and forgive him for his sins. Finally, the speaker begs God not to deliver him unto Satan and ends with a description of Judgement Day. Evidently, this prayer was composed by an old man seeking

[14] *Alcuin of York*, trans. Allott, let. 68.
[15] *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, trans. E. Emerton (New York, 1940), let. 51.
[16] London, Lambeth Palace Library, 427 (s. xi[1], Winchester?; the 'Lambeth Psalter'); Ker, no. 280; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 517. The space was left blank between Psalms 108 and 109. P. O'Neill, 'Latin Learning at Winchester in the Early Eleventh Century: The Evidence of the Lambeth Psalter', *ASE* 20 (1991), 146, 162, has pointed out that, since Psalm 109 marks the first of a series of psalms intended for the daily use at Vespers in the Roman and Benedictine office, some space was always left open before this psalm, for an illustration or the addition of personal prayers.
[17] M. Förster, 'Die altenglischen Beigaben des Lambeth-Psalters', *Archiv* 132 (1914), 328–9. The partial Old English gloss reads "heafod, deorcaþ gesihð, wecsð sar heafdes, feallaþ teþ, cwaciaþ lima, hreosað ealle" [head, vision darkens, headache grows, teeth fall, limbs tremble, completely decays].
[18] See below, pp. 110ff.
[19] C. D. Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1993), 98, n. 209, compares the list in the Lambeth Psalter to the *Vita Tertia* of St. Patrick: "oculi non bene uident, aures non bene audiunt, lingua non bene loquitur, dentium numerus imminutus est, similiter et cetera membra" [the eyes do not see well, the ears do not hear well, the tongue does not speak well, the number of teeth is diminishing and the other limbs (fare?) likewise]. The two lists are, however, so divergent that even an indirect link between the two texts is unlikely.

forgiveness for his sins, afraid of his impending death that was announced by the decrepit state of his aging body.

The examples above illustrate that for many elderly Anglo-Saxons, old age manifested itself as a source of physical woe and mental distress. It should come as no surprise, then, that these repercussions of age also feature widely in the literary record. These texts reflect not only what aged Anglo-Saxons actually suffered, but also what drawbacks were typically associated with growing old and how these were interpreted.

atol yldo: The terrors of old age and the transience of the world in Anglo-Saxon poetry

On the whole, Anglo-Saxon poets appear to propagate a bleak image of old age. Typically, growing old was grouped with other negative aspects of life, such as evil, death and darkness, as in the group of versified gnomic statements known as *Maxims II*:

> God sceal wið yfele, geogoð sceal wið yldo,
> lif sceal wið deaþe, leoht sceal wið þystrum,
> fyrd wið fyrde, feond wið oðrum.[20]
>
> [Good must be against evil, youth against old age, life against death, light against darkness, army against army, one enemy against the other.]

In another set of proverbs, in the Royal Psalter,[21] aging is similarly linked to processes of degeneration rather than progress:

> *Ardor refriescit, nitor quualescit;*
> *Amor abolescit, lux obtenebrescit;*
> hat acolað, hwit asolað,
> leof alaþað, leoht aþeostrað.
> *Senescunt omnia que aeterna non sunt.*
> æghwæt ealdað þæs þe ece ne byð.[22]
>
> [What is hot grows cool, what is white becomes dirty, what is dear becomes hateful, what is light becomes dark. Everything which is not eternal grows old.]

Here, senectitude is framed as a negative outcome, akin to cold, filth, hate and darkness. Both these proverbial treatments of age are exemplary of the underlying negative attitude towards aging in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

[20] *Maxims II*, ed. and trans. Shippey, ll. 50–2.
[21] London, British Library, Royal 2 B. v (s. xi med.; the 'Royal Psalter'); Ker, no. 249; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 451.
[22] *Der altenglische Regius-Psalter. Eine Interlinearversion in Hs. Royal 2. B. 5 des brit. Mus.*, ed. F. Roeder (Halle, 1904), xii.

In terms of the physical drawbacks of age, poets rarely provided detailed descriptions of old bodies. Rather, without much specification, old age was listed among other causes for physical impairment. A typical example is Hrothgar's 'Sermon' in *Beowulf*, cited in the previous chapter (p. 89), where "atol yldo" [terrible old age] is grouped with disease, fire and attacks by swords or spears.[23] Similarly, old age forms part of a cluster with illness and 'edge-hate' in *The Seafarer*:

> simle þreora sum þinga gehwylce
> ær his tidege to tweon weorþeð;
> adl oþþe yldo oþþe ecghete
> fægum fromweardum feorh oðþringeð.[24]
>
> [always one of three turns into doubt everything before its due: illness, old age or edge-hate tears away life from the ones fated to die.]

The collocation of *ādl* 'sickness' and *yldo* 'old age' is also found in two other poems. *Maxims I*, for example, notes that God is affected neither by "adl ne yldo" [sickness or old age].[25] Neither do "yldo ne adle" hurt the soul, as is implicated by *Riddle 43* in the Exeter Book.[26] Thus, while the connection with disease was often made, Old English poetry rarely features any explicit description of physical symptoms of old age, apart from the frequent use of the poetic word *hār* 'grey' to denote the hair colour of the elderly.[27]

In fact, poets appear more interested in the social and emotional repercussions of growing old. *The Seafarer*, once again, reminds his audience that old age also involved the loss of friends:

> yldo him on fareð, onsyn blacað,
> gomelfeax gnornað, wat his iuwine,
> æþelinga bearn eorþan forgiefene.[28]
>
> [old age comes upon him, his face grows pale, grey-haired he mourns, he knows that his friends of old, children of earls, have been given to the earth.]

The treatment of old age in the poetic adaptation of *Genesis B*, as one of the consequences of Adam and Eve's choice to eat from the tree of knowledge,[29] likewise focuses on the social implications rather than its physical symptoms: old age is said to

[23] *Beowulf*, l. 1766a.
[24] *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 68–71.
[25] *Maxims I*, ed. and trans. Shippey, ll. 8–12; cf. *Beowulf*, l. 1736a.
[26] *Riddle 43*, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. v. K. Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, ASPR 3 (New York, 1936), l. 4a.
[27] For *hār*, see Appendix, s.v. *hār*.
[28] *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 91–3
[29] Old age is also named as one of the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience in *Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. Rauer, no. 53: "Ac þa hi þæt ne geheoldan, ða underðeoddon hi selfe ond eall ðæt mænnisce cynn to sare ond eldo ond to deaðe" [But when they did not obey it, they then subjected themselves and all of humankind to pain and old age and to death].

rob people of "ellendæda, dreamas and drihtscipes" [valorous deeds, joys and rulership].[30] These emotional and social consequences are also epitomised by a number of grieving, elderly characters in *Beowulf*. Hrothgar, for instance, is described by Beowulf as an old, desolate man, who, 'bound by age', sadly sings of his lost youth:

> gomela Scilding,
> felafricgende feorran rehte;
> hwilum hildedeor hearpan wynne,
> gome(n)wudu grette, hwilum gyd awræc
> soð ond sarlic, hwilum syllic spell
> rehte æfter rihte rumheort cyning;
> hwilum eft ongan eldo gebunden,
> gomel guðwiga gioguðe cwiðan,
> hildestrengo; hreðer (in)ne weoll
> þonne he wintrum frod worn gemunde.[31]
>
> [The old, well-informed Scylding told of things far back in time; sometimes the one brave in battle touched the wood of entertainment, the joy of the harp, sometimes he recited a song, true and sad; sometimes he, the noble-spirited king, told a wonderful story according to what is right. Sometimes again, the old warrior, bound by old age, began to speak of his youth, his battle-strength; his heart welled up inside, when he, old and wise in winters, remembered many things.]

Binding old age, it would seem, has broken the old king both physically and emotionally. Aside from Hrothgar, five other characters in *Beowulf* are described as both old and grieving, either for losses in the past or looming defeats in the future.[32] Thus, old age occurs in poetry not only as a cause for physical inaptitude, it also takes away joy, companionship and social standing.

The physical, as well as emotional and social, drawbacks of senescence also feature in two Latin poems by Alcuin, which have hitherto been ignored in the few studies on old age in Anglo-Saxon England: *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine et clade Lindisfarnensis monasterii* [On the mutability of human affairs and the destruction of the monastery of Lindisfarne] and *O mea cella* [O my cell]. In both poems, Alcuin explicitly linked the effects of old age to the idea of transience of worldly joys. In doing so, he introduced a theme into Anglo-Saxon poetry that can also be traced in the Old English elegiac wisdom poems *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and

[30] *Genesis B*, ed. A. N. Doane, *The Saxon Genesis: An Edition of the West Saxon Genesis B and the Old Saxon Vatican Genesis* (Madison, 1991), ll. 484–5.
[31] *Beowulf*, ll. 2105–14.
[32] The four other characters are the old Heathobard warrior who, "geomor-mod" [sad-minded] (l. 2044a), incites his younger colleague to take up arms once again; an old father, "geomorlic" [sad] (l. 2444a) and singing a "sarigne sang" [a sorrowful song] (l. 2447a), who has lost his son to the gallows; the Swedish king Ongentheow, "frod, felageomor" [old and wise and very sad] (l. 2950); and Beowulf himself, who is described twice with the phrase "gomol on gehðo" [the old man in grief] (ll. 2783, 3095). For a more detailed exploration of these characters in *Beowulf*, see chapters 6 and 7.

The Riming Poem, as well as in the epilogue to *Elene* by Cynewulf: the decline in human old age as an analogue to the deterioration of the world in general.

Alcuin's most extensive poetic treatment of this theme is found in the *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine*, a poem of lament and consolation addressed to the monks of Lindisfarne. The poem is dated shortly after the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793, which Alcuin placed in the context of other disastrous historical happenings, including the death of Alexander the Great, the fall of Rome and the Islamic conquest of Spain. He then drew an analogy between the passing of empires and the decline in human old age:

> Thus was the order of this world subject to change and so it will be,
> let no one have trust in the permanence of joy.
> He who once hunted in the fields for the stag
> lies in bed, now that weary old age is at hand.
> He who once reclined joyously on his purple couch
> can scarcely cover his chill limbs with an old rag.
> The long day closes in black darkness eyes
> which used to count each solitary wandering mote.
> Hands which once brandished swords and mighty weapons
> now tremble and can barely convey their food to their mouths.
> Voices, clearer than trumpets, suddenly stick in the throat
> summoning up a subdued whisper for attentive listeners.[33]

In these lines, Alcuin painted a pessimistic picture of old age, characterised by a loss of strength and status, as well as sensory impairment. It is worth noting that Alcuin himself experienced the detrimental effects of old age first-hand, as his correspondence reveals,[34] and would have been in his late fifties when he wrote these lines. This particular passage, therefore, may have been inspired by his own familiarity with the decline resulting from age.

Nevertheless, his lament is more than a personal reflection, since he used this image of old age to make a more general point:

> Let my poem be brief. All youth fades away,
> all physical beauty perishes and falls,
> only the empty skin clings with difficulty to the bones,
> and when a man grows old he does not even recognise his own limbs.
> What he was, another will be, nor will he continue to be what he is,
> he will act as a thief from himself at different times.
> And so the day to come will change minds and bodies
> and may it mark better progress in good deeds!
> Therefore let us always love instead the things of the higher world,
> and what will remain in heaven rather than what will perish on earth.
> Here time changes and you see nothing that is not mutable;

[33] Alcuin, *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine et clade Lindisfarnensis monasterii*, trans. P. Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance* (London, 1985), ll. 99–110.
[34] *Alcuin of York*, trans. Allott, lets. 6, 8, 67, 68, 69, 91, 104, 116, 133.

there one day will always be what it will be.[35]

In other words, the decline in human old age is similar to what happens to all worldly things. Loss and decline are inevitable in this life and eternity and fixedness can only be found in Heaven.

The notion of declining old age and a subsequent admonition to focus on the permanence of celestial joys is also found in Alcuin's elegiac poem *O mea cella*, which was most likely written after the poem on Lindisfarne, when Alcuin himself would have been in his sixties.[36] In *O mea cella*, Alcuin described a beautiful place that he could no longer visit as it had been deteriorated and had been passed into the hands of other people. According to Carole Newlands, the poem is best read as "the lament of an exile, severed from homeland through political calamities".[37] From this personal lament, Alcuin then moves into a general observation about the fleeting nature of worldly joys and the inevitable decline of a man in old age:

All temporal beauty changes in this sudden way,
all things alter in different fashions.
Nothing remains eternal, nothing is truly immutable;
the shadows of night cover the holy day.
Cold winter suddenly shakes down the beautiful flowers
and a dreary breeze churns up the peaceful sea.
In the fields where the holy youths chased the stag
the old man now leans wearily on his staff.[38]

Alcuin probably based this contrast between the active youth and the decrepit old man on the similar image in the poem about Lindisfarne.[39] Like the latter poem, *O mea cella* continues with an advice to focus on the permanence and eternity offered by God, rather than on the transient beauty of the world:

Why do we wretches love you, fugitive world?
You always fly headlong from us.
May you flee away, and let us always love Christ,
let love of God always possess our hearts.[40]

[35] Alcuin, *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine*, trans. Godman, ll. 111–22.
[36] While P. Godman, 'Alcuin's Poetic Style and the Authenticity of *O mea cella*', *Studi Medievali* 20 (1979), 568–9, relates the poem to Alcuin's departure from Aachen to Tours and argues that Alcuin laments the decline of the palace school in his absence, C. Newlands, 'Alcuin's Poem of Exile: *O mea cella*', *Mediaevalia* 11 (1985), 27, argues that it was written on the occasion of Alcuin's departure from York and his vow never to return, following the murder of Æthelred, king of Northumbria, in April 796.
[37] Alcuin may have based his poem on Vergil's *Eclogue*, a poem similarly concerning political turmoil and exile, see Newlands, 'Alcuin's Poem', 30–3.
[38] Alcuin, *O mea cella*, ed. and trans. Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, ll. 23–30.
[39] Cf. Alcuin, *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine*, trans. Godman, ll. 101–2.
[40] Alcuin, *O mea cella*, trans. Godman, ll. 31–4.

The pattern Alcuin established in *O mea cella*, moving from a personal lament to general reflection on worldly transience with a subsequent admonition to seek divine permanence, can also be found in various Old English poems: *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Riming Poem* and the epilogue to Cynewulf's *Elene*.[41]

The influence of Alcuin's poetry on the three Old English elegiac wisdom poems *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and *The Riming Poem* is suggested by a number of shared characteristics. Michael Lapidge and Anne L. Klinck, for instance, have both noted that all three Old English poems echo the mood of Alcuin's poetry with their personal, reflective tone with respect to the transience of worldly joys.[42] More particularly, all three poems use the device of an aged narrator whose personal lament over the consequences of old age is linked to a more general regret over impermanence.[43] Like Alcuin's narrator in *O mea cella*, the aged persona in *The Wanderer*, first of all, is cut off from his former life, mourns the loss of his friends and now suffers exile in his old age.[44] This reflection on his private losses leads to a more universal treatment for the topic of transience, culminating in a series of exclamations starting with "hwær cwom" [where are], the Old English reflex of the well-known *ubi sunt* motif.[45] The monologue in *The Seafarer* also moves from personal to general, when the speaker, after recounting some of his private hardships, remarks: "Ic gelyfe no / þæt him eorðwelan ece stondað" [I do not believe that earthly treasures last forever].[46] Additionally, Alcuin's link between the fall of kingdoms in Biblical and Classical history and the decline in human old age in his poem on Lindisfarne is echoed by the passage in *The Seafarer* that laments the passing of gold-giving kings, who have been replaced by weaker individuals:

> næron nu cyningas ne caseras
> ne goldgiefan swylce iu wæron,
> þonne hi mæst mid him mærþa gefremedon,
> ond on dryhtlicestum dome lifdon.
> Gedroren is þeos duguð eal; dreamas sind gewitene.
> Wuniað þa wacran ond þas woruld healdaþ,
> brucað þurh bisgo. Blæd is gehnæged;
> eorþan indryhto ealdað ond searað;
> swa nu monna gehwylc geond middangeard:
> yldo him on fareð, onsyn blacað,
> gomelfeax gnornað; wat his iuwine,

[41] Newlands, 'Alcuin's Poem', 34, has noted the similarity to *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, tentatively suggesting that "Alcuin introduced to Anglo-Latin literature the pattern that the Old English lyrics, whether consciously or not, would later follow". The similarity between Alcuin's poetry and Cynewulf's *Elene* has hitherto gone unmentioned.
[42] Klinck, 232–3.
[43] Cf. G. V. Smithers, 'The Meaning of *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*', *Medium Ævum* 28 (1959), 10–1.
[44] M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature. Vol. 1: 600–899* (London, 1996), 22; cf. Klinck, 233, who notes that the persona adopted in Alcuin's poem *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine* and the Old English elegies are "quite different"; she does not discuss Alcuin's *O mea cella.*
[45] *The Wanderer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 92–3.
[46] *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 65b–6

> æþelinga bearn eorþan forgiefene.[47]
>
> [There are no kings, emperors and gold-givers as there were before, when they performed the most of glories among themselves and lived in the noblest glory. This entire noble band has fallen; joys have departed. Weaker ones remain and hold the earth, use it with toil. Glory is brought low. The very noble ones of the earth grow old and wither, as now does each person throughout the middle earth. Old age comes on him, his face grows pale, the hoary-haired one mourns, knows his friends from former days, the children of nobles, having given up the earth.]

Lastly, *The Riming Poem* also begins by relating the personal experience of an aged speaker, looking back at his youth. He, too, has suffered the mutability of pleasure first-hand and describes the difference between the pleasantries of his youth, such as joy and social standing, and their absence in old age in terms of day and night:

> Nu min hreþer is hreoh, heofsiþum sceoh,
> nydbysgum neah. Gewiteð nihtes in fleah
> se ær in dæge was dyre.[48]
>
> [Now my heart is distressed, fearful of unhappy journeys, close to inescapable troubles. That which had been dear during the day, departs in flight during the night.]

As in the other poems, the narrator's experience of aging is then linked to the fate of the world at large: "Swa nu world wendeþ, wyrd sendeþ / ond hetes henteð, hæleþe scyndeð" [Thus now the world turns, sends disastrous events and seizes with hate, puts men to shame].[49] A final characteristic that these three Old English poems share with Alcuin's poetry is that each ends with an enjoinder to focus on the eternal joys, found in Heaven.[50] In sum, there are notable similarities between the three Old English elegiac poems and Alcuin's Latin poetry; precise parallels and a direct influence cannot be established, but the vernacular poets did share with Alcuin the conceit of relating old age to the more general idea of transience.

Another Anglo-Saxon poet who may have been inspired by Alcuin to draw an analogy between the decline in old age and worldly mutability is Cynewulf, author of the Old English poems *Fate of the Apostles*, *Christ II*, *Juliana* and *Elene*. Cynewulf's authorship of these poems is based on the fact that they all feature closing epilogues that spell out his name in runes.[51] While Cynewulf is one of few vernacular poets

[47] *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 82–93. Cf. Alcuin, *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine*, ed. and trans. Godman, ll. 31–110.
[48] *The Riming Poem*, ed. Klinck, ll. 43–5a
[49] *Ibid.*, ll. 59–60.
[50] *The Wanderer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 112–5; *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 117–24; *The Riming Poem*, ed. Klinck, ll. 80–7.
[51] Generally, *Guthlac B* is also considered part of the Cynewulfian corpus on the basis of style, though it misses the epilogue, since the poem is incomplete. See: R. D. Fulk, 'Cynewulf: Canon, Dialect, and Date', in *The Cynewulf Reader*, ed. R. E. Bjork (New York, 2001), 3–22.

known by name, his exact identity remains a mystery. Attempts to link the poet Cynewulf to historical figures, such as Cynewulf, bishop of Lindisfarne (d. ca. 783), Cynulf, priest of Dunwich (fl. 803) and Abbot Cenwulf of Petersborough (d. 1006), cannot be substantiated, since the name Cynewulf was simply very common: the ninth-century Lindisfarne *Liber Vitae* alone lists no fewer than twenty-one people named Cynewulf.[52] The works attributed to the poet Cynewulf are dated between c.750 to the end of the tenth century, though a tenth-century date is most probable.[53]

Various scholars have suggested that Cynewulf himself may have been of an advanced age when he wrote some of his poetry. Rosemary Woolf, for example, has argued that Cynewulf wrote *Juliana* when he was an old man, because it was a work of "uninspired competence".[54] Similarly, Eduard Sievers and Claes Schaar saw *Fates of the Apostles* as Cynewulf's latest poem, considering it "the work of an aged poet, still competent but uninspired".[55] The only overt indication that Cynewulf may have been an elderly poet is found in his epilogue to *Elene*, a poem about how St. Helen found the True Cross. In this epilogue, written in the first person, Cynewulf explicitly described himself as an old man: "ic frod ond fus þurh þæt fæcne hus" [I, old and wise, and ready for death because of this deceitful house].[56] Moreover, Cynewulf notes that God gave him the gift of poetry as a comfort in his old age:

> … me lare onlag þurh leohtne had
> gamelum to geoce, gife unscynde
> mægencyning amæt ond on gemynd begeat,
> torht ontynde, tidum gerymde,
> bancofan onband, breostlocan onwand,
> leoðucræft onleac.[57]
>
> […the mighty King gloriously bestowed on me His teaching as a comfort in my old age, meted out the noble gift and begot it in my mind, disclosed the brightness, extended it at times, unbound my bone-coffer, loosened my breast-hoard, unlocked the craft of poetry.]

While some scholars have taken this description of Cynewulf's own old age at face value, Earl R. Anderson points out that Cynewulf's revelation need not be autobiographical. Instead, he argues that Cynewulf may have used an 'aged author' motif.[58] Cynewulf's identification as an old man, in this case, would be a stylistic

[52] E. R. Anderson, *Cynewulf: Structure, Style, and Theme in His Poetry* (London, 1983), 16.
[53] P. W. Conner, 'On Dating Cynewulf', in *Cynewulf Reader*, ed. Bjork, 47.
[54] Cited in Anderson, *Cynewulf*, 22
[55] *Ibid*. Arguably, assigning supposedly 'uninspired' poetry to an aged poet borders on ageism.
[56] Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. P. O. A. Gradon (New York, 1966), l. 1236. The phrase "fæcne hus" [deceitful house] is a metaphor for the elderly body. Anderson, *Cynewulf*, 17, argues that Cynewulf's use of this image is probably inspired by Ecclesiastes 12. 1–4, where the young are advised to remember their Creator and the body of an old man is compared to a household in decline. However, there is no need to presuppose a biblical source for this image; the metaphor of 'house' for body is well-attested, e.g., in the Old English kenning *bānhūs* 'bone-house, body'.
[57] Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, ll. 1245–50a.
[58] Anderson, *Cynewulf*, 18.

device, rather than a reflection of personal senectitude. Similarly, Dolores W. Frese has argued that Cynewulf's use of the word "frod" to describe himself need not refer to the author's personal old age per se. Rather, this word connects Cynewulf to several characters in *Elene*, such as Sachius, Symon and Judas, who are described with the same word. Moreover, the poet's supposed acquisition of his poetic abilities in later life is paralleled by the "mature conversions to Christianity" of Constantine, Elene, Symon and Judas.[59]

Indeed, Cynewulf's presentation of himself as an old man is certainly conventional and shows some similarities to the old wise man in wisdom poetry (see above, pp. 87ff). As in these other poems, Cynewulf explicitly linked his old age to wisdom: he called himself "frod" [old and wise] and his craft, the ability to write poetry, had been granted to him at an advanced age, "gamelum to geoce" [as a comfort in <my> old age].[60] Moreover, Cynewulf continued his epilogue with his runic signature that features a now familiar image of an old man, in this case a former warrior, grieving over his diminishing prowess and the fleeting nature of youth and joys. As in Alcuin's poems discussed above, these physical and social drawbacks of old age are then linked to the decline of the world as a whole:

A wæs sæcg oð ðæt
cnyssed cearwelmum, .ᚳ. drusende,
þeah he in medohealle maðmas þege,
æplede gold .ᛗ. gnornode
.ᚾ. gefera, nearusorge dreah,
enge rune, þær him .ᛖ. fore
milpaðas mæt, modig þrægde
wirum gewlenced. ᚹ. is geswiðrad,
gomen æfter gearum, geogoð is gecyrred,
ald onmedla. .ᚢ. wæs geara
geogoðhades glæm. Nu synt geardagas
æfter fyrstmearce forð gewitene,
lifwynne geliden, swa .ᛇ. toglideð,
flodas gefysde. .ᛈ. æghwam bið
læne under lyfte; landes frætwe
gewitaþ under wolcnum winde geliccost,
þonne he for hæleðum hlud astigeð,
wæðeð be wolcnum, wedende færeð
ond eft semninga swige gewyrðeð,
in nedcleofan nearwe geheaðrod,
þream forþrycced; swa þeos world
eall gewiteð.[61]

[59] D. W. Frese, 'The Art of Cynewulf's Runic Signatures', in *Cynewulf Reader*, ed. Bjork, 333–4 .
[60] Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, ll. 1236a, 1246a.
[61] *Ibid*., ll. 1256–77

> [Until that time, the warrior had always been overwhelmed by sorrows, a failing TORCH,[62] though he received treasures in the mead-hall, appled gold, he grieved for his BOW**,** the companion in NEED, he endured crushing distress, a cruel mystery**,** where before a HORSE carried him over army-paths,[63] ran bravely adorned with wire-ornaments. JOY is diminished, pleasure after the years, youth has changed, the magnificence of old. Once was OURS the splendour of youth.[64] Now the days of yore have, after a period of time, passed away, bereft of the enjoyment of life, just as the WATER glides away, floods sent forth. WEALTH is for everyone transitory under the sky, treasures of the land**,** departs under the clouds, most like the wind. When it loudly proceeds in the presence of heroes, hunts under the clouds, goes, raving, and afterwards it becomes quiet of assemblies, restrained in a narrow prison, oppressed by throes. Thus, this world will depart completely.]

Cynewulf then launches into a description of Judgement, after which those who have been cleansed of their sins are allowed to "sybbe brucan / eces ead-welan" [to enjoy peace, eternal happiness].[65] Like Alcuin, then, Cynewulf relates the decline in human old age to the fleeting nature of earthly beauties and, similarly, contrasts this to the eternity found in Heaven.

While the influence of Alcuin on the epilogue of Cynewulf's *Elene* has been suggested before, especially regarding the description of Judgement in lines 1277ff,[66] the parallels between Cynewulf's and Alcuin's poetic treatment of old age have hitherto remained unmentioned. Both poets, it should be noted, like the anonymous authors of the Old English elegies, used the grieving old man reflecting on his former joys as a focal point for a discussion on the transience of earthly pleasures. Moreover, all poets use this idea to encourage their audience to put their minds to the eternal joys in Heaven instead. As we shall see below, this notion was used to much the same effect in later Anglo-Saxon homilies.

In the poems discussed above, the image of the aging man, suffering both physically and emotionally, was used as a demonstration of the transience of the world at large. Conversely, the author of *Solomon and Saturn II* reversed this idea and used the detrimental effect of time on Nature as a metaphor for the detrimental effects old age would have on Man. *Solomon and Saturn II* is an enigmatic debate poem between the pagan Saturn and the wise King Solomon, dating back to the early tenth century.

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[62] For the 'failing torch' as a symbol of a warrior's life, see T. D. Hill, 'The Failing Torch: The Old English *Elene*, 1256–1259', *NQ* ns 52 (2005), 155–60.

[63] For the interpretation of "milpaþas" as 'army roads', see A. Breeze, '*Exodus, Elene,* and the *Rune Poem:* milpæþ 'Army Road, Highway'', *NQ* ns 38 (1991), 436–8.

[64] In translating the ᚩ-rune as 'ours' I follow the majority of translators, see e.g. Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, 73, n. 1265b. R. W. V. Elliott, 'Cynewulf's Runes in *Christ II* and *Elene*', in *Cynewulf Reader*, ed. Bjork, 284–5, argues, however, that the rune here must be interpreted as 'aurochs, bison', the original sense of the rune as preserved in the Old English *Runic Poem*. As the name of the animal does not make sense in this context, Elliott then suggests it is to be translated as 'manly strength', as in 'Manly strength was once the splendour of youth'.

[65] Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, ll. 1315–6a.

[66] *Ibid.*, 22.

The poem contains several riddles, of which one is the following 'Old Age' riddle, posed by Saturn:

> 'Ac hwæt is ðæt wundor ðe geond ðas worold færeð,
> styrnenga gæð, staðolas beateð,
> aweceð wopdropan, winneð oft hider?
> Ne mæg hit steorra ne stan ne se steapa gimm,
> wæter ne wildeor wihte beswican,
> ac him on hand gæð heardes ond hnesces,
> micles ond mætes; him to mose sceall
> gegangan geara gehwelce grundbuendra,
> lyft fleogendra, laguswemmendra,
> ðria ðreoteno ðusendgerimes.'[67]
>
> ['But what is that strange thing that travels throughout this world, sternly goes, beats the foundations, arouses tears, often forces its way here? Neither star nor stone nor the broad gem, water nor wild beast can deceive it, but into its hand go hard and soft, the great and small. Each and every year the count of three times thirteen thousand of the ground-dwellers, of the air-flying, of the sea-swimming, must go to it as food.']

The answer to this riddle – old age or devouring time – is given by Solomon, who first notes how Nature is ravished by old age and then concludes that the same fate awaits mankind:

> 'Yldo beoð on eorðan æghwæs cræftig;
> mid hiðendre hildewræsne,
> rumre racenteage, ręceð wide,
> langre linan, lisseð eall ðæt heo wile.
> Beam heo abreoteð and bebriceð telgum,
> astyreð standendne stefn on siðe,
> afilleð hine on foldan; friteð æfter ðam
> wildne fugol. Heo oferwigeð wulf,
> hio oferbideð stanas, heo oferstigeð style,
> hio abiteð iren mid ome, deð usic swa.'[68]
>
> ['Old age is, of all things, powerful on earth. With plundering shackles, capacious fetters, she reaches widely, with her long rope, she subdues all she will. She destroys the tree and shatters its branches, uproots the upright trunk on her way, and fells it to the earth; after that she feeds on the wildfowl. She defeats the wolf, she outlasts stones, she surpasses steel, she bites iron with rust, does the same to us.']

[67] *Solomon and Saturn II*, ed. and trans. Anlezark, ll. 104–13. For a close Latin analogue to this riddle in the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, see T. D. Hill, 'Saturn's Time Riddle: An Insular Latin Analogue for *Solomon and Saturn II* lines 282–291', *RES* ns 39 (1988), 273–6.
[68] *Solomon and Saturn II*, ed. and trans. Anlezark, ll. 114–23.

In other words, just as old age will destroy everything on earth, it will be devastating to humans. The author's use of feminine pronouns to refer to old age prompted Semper to argue that "the personification of old age as an invincible *female* emphasises how unnatural this process appears to fighting men; she is a foe they cannot defeat, neither man nor monster".[69] Given the clear monastic context of the text,[70] however, Semper's reference to 'fighting men' appears out of place and the feminine pronouns are more likely to reflect the grammatical gender of the noun *yldo* rather than expressing the unnaturalness of old age to men, martial or monastic.[71] If anything, old age is presented here as a natural force that leaves nothing in its wake.

In sum, Anglo-Saxon poets approached the drawbacks of old age with apprehension. They typically grouped growing old with other processes of decline and, as such, the old man became a metaphor for secular impermanence. Just as wealth, joy, friends and status do not last forever, so, too, a man's youth is not eternal and old age will get him in the end.

The symptoms of old age: Anglo-Saxon geriatrics from the pulpit

Patristic and biblical texts were not wholly unsympathetic towards the sufferings of the elderly and could provide solace for some aged Anglo-Saxon readers. For instance, Alcuin wrote to Charlemagne how he found consolation for his physical weakness by reading the letters of St. Jerome: "In my broken state of health I am comforted by what Jerome said in his letter to Nepotianus: 'Almost all the physical powers change in the old, wisdom alone increasing while the others decrease.'"[72] In another letter, Alcuin reminded his pupil Eanbald that physical weakness could help the soul and quoted the apostle Paul: "Let your bodily weakness make your spirit strong, and say with the apostle, 'When I am weak, then am I strong' [2 Cor. 12:10]. Physical affliction should help the soul".[73] Boniface used the same quotation from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, along with other biblical quotations, when he wrote to the aged Abbess Bugga in an attempt to console her in her old age, convincing her that God "desires to adorn the beauty of [her] soul with labour and sorrow".[74]

Whereas these epigraphical examples illustrate that the writings of Church fathers and biblical quotations could be used to console the elderly in times of physical distress, Anglo-Saxon preachers rarely if ever sought to soften the blow when they spoke of the drawbacks of old age. Rather, evocative descriptions of the physical and emotional repercussions of senescence pointed out the futility of loving secular life.

[69] Semper, 294.
[70] *Old English Dialogues*, ed. and trans. Anlezark, 49–57.
[71] A notable analogue to this female personification of old age is found in the Scandinavian *Gylfaginning* [The Tricking of Gylfi], part of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. In a test of strength, the god Thor loses a wrestling match with an old crone called Elli, presented as the wetnurse of the giant Utgarda-Loki. As it turns out, this old woman is a personification of 'old age' and, as the giant later explains, "there never has been anyone, and there never will be anyone, if they get so old that they experience old age, that old age will not bring them all down". Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. and trans. A. Faulkes (London, 1987), 45.
[72] *Alcuin of York*, trans. Allott, let. 8.
[73] *Ibid.*, let. 6.
[74] *Letters of Boniface*, trans. Emerton, let. 77.

Furthermore, homilists used the symptoms of old age to remind the audience of the inevitability of death and even argued that they constituted a prefiguration of the horrors of Hell. The following paragraphs outline the manner in which these Anglo-Saxon homilists used their Latin sources, often of an Irish origin, to create various images of the drawbacks of growing old in order to make their message hit home.

A recurring device in homilies is a list of symptoms of old age that serve to remind the audience that death is at hand and that one's attentions should be turned to Heaven. This theme can be traced as far back, at least, as the letter of St. Jerome to the widow Furia, dated to 394 AD. Jerome admonished Furia to remind her aged father that he would soon die and that he needed to focus on attaining the heavenly afterlife:

> Jam incanuit caput, tremunt genua, dentes cadunt: et fronte ob senium rugis arata, vicina est mors in foribus; designatur rogus prope. Velimus, nolimus, senescimus. Paret sibi viaticum, quod longo itineri necessarium est.[75]
>
> [Now his head grows grey, his knees tremble, his teeth fall out and his forehead is ploughed with wrinkles because of old age, death is near at the gates; a funeral pyre is almost prepared. Whether we want to or not, we grow old. Let him make a provision for himself, which is necessary for the long journey.]

Similar, and occasionally more evocative, descriptions of the aging body, often in combination with admonitions to focus on the eternal rather than the temporary, are found in at least five Anglo-Saxon homilies. Each homily was based on a Latin source and, on occasion, the vernacular preacher added symptoms of his own.

A first Latin text, used by both the Blickling homilist and Ælfric, is Pseudo-Basil's *Admonitio ad filium spiritualem* [Admonition to a Spiritual Son]. This late fifth-century text reflected, among other things, on the virtue of contempt for all earthly possessions. The eighth chapter "De saeculi amore fugiendo" [Concerning fleeing the love of this world], in particular, warned its reader for loving worldly beauty: just as hay will wither in the summer's heat, so, too, will the loveliness of the body fade with time, along with other pleasures of the world.[76] Following a description of a body decayed through age and death, Pseudo-Basil added a series of *ubi sunt* passages, such as "ubi est suavitas luxuriae et conviviorum opulentia?" [Where is the sweetness of luxury and opulence of banquets?],[77] underlining once more the fleeting nature of earthly delights.

Laura R. McCord has suggested that the eighth chapter of the *Admonitio* was the probable source for a similar series of Old English *ubi sunt* passages in Blickling Homily V.[78] While she formulated her claim hesitantly, her suggestion can be

[75] Jerome, *Epistolae*, PL 22, col. 557.
[76] Pseudo-Basil, *De admonitio ad filium spiritualem*, ed. P. Lehmann (München, 1955), trans. J. F. LePree, 'Pseudo-Basil's *De admonitio ad filium spiritualem*: A New English Translation', *HA* 13 (2010), ch. 8.
[77] *Ibid.*
[78] L. R. McCord, 'A Probable Source for the *ubi sunt* Passage in Blickling Homily V', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 82 (1981), 360–1; see also C. Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words: Isidore's Synonyma in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto, 2008), 130–3.

confirmed by the fact that the descriptions of the aging body that precede the *ubi sunt* passages in both texts also share some characteristics. First, both texts compare the human body to withering plants:

Nonne sicut fenum, cum a fervor aestatis percussum fuerit, arescit et paulatim pristinum decorum amittit? Similis est etiam humanae naturae species.[79] [Surely it is like hay when it has been struck by the heat of summer: it dries up and little by little; it loses its pristine state. The appearance of human nature is also like this.]	We witon þæt Crist sylfa cwæþ þurh his sylfes muþ, 'þonne ge geseoþ growende 7 blowende ealle eorþan wæstmas, 7 þa swetan stencas gestincað þara wudu-wyrta, þa sona eft adrugiaþ 7 forþgewitaþ for þæs sumores hæton'. Swa þonne gelice bið þære menniscan gecynde þæs lichoman…[80] [We know that Christ himself said, through his own mouth: 'When you see all the earth's fruits growing and blooming, and smell the sweet odours of the plants, then immediately afterwards they shall dry up and whither away because of the summer's heat.' So it (the fruit) is like the nature of a man's body …]

The Blickling homilist, here, appears to have conflated two statements by Christ – 1 Pet. 1:24 and James 1:11[81] – in order to formulate a biblical quotation to match the Latin original's image of drying hay. Next, both texts discuss the decaying body in old age:

Succedente enim senectute omnis decor pristinus iuventutis floridae deperit et quos in amorem sui antea concitabat, postmodum in odium eorum efficitur, et quando mors venerit, tunc penitus omnis pulchritudo delebitur. Et tunc recognosces, quia vanum est, quod antea inaniter diligebas.[82] [With the advent of old age, every pure beauty of florid youth is destroyed and what you loved before, you now find hateful, and when death comes, then all	… þonne se geogoþhad ærest bloweþ 7 fægerost bið, he þonne raþe se wlite eft gewiteþ 7 to ylde gecyrreþ, 7 he þonne siþþon mid sare geswenced bið, mid mislicum ecum 7 tyddernessum. 7 eal se lichoma geunlustaþ þa geogoðlustas to fremmenne þa þe he ær hatheortlice luf-ode, 7 him swete wæron to araefnenne. [83] [… when youth first blooms and is fairest, then quickly beauty fades and turns to old age, and afterwards he is troubled by pain and by various ailments

[79] Pseudo-Basil, *Admonitio*, ed. Lehmann, trans. LePree, ch. 8.
[80] *Blickling Homilies*, ed. and trans. Morris, hom. 5, pp. 58–9.
[81] Cf. M. McC. Gatch, 'The Unknowable Audience of the Blickling Homilies', *ASE* 18 (1989), 107.
[82] Pseudo-Basil, *Admonitio*, ed. Lehmann, trans. LePree, ch. 8.
[83] *Blickling Homilies*, ed. and trans. Morris, hom. 5, pp. 58–9.

beauty will be totally destroyed and then you will recognise that what you loved vainly before was merely an illusion.]	and infirmities. And the whole body loathes to perform those youthful lusts that he loved so earnestly before, and which were sweet to him to perform.]

While the *Admonitio* makes the point that the observer no longer loves the body once its beauty has faded, the Blickling homilist observes that it is the old body itself that no longer loves its former pastimes. Furthermore, the Blickling homilist adds that an old man is troubled by pain and infirmities. Subsequently, both texts turn to what happens to the body after death:

Cum videris totum corpus in tumore et foetore esse conversum, none intuens maximo horror concutieris, none claudes nares tuas non sustinens foetorem durissimum?[84] [When you have seen an entire body swelling and smelling, surely contemplating it will have struck you with great horror. Surely you will hold your nose, not able to bear the most oppressive smell?]	Hie him þonne eft swiþe bitere þencaþ, æfter þon þe se deað him tocymeþ Godes dom to abeodenne. Se lichoma þonne on þone heardestan stenc 7 on þone fulostan bið gecyrred, 7 his eagan þonne beoþ betynde, 7 his muþ 7 his næsþyrlo beoþ belocene, 7 he þonne se deada byð uneaþe ælcon men on neaweste to hæbbenne. [85] [Then, again, they shall appear very bitter to him, after that death shall come to him to announce God's Judgement. The body then, shall be turned to the strongest and foulest stench, and his eyes shall then be sealed up, and his mouth and his nostrils shall be closed, and then with difficulty will the dead man be kept in proximity to any living man.]

In both texts, the stench of the decayed corpse appalls those around it, but the Blickling homilist's description of the dead body with its sealed eyes, mouth and nostrils is more evocative. Summing up, both texts show a similar progression of ideas: withered plants are like the human body, the beauty of the aging body fades, the stinking corpse is oppressive. Along with the similarities between the *ubi sunt* passages that follow this series of ideas, the use of the *Admonitio* as a source of inspiration for the author of Blickling Homily V is beyond question, albeit that the homilist has varied significantly from his source,[86] expanding the burdens of old age and creating a more haunting image of the sealed up corpse.

[84] Pseudo-Basil, *Admonitio*, ed. Lehmann, trans. LePree, ch. 8.
[85] *Blickling Homilies*, ed. and trans. Morris, hom. 5, pp. 58–9.
[86] S. Pelle, 'Sources and Analogues for Blickling Homily V and Vercelli Homily XI', *NQ* ns 59 (2012), 8–11, has noted the Blickling homilist's freedom with another Latin source, suggesting that he possibly drew from memory. The same case could be made for the author's use of the *Admonitio*.

The *Admonitio* was also used by Ælfric, who made a vernacular adaptation of the entire text.[87] A comparison between chapter 8 of the source text and Ælfric's reworking of it makes clear that Ælfric added to the aging body some aspects that Pseudo-Basil attributed to the dead body, namely the swelling and smelling:

> Swa byð þæs mannes wlite þe wyrðeð eall fornumen mid onsigendre ylde and se deað geendað þone ærran wlite þonne ongitt þin sawl þæt þu sylf lufodest idel. Foroft se mann gewyrðeð on ende toswollen and to stence awended mid unwynsumnysse þæt him sylfum byð egle and andsæte se stenc and his lustfullnysse him ne belifð nan þing and his wistfullnys him wyrðeð to biternysse.[88]
>
> [In like way is the beauty of man, which becomes thoroughly destroyed by approaching old age, and death puts an end to its former beauty, when your soul understands that you have yourself loved vanity. Very often in the end the man becomes swollen, and is perverted to a bad odour with unpleasantness, so that he is loathsome to himself, and his odour is abominable, and of his lustfulness nothing remains to him, and his good cheer becomes a bitterness to him.]

As such, Ælfric transformed the idea of the disgust over another person's decayed corpse into a poignant picture of a self-loathing old man, appalled by his own swollen and odourous state. In the subsequent adaptation of this chapter, Ælfric followed his source in adding various instances of the *ubi sunt* motif. In this way, the intended goal of the chapter remained intact: to remind readers that eternal spiritual life is superior to physical life, which is temporary.

Yet another description of the aging body, again by Ælfric in one of his *Catholic Homilies*, was based on the first homily of Gregory the Great's *Homiliae in Evangelia*.[89] Both texts discuss the idea that the world is weighed down by evils and will not last forever, just as a man's strength and health will deteriorate as a result of age. Ælfric once more elaborated on his source's list of symptoms of age:

Sicut enim in juventute viget corpus, forte et incolume manet pectus, torosa cervix, plena sunt brachia; in annis autem senilibus statura curvatur, cervix exsiccata deponitur, frequentibus suspiriis pectus urgetur, virtus deficit, loquentis verba anhelitus intercidit; nam etsi languor	On geogoðe bið se lichama þeonde on strangum breoste: on fullum leomum 7 halum: witodlice on ealdlicum gearum bið ðæs mannes wæstm gebiged. his swura aslacod. his neb bið gerifod. & his leomu ealle gewæhte. His breost bið mid siccetungum geþread. & betwux wordum

[87] For this text, see M. A. L. Locherbie-Cameron, 'From Caesarea to Eynsham: A Consideration of the Proposed Route(s) of the *Admonition to a Spiritual Son* to Anglo-Saxon England', *HA* 3 (2000).
[88] *The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Hexameron of St. Basil*, ed. and trans. H. W. Norman (London, 1848), 50–1 (translation slightly adapted).
[89] Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 339.

desit, plerumque sensibus ipsa sua salus aegritudo est.[90] [In youth the body is vigorous, the chest remains strong and healthy, the neck is straight, the arms muscular; in later years, the body is bent, the neck scrawny and withered, the chest oppressed by difficult breathing, strength is failing, and speech is interrupted by wheezing. Weakness may not yet be present, but often in the case of the senses their healthy state is itself a malady.]	his orþung ateorað. Ðeah ðe him adl on ne sitte þeah forwel oft his hæl him bið adl.[91] [In youth the body is thriving with a strong chest and full and healthy limbs: truly, in later years a man's stature is bowed, his neck slackened, his face is wrinkled, and his limbs are all afflicted. His breast is tormented with sighs, and his breath fails between words. Although disease does not sit on him, nevertheless his health is often a disease for him.]

Specifically, Ælfric shortened the characteristics of the youthful body, but added to the symptoms of age a wrinkled face and defined the original's "virtus deficit" [strength is failing] by referring to afflicted limbs, the antithesis of the full and healthy ones he had referred to earlier. Thus, when it came to describing the aging body, Ælfric did not shy away from taking some liberties to embellish the lists of symptoms of age he found in his sources, in both his reworking of Pseudo-Basil's *Admonitio* and Gregory's homily.

Similar, longer lists of symptoms of age circulated as a *topos* in early medieval Hiberno-Latin texts and gradually made their way into later Anglo-Saxon homilies. Charles D. Wright has called attention to two such lists, found in a seventh-century treatise on the twelve abuses, *De duodecim abusiuis*, and a ninth-century florilegium, *Catechesis Celtica*.[92] The former text provided the list of symptoms in its description of the *senex sine religione*, 'the old man without religion', noting that these symptoms ought to remind elderly men that their death was at hand:

> Dum oculi caligant, auris graviter audit, capilli fluunt, facies in pallorem mutatur, dentes lassi numero minuuntur, cutis arescit, flatus non suauiter olet, pectus suffocatur, tussis cachinnat, genuat trepidant, talos et pedes tumor inflat, etiam homo interior qui non senescit his omnibus aggravatur, et haec omnia ruituram iam iamque domum corporis cito pronuntiant. Quid ergo superest, nisi ut, dum huius vitae defectus appropiat, nihil aliud cogitare quam quomodo futurae habitus prospere comprehendatur quisque senex appetat? Iuuenibus enim incertus huius vitae terminus instat, senibus uero cunctis maturus ex hac luce rexitus breviter concordat.[93]

[90] Gregory, *Homiliae in evangelia*, ed. Étaix, trans. Hurst, hom. 1, 18.
[91] *ÆCHom I*, hom. 40, ll. 110–20.
[92] Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 96–102.
[93] Pseudo-Cyprian, *De duodecim abusiuis*, ed. S. Hellmann, *Texte under Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, Reihe 3, Band 4, Heft 1 (Leipzig, 1909), 34–5, trans. P. Throop, *Vincent of Beauvais, The Moral Instruction of a Prince, and Pseudo-Cyprian, The Twelve Abuses of the World* (Charlotte, 2011), 117. The text was copied almost at verbatim in the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, another ninth-century, insular florilegium of riddles and encyclopaedic material, albeit without the note about the uncertainty of death for young men; see *Collectanea*, ed. and trans. Bayless and Lapidge, no. 119.

> [When eyes cloud over, ears hear with difficulty, hair falls out, the face turns to pallid, teeth, having fallen out, diminish in number, the skin dries out, the breath does not smell sweet, the chest is suffocating, the cough grates, the knees tremble, the swelling inflates the ankles and feet, indeed the interior person (which does not grow old) is weighed down by all these things. All these conditions announce that the bodily home is quickly going to collapse. What remains except that, while the cessation of this life is approaching, any old person should seek to think about nothing else than how their future situation may successfully be grasped? For young people the end of this life exists as an uncertainty, but for all old people it is a sure thing that the exit from this life is soon at hand.]

The *Catechesis Celtica* included a similar list of symptoms in its description of the five likenesses of Hell,[94] which included old age:

> Senectus assimilator quando V sensus in ecitem exeunt. Nam oculi caliginant, aures sordescunt, gustus non bene discernit, odoratus uitiatur, tactus rigescit; sed et dentes denudantur, lingua balbutiat, pectus licoribus grauatur, edes tremore et tumore tumescunt, manus ad opus debilitantur, canities flore, et corpus omne infirmatur, sed sensus diminuitur.[95]
>
> [Old age is likened to hell, when the five senses pass away at the end of life. For the eyes grow blurry, the ears grow deaf, the sense of taste distinguishes poorly, the sense of smell is corrupted, the sense of touch becomes numb; and also the teeth are revealed, the tongue stutters, the chest grows heavy with fluid, the feet swell with tumors and shaking, the hands are crippled for work, the grey hair grows, and the whole body is weakened, and perception is diminished.]

Wright has pointed out that the correspondences between the two lists, in combination with the divergence in wording, suggest that they were both independently translated from a vernacular list of symptoms of old age.[96] He further hints at the fact that enumerations of body parts are a frequent feature in Hiberno-Latin prayers, of which the list of symptoms of age may be a logical expansion.[97] *De duodecim abusiuis* and the *Catechesis* have been linked to two Old English homilies: Vercelli Homily IX and Pseudo-Wulfstan's 'Be rihtan Cristendome' (Napier XXX).

The late tenth-century Vercelli Homily IX, to begin with, describes five prefigurations of Hell which are the same as those listed in the *Catechesis*: pain, old age, death, the grave and torment. The list of symptoms of old age in Old English is similar to the Latin text but also features some notable differences:

[94] These are to be distinguished from the Five Horrors of Hell, cf. D. F. Johnson, 'The Five Horrors of Hell: An Insular Homiletic Motif', *English Studies* 74 (1993), 414–31.
[95] Cit. with translation in Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 96–7.
[96] Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 98–9.
[97] *Ibid.*, 99; similar lists are also found in the *Book of Cerne* and related Old English prayers, see Porck, 'Two Notes', 493–8.

> Þonne is þære æfteran helle onlicnes genemned oferyldo, for þan him amolsniaþ þa eagan for þære oferyldo þa þe wæron gleawe on gesyhþe, 7 þa earan adimmiaþ þa þe ær meahton gehyran fægere sangas, and sio tunge awlispaþ þe ær hæfde gerade spræce, 7 þa fet aslapaþ þe ær wæron ful swifte 7 hræde to gange, 7 þa handa aþindaþ þe ær hæfdon ful hwate fingras, 7 þæt feax afealleþ þe ær wæs on fullere wæstme, 7 þa teþ ageolewiaþ þa þe ær wæron hwite on hywe, 7 þæt oroþ afulaþ þe wæs ær swete on stence.[98]
>
> [Then is the second prefiguration of Hell named 'extreme old age', because his eyes weaken because of extreme old age, those that had been keen of sight, and his ears become dim, which had been able to hear beautiful songs, and his tongue lisps, that had possessed skilful speech, and his feet sleep, that had been very swift and quick in movement, and his hands become swollen, that had had fully active fingers, and his hair falls out, that had been very abundant, and his teeth become yellow, those that had been white in appearance, and his breath, which had been sweet of smell, becomes foul.]

First of all, references to the three general senses of *gustus*, 'taste', *odoratus*, 'smell', and *tactus*, 'touch', as well as to the tormented *pectus*, 'chest', all present in the *Catechesis*, are missing in Vercelli Homily IX. Conversely, the Vercelli homilist expanded the list of symptoms by adding references to the former excellence of eyes, ears, tongue, feet, hair and teeth. He also added a remark about ill-smelling breath, which is not featured in the *Catechesis* either. Moreover, the Old English text has teeth growing yellow and hair falling out, whereas the *Catechesis* has teeth falling out and hair growing grey. It is worth pointing out, however, that the list in *De duodecim abusiuis*, which shares its origin with that in the *Catechesis*, does feature a reference to breath and also has hair falling out. As such, some of the differences between Vercelli Homily IX and the *Catechesis* need not necessarily be attributed to the Anglo-Saxon homilist; in all probability, the discrepancy stems from the homilist's use of an unknown variant of the list of symptoms of age that stems from the same Hiberno-Latin tradition as the *Catechesis* and *De duodecim abusiuis*.[99] Whatever its direct source, the Vercelli homilist shared the Hiberno-Latin view that old age was a prefiguration of Hell, a clear indication that, in this respect at least, old age was not preferred over other age categories.

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[98] *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 9, ll. 84–97. This is the text as it is preserved in Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, CXVII (s. x^2; the 'Vercelli Book'); Scragg, *ibid.*, 167, 169, ll. 71–8, has also edited a related, later reworking of this homily in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 115, fols. 140–7 (s. xi^2) that has a near-identical list but skips the reference to weakened eyes.

[99] J. E. Cross, *The Literate Anglo-Saxon – On Sources and Disseminations* (London, 1972), 5, rightly calls attention to the fact that the exact variant of a Latin text that an Anglo-Saxon author used may be lost. On Vercelli Homily IX and the *Catechesis*, specifically, he states "I, for one, would not presume to say more at present than that they are two examples of the theme. I could not indicate any relationship between one and the other without other evidence", *ibid.*, 31; cf. Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 99–100.

Another list of symptoms of old age, analogous to the one in Vercelli Homily IX, was the most likely source for the eleventh-century homily 'Be rihtan Cristendome' (Napier XXX), formerly attributed to Archbishop Wulfstan.[100] Donald G. Scragg has pointed out that Napier XXX is a 'cut-and-paste' homily, derived from a homiliary related to the Vercelli Book but now lost, as it contains parallels to various Vercelli homilies.[101] The list of symptoms of age is certainly similar to that in Vercelli Homily IX:

> Him amolsniað and adimmiað þa eagan, þe ær wæron beorhte and gleawe on gesihðe. And seo tunge awistlað, þe ær hæfde getinge spræce and gerade. And ða earan aslawiað, þa þe ær wæron ful swifte and hræde to gehyrenne fægere dreamas and sangas. And þa handa awindað, þa ðe ær hæfdon ful hwæte fingras. And þæt feax afealleð, þe ær wæs fæger on hiwe and on fulre wæstme. And þa teð ageolwiað, þa ðe wæron ær hwite on hiwe. And þæt oreð stincð and afulað, þe ær wæs swete on stence.[102]
>
> [His eyes weaken and become dim, that had been bright and keen of sight. And his tongue hisses, which had possessed fluent and skilful speech. And his ears become sluggish, which had been very swift and quick to hear beautiful stories and songs. And his hands bend, that had possessed fully active fingers. And his hair falls out, that had been fair in colour and in full abundance. And his teeth turn yellow, that had been white in appearance. And his breath, which had been sweet of smell, stinks and turns foul.]

Scragg has noted that the compiler of Napier XXX expanded his source by using pairs of near synonyms, such as "amolsniað and adimmiað" [weaken and become dim] for Vercelli Homily IX's "amolsniaþ" [weaken].[103] To this difference might be added that the compiler arranged the symptoms in a different order: eyes-tongue-ears as opposed to the more frequently attested eyes-ears-tongue.[104] Furthermore, the description of the ears appear to have been conflated with the description of the feet in Vercelli Homily IX that is missing in Napier XXX altogether. This conflation has caused the rather awkward remark in Napier XXX "ða earan aslawiað, þa þe ær wæron ful swifte" [the ears grow sluggish, those which had been very swift] in Napier XXX, which is closely resembled by Vercelli Homily IX's "þa fet aslapaþ þe ær wæron ful swifte" [the feet

[100] On this homily and its relation to Wulfstan's work, see L. Whitbread, ''Wulfstan' Homilies XXIX, XXX and Some Related Texts', *Anglia* 81 (1963), 347–64; D. G. Scragg, 'Napier's 'Wulfstan' Homily XXX: Its Sources, Its Relationship to the Vercelli Book and Its Style', *ASE* 6 (1977), 197–211.

[101] Scragg, 'Napier's 'Wulfstan' Homily', 198–205; *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, lxxv.

[102] Napier, hom. 30, p. 147, ll. 23–31, p. 148, ll. 1–7.

[103] Scragg, 'Napier's 'Wulfstan' Homily', 207.

[104] The order eyes-ears-tongue is attested in the *Catechesis* and the *Vita Tertia* of St. Patrick (see p. 98, n. 19 above). Cf. *ÆCHom II*, hom. 1, ll. 184–91: "Þonne beoð geopenode blindra manna eagan. and deaffra manna earan gehyrað. þonne hleapð se healta swa swa heort. and dumbra manna tungan beoð swiðe getinge" [then the eyes of the blind men will be opened, and the ears of the deaf men will listen, then the lame will leap as a deer and the tongue of the dumb men will be very eloquent].

sleep, which had been very swift].[105] The list of symptoms in Napier XXX, then, appears to be rather clumsily copied from a list of symptoms that was similar to that found in Vercelli Homily IX.

A more profound contrast between Napier XXX and Vercelli IX is the context in which both feature the lists of symptoms. Whereas Vercelli Homily IX frames old age as one of the prefigurations of Hell, as does the *Catechesis Celtica*, Napier XXX places the list of symptoms in a context similar to that of the *De duodecim abusiuis*: as bodily signs that must warn an old man of his impending death. In fact, the lines preceding the list in Napier XXX, for which Scragg was unable to find a source,[106] show some similarities to the lines that follow the symptoms of age in *De duodecim abusiuis*:

Iuuenibus enim incertus huius vitae terminus instat, senibus uero cunctis maturus ex hac luce rexitus breviter concordat.[107] [For young people the end of this life exists as an uncertainty, but for all old people it is a sure thing that the exit from this life is soon at hand.]	Þa geongan men hopiad, þæt hi moton lange on þissere worulde libban, ac se hopa hi bepæcð and beswicð, þonne him leofost wære, þæt hi lybban moston. Se ealda man him mæg gewislice witod witan, þæt him se deað genealæcð for ðære oferylde, þe him on sihð.[108] [Young men hope that they are able to live long in this world, but the hope that they are allowed to live, deceives and betrays them, when it would be most valuable to them. The old man can certainly know that death is approaching him because of old age, which then descends upon him.]

Napier XXX and *De duodecim abusiuis* share the notion that the aging body announces imminent death for the old man, whereas young men are uncertain about their future. Possibly, the compiler of Napier XXX had read *De duodecim abusiuis* and wanted to use the text for his message that death is inexorable, but then preferred the list of symptoms he found in the now lost homiliary that was similar to the Vercelli Book.

The symptoms of old age, so much has become clear, appear as a recurring *topos* in Old English homilies. The often detailed descriptions of the aged body were freely adapted from (Hiberno-)Latin sources and even occasionally expanded rather

[105] Napier, hom. 30, p. 148, ll. 1–2; *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 9, l. 93. On closer inspection, the reading in the Vercelli Book is closer to that in Napier XXX: "þa earan aslapað þe ær wæron ful swifte to gehyrenne", which Scrag emended to "þa fet aslapaþ þe ær wæron ful swifte" on the basis of the text in Hatton 115 (see p. 117, n. 98 above). It is worth noting that the form "aslawiað" [become sluggish] is more apt for formerly swift feet than is "aslapaþ" [become weak] and that, in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, the 'wynn' (*p*) and the *p* are easily confused. Napier XXX, then, may retain the correct reading for this word, as opposed to Vercelli Homily IX.

[106] Cf. Scragg, 'Napier's 'Wulfstan' Homily', 198.

[107] Pseudo-Cyprian, *De duodecim abusiuis*, ed. Hellmann, 34–5, trans. Throop, 117.

[108] Napier, hom. 30, p. 147, ll. 23–9.

than shortened, resulting in evocative depictions of an elderly person devoid of joy and sensory aptitude. Such images were employed for two distinct purposes: the Blickling homilist, Ælfric and the author of Napier XXX utilised the representation of the decaying body to remind their audience that secular life would come to an end and was, therefore, inferior to spiritual life; the Vercelli homilist, by contrast, framed the drawbacks of age as one of the prefigurations of Hell. In all, the decrepit, aging body was a welcome device that Anglo-Saxon homilists could use to turn their audience's hopes and minds towards the afterlife; an afterlife, as we shall see below, where old age was either absent or present, depending on whether the hereafter would be Heaven or Hell.

Hellish old age and heavenly youth: Age in the afterlife

In her article on old age in Anglo-Saxon literature, Semper has postulated that "Christianity does not simply promise Anglo-Saxons a life without end after death; it promises them an eternal life without old age".[109] She based her claim on a single description of the resurrection of aged bodies at Judgement Day in the Old English translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*:

> Ge, furþum manna lichaman forealdiað, swa swa oðre gescæaftas ealdiat. Ac swa swa hy ær wurðlicor lybbað þonne treowu oðþe oðre nytenu, swa hy eac weorðfulicor arisað on domes dæge, swa þæt nefre syððam þa lichaman ne geendiað ne ne forealdiað.[110]
>
> [Yes, even the bodies of men grow old, just as other creatures grow old. But just as they formerly lived more honourably than the trees and other animals, so they also arise more honourably on Judgement Day, so that the body will never afterwards come to an end nor grow old.]

In other words, when the dead are resurrected at Judgement Day they will no longer be old nor will they grow old in the future. Similar representations of a restored youth of aged bodies at the time of their resurrection exist, such as Ælfric's notion that "we sceolon arisan of deaðe on þære ylde þe crist wæs þa ða he þrowade: þæt is ymbe þreo 7 þrittig geara; Ðeah cyld forðfare oððe forwerod mann" [we shall arise from death at the age that Christ was when he suffered, that is about thirty-three years, whether departed as a child or as a worn-out man].[111] In another homily, Ælfric again noted that, upon resurrection, the dead will be as old as Christ was when he died.[112] Thus, whether death ensued in infancy or at an advanced age, everyone would be in their early thirties on the Day of Judgement.

[109] Semper, 314.
[110] *King Alfred's Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies*, ed. T. A. Carnicelli (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 53, ll. 22–6.
[111] *ÆCHom I*, hom. 16, ll. 126–8. Ælfric here follows Julian of Toledo's *Prognosticon futuri saeculi*, see Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 133.
[112] *Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. Pope, hom. 11, ll. 302–7.

Semper's assertion that old age was absent from the afterlife is further confirmed by various descriptions of Heaven in poetry and homilies.[113] Such literary representations of Paradise often enumerated the celestial joys in combination with the absence of certain horrors that typically included old age. Bede, for instance, wrote in his eschatological poem *De die iudicii* [Concerning Judgement Day] that in the heavenly afterlife one would enjoy the greatest of joys and no longer suffer "fessa senectus" [wearied old age].[114] Bede's poem was extremely popular and also survives in the late tenth-century vernacular version *Judgement Day II*, which translated "fessa senectus" as "geswenced yld" [wearied old age].[115] The anonymous poet of *The Phoenix*, likewise, presented Heaven as a place without "yrmþu ne yldo" [misery or old age], as did Aldhelm in his *Carmen de Virginitate*.[116] A recurring compositional device to describe the afterlife was the formula '*þær is* x *butan* y', where both x and y are antonyms.[117] A typical but expanded example is found in the poem *Christ III*:

> Đær is leofra lufu, lif butan endedeaðe,
> glæd gumena weorud, gioguð butan ylde,
> heofonduguða þrym, hælu butan sare,
> ryhtfremmendum ræst butan gewinne,
> domeadigra dæg butan þeostrum,
> beorht blædes full, blis butan sorgum,
> frið freondum bitweon forð butan æfestum,
> gesælgum on swegle, sib butan niþe
> halgum on gemonge.[118]
>
> [There is the love of loved ones, life without death, a joyous troop of men, youth without old age, glory of heavenly hosts, health without pain, rest without toil for the well-doers, a day of the renowned ones without darkness, bright full of glory, bliss without sorrows, continuous peace between friends without envy, for the blissful in harmony, peace without envy, among the saints.]

Thomas D. Hill has identified these lines in *Christ III* as belonging to the *topos* of 'The Seven Joys of Heaven', a numerical apothegm that stems from a Hiberno-Latin tradition.[119] Variants of this *topos* also regularly occur in Old English homiletics texts:

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[113] Semper, 301–2.
[114] Bede, *De die iudicii*, ed. and trans. G. D. Caie, *The Old English Poem Judgement Day II* (Cambridge, 2000), l. 129.
[115] *Judgement Day II*, ed. and trans. Caie, l. 257b. On the popularity of Bede's poem, see *ibid.*, 35.
[116] *The Phoenix*, ed. N. F. Blake (Exeter, 1990), l. 614a; Aldhelm, *Carmen de Virginitate*, trans. J. L. Rosier, *Aldhelm: Poetic Works*, ed. M. Lapdige and J. L. Rosier (Cambridge, 1958), 153.
[117] H. L. C. Tristram, 'Stock Descriptions of Heaven and Hell in Old English Prose and Poetry', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 79 (1978), 102–5.
[118] *Christ III*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie, *Exeter Book*, ll. 1652–60a.
[119] T. D. Hill, 'The Seven Joys of Heaven in *Christ III* and Old English Homiletic Texts', *NQ* ns 16 (1969), 165. Early Hiberno-Latin analogues, including the eighth-century *Liber de Numeris*, the *Catechesis Celtica* and the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, are reproduced in Johnson, 'Horrors of Hell', 429.

in at least eleven homilies "geogoþ butan ylde" [youth without old age] is consistently listed as one of the assets of Heaven, along with light (without darkness), happiness (without sorrow) and health (without sickness).[120]

Only two unique cases list old age as a property of Heaven, albeit not without reservation. Firstly, Vercelli Homily IX specifies that in Heaven one might experience old age, but that it will be "yld butan sare" [old age without pain].[121] This heavenly property is not attested elsewhere and Wright has hypothesised that it is probably a conflation of two more frequently used joys of heaven: "geogoþ butan ylde" [youth without old age] and "hælo butan sare" [health without pain].[122] The second homily to deviate from the apparent norm is an anonymous homily,[123] edited by Susan Irvine as 'The Transience of Earthly Delights'. The homily describes Heaven as follows:

> þær is ece eadignesse: þær eald ne graneð, ne child ne scræmeð. Ne bið þær þurst, ne hungor, ne wop, ne teoðe gegrind, ne morþer, ne man, ne þær nan ne swæltæð, for þam ðe þær ne byð nan acenned; ne þer ne byð sar, ne seoregæ, ne nan longing, ne unlustes gewin.[124]
>
> [there is eternal happiness; there the old man does not groan and the child does not scream. There will be no thirst, no hunger, no weeping, no grinding of teeth, no murder, no crime, there no one will die, because no one is born there; there will be no pain, no sorrow, no longing, no strife of evil.]

Irvine was unable to make out the source for this passage. I suggest that it was probably derived from the Latin poem *De mundi transitu* [On the World's Impermanence] by the Irish missionary and author Columbanus (543–615). His description of Heaven in this poem on the fleeting nature of worldly pleasures corresponds in various places with that in 'The Transience of Earthly Delights':

> *Ubi senex non gemat,*
> *Neque infans uagitat,*
> Ubi laudis Domini
> Nulla uox retinetur,
> *Ubi non esuritur,*
> *Ubi numquam sititur*,
> Ubi cibo superno

[120] *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, ed. B. Thorpe (London, 1840) II, p. 400; *Blickling Homilies*, ed. Morris, hom. 5, pp. 64–5, hom. 8, pp. 102–3; Assmann, hom. 14, l. 73; Napier, hom. 29, p. 142, l. 27; M. Förster, 'A New Version of the Apocalypse of Thomas in Old English', *Anglia 73* (1955), 18; *Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. Bazire and Cross, hom. 1, l. 160, hom. 4, l. 93; *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 19, ll. 173–4, hom. 21, ll. 243–4; 'Geherað nu mæn ða leofestan hu us godes bec', DOEC transcript from Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 85/86.

[121] *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 9, ll. 174–5.

[122] Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 105. Cf. *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, 188, n. 173–5.

[123] In Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 343 [s. xii^2]; Ker, no. 310.

[124] *Old English Homilies from MS Bodley 343*, ed. S. Irvine, EETS os 302 (Oxford, 1993), hom. 7, ll. 86–90.

> Plebs caelestis pascitur,
> *Ubi nemo moritur*
> *Quia nemo nascitur.* (correspondences in italics)[125]
>
> [… where the old does not groan nor the infant cry, where no voice is restrained to praise the Lord, where there is no hunger, where there is never thirst, where on celestial food the heavenly folk are fed, where no one dies because no one is born.]

Thus, yet again, an Anglo-Saxon homilist turned to a Hiberno-Latin text for inspiration concerning the impact of old age.[126] As elsewhere, old age is here presented as a state that does not unproblematically fall into the category of the joys of Heaven.

Being generally absent from Heaven, old age in contrast does occur as one of the horrors of Hell in at least two other homilies. Contrary to the recurrent mention of old age in instances of the Seven Joys of Heaven, the parallel-reverse motif the Five Horrors of Hell, identified by David F. Johnson, does not normally feature old age.[127] However, a unique, abbreviated version of this motif found in the homily 'Be heofonwarum 7 be helwarum' [On the inhabitants of Heaven and the inhabitants of Hell] reads: "Đar syndon þa ytemestan þystro butan leohte, þar byþ yld butan geoguðe" [there is the utmost darkness without light, there is old age without youth].[128] The latter property of Hell is an obvious reversal of the frequently attested Joy of Heaven "geoguð butan yldo" [youth without old age]. Lastly, and unrelated to the Five Horrors of Hell, old age is enumerated in a rogationtide homily as one of nine characteristics of Hell: "þær bið þeostru beþrycced and hungor and þurst and heto and yldo and unhælo and wanung and granung and toða grisbitung" [there will be oppressive darkness, hunger, thirst, heat, old age, ill health, deprivation, groaning and gnashing of teeth].[129]

To sum up the above, when Anglo-Saxons considered the afterlife, they imagined Heaven consistently as a place without old age, while their idea of hellish torment did on occasion include growing old. Thus, the restoration of bodies to their prime at Judgement Day, as claimed in Augustine's *Soliloquies* and the work of Ælfric, only lasted for those who would go to Heaven; for the souls assigned to the Abyss, their regained physical prime would turn out to be short lived.

Conclusion

Anglo-Saxon writers had much to say about the drawbacks of old age. Poets focused primarily on the emotional and social repercussions of growing old, linking human senescence to secular transience. The old narrators of various sapiential poems had gained their wisdom through adversity and thus embodied their own overarching

[125] Columbanus, *De Mundi Transitu*, ed. G. S. M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani opera* (Dublin, 1957), ll. 95–104.
[126] The Bodley homilist also used Columbanus's *De mundi transitu* in various other passages as well, as I hope to show in a future publication.
[127] Johnson, 'Horrors', 414–31.
[128] Quoted in *ibid.*, 427, who also gives an Old Norse analogue.
[129] *Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. Bazire and Cross, hom. 4, ll. 47–8.

message: the fleeting nature of worldly joys. The most evocative depictions of the aging body, however, are to be found in pastoral texts. Rather than comforting those who suffered from the disadvantages of age, homilists referred to physical decrepitude in order to remind their audience of their impending death or to strike the fear of Hell into their hearts. Indeed, one of the alluring aspects of Heaven for an Anglo-Saxon was the absence of old age.

I started chapter 3 by juxtaposing the *gerontophobia*, 'fear of old age', established for Modern English literature, and Burrow's claim, followed by Crawford, that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other age categories.[130] Everything in chapter 4 suggests that the literary record of early medieval England is not wholly different from that of later ages and, arguably, it is apter to ascribe to the Anglo-Saxons an apprehension for old age, rather than an appreciation. With that in mind, let me return to the start of this chapter and the interpretation of "on yldo eft" in *The Fortunes of Men* to indicate a period of "wyndagum" [days of joy]. Given the above, the translation 'in the next stage of life, i.e. maturity' is more likely than 'in old age': clearly, Anglo-Saxon writers did not associate the last stage of life with 'happy days'. Rather, in the perception of the Anglo-Saxons, the elderly typically spend their days in *gēomor*, *sār* and *gehðo*: sadness, pain and grief.

[130] Freedman, 'Sufficiently Decayed: Gerontophobia', 49–61. Cf. Burrow, 109; Crawford, 59.