CHAPTER 3

Outliving Others
Old Age in Beowulf *and Cynewulfian Epilogues*

> The only benefit is you can cry away
> and no one will know the difference,
> which at this stage is something we all could use.
> – Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Old Blue-Eyes', from *Outliving*

Isidore of Seville sets the tone for centuries of philosophising about old age in seeing it as a time of great contrasts, offering clear drawbacks and advantages:

> Senectus autem multa secum et bona adfert et mala. Bona, quia nos ab inpotentissimis dominis liberat, voluptatibus inponit modum, libidinis frangit impetus, auget sapientiam, dat maturiora consilia. Mala autem, quia senium miserrimum est debilitate et odio. 'Subeunt' enim 'morbi tristisque senectus'.
>
> Old age brings with it much that is good and much that is bad. Much that is good, because it frees us from despotic masters, imposes moderation on desires, breaks the drive of lust, augments wisdom, and imparts riper counsel. Much that is bad, however, because of the weakness and unpopularity it brings, for: 'Disease and sorrowful old age creep up.'[1]

On the one hand, this phase of life brings modesty and wisdom, but, on the other, it brings a lack of strength, ill will from others, and sadness. Isidore does not strive to connect these diverse characteristics, but instead allows them to sit alongside each other in quiet disharmony.

Old English writings likewise harbour an ambivalence about elderliness, as recent scholarship has highlighted. Refuting earlier claims that the pre-Conquest period was 'a golden age for the elderly', Porck has recently emphasised the diversity of views on old age in early medieval England, stressing particularly the 'many negative remarks about senescence' made in Old English and Anglo-Latin writings, especially homilies, and asserting that although some Old English texts suggest that the aged are 'wise and worthy of respect', others 'abound in concerns about ungodly elderly and

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feature graphic descriptions of the physical drawbacks associated with old age, such as the loss of hair and teeth'.[2] Old age in Old English poetry and prose is not presented wholly positively or negatively, but instead as a complex mixture of the two.

Deep-set ambivalence is immediately clear from surveys of the Old English lexical field of elderliness, as even individual words are often multivalent. For instance, *eald* ('old'), one of the fifty most common words in the Old English language, at times seems to carry some sense of 'authority', but of material things it can mean 'worn with age or use . . . deteriorated through the effects of time'.[3] The related noun *yldo* can connote either 'decrepitude' or 'authority' depending on context.[4] The adjective *frod* refers to people as well as what the *DOE* describes as 'anthopomorphized' creatures and plants, straddling the meanings 'old', 'experienced', and 'wise', signalling 'worthy of veneration/respect on account of age/experience, wisdom'.[5] According to Corey J. Zwikstra, this word refers to wisdom and experience that is 'unambiguously presented in a positive light'; however, Porck points out that *frod* can be linked with experiences of grief, for instance in the compound *geomor-frod* ('sad and old'), used to describe the aged Sarah in *Genesis A* (2226b), stressing that ideas of grief, wisdom, and old age can 'overlap' in Old English.[6]

The present chapter is interested in inhabiting such overlaps. It dwells on the places where apparently dissonant characteristics associated with old age come into contact: where decrepitude is concomitant with authority (even supportive of it), and where grief prompts, enables, and underpins consolation, rather than only being resolved by it. The close relationship between wisdom and verbal communication in Old English poetry is especially important for understanding the kind of wisdom that can come with age.[7] Even more importantly, the experiences of loss, witnessing the death of others and – to some degree – living through trauma, are nodes connecting what might seem like very distinct qualities associated with old age, especially grief and wisdom. A life 'lived into old age', as Helen Small remarks, 'is likely to be one that experiences more in the way of contingent harm than a life that ends in a person's prime'.[8] Numerous Old English poems are keenly invested in this idea: to live into later years is to be exposed to ever more risk and loss. The frequency with which ideas of grief, wisdom, and age are directly referred to – and related – in these poems can make it tempting to gloss over the exact nature of the relationships between these ideas, but it is only through this kind of scrutiny that we can discover points of real nuance within the big picture.

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Trauma theory is full of potential to elucidate how ostensibly positive and negative traits associated with old age might relate, especially given its long-standing emphasis on the importance of verbalisation, storytelling, and narrative as responses to trauma, and its development of concepts of post-traumatic growth, sometimes described in terms of 'wisdom'.[9] In Old English poems too, experiencing psychologically overwhelming and distressing events is regularly associated with their later articulation through speech and narrative, and especially the composition of poetry; in a further departure from previous scholarship, I emphasise the preponderance of old poets in Old English verse.[10] I am not interested here in retrospectively diagnosing characters with any psychological conditions as they would today be understood, or in unmasking or resolving the meaning of poetic texts by recourse to trauma theory. I instead aim to think with trauma theory as a new means of approaching the oft-discussed nexus of grief, experience, wisdom, age, and speech in Old English poetry. Taking such a perspective reveals the extent to which Old English verse presents the verbal and poetic ability of the elderly, as well as their intellectual and spiritual growth, as responses to the pain, loss, and transformative suffering these figures have experienced over the course of their lives in the world, and as therefore intimately connected with that suffering.

This chapter will primarily focus on elderliness in *Beowulf* and in the epilogues which bear Cynewulf's name, which are recurrently concerned with the ends of worldly life courses and which might even be termed 'death songs', as we will see. The historical provenance of both *Beowulf* and the works of Cynewulf are largely unknown, but it has long been observed that words and phrases in Cynewulf's poetry parallel and may echo *Beowulf*.[11] This chapter will note structural, thematic, and lexical similarities in both poets' handling of old age, but also key differences: the suffering described by aged singers in *Beowulf* largely takes the form of personal loss of beloved individuals, but for the Cynewulf-persona, it tends to constitute a more general awareness of death as well as the threat of spiritual failure. I will then consider the Exeter Book poem known as *The Phoenix*, a text 'clearly Cynewulfian' in style, and Cynewulfian too in its handling of the intersection of age, experience, suffering, and poetic skill.[12]

The ambiguous nature of the phoenix-bird's gender aside (on which, see later in this chapter), most of the elderly figures discussed in this chapter are male. As Porck has previously observed, elderly women are not well represented in the poetic corpus.[13] Nonetheless, they are present, and the chapter will alight upon Beowulf's depiction of Ongentheow's wife, and *Genesis A*'s presentation of Sarah, who is explicitly both postmenopausal

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and elderly. It will dwell at greatest length on the aged female poet described in *Riddle 6*, a nightingale, with the poem most likely reflecting the fact that Old English *nihte-gale* is feminine in gender.[14] Like *Beowulf* and the Cynewulfian epilogues, *Riddle 6* connects old age, wise skill, and poetic ability. Like the description of Sarah in *Genesis A*, however, the poet's attention slides over the internal experience of the female subject and stresses instead how the figure's age is witnessed by others. The experience of being scrutinised frequently surfaces as a facet of elderliness in the texts discussed in this chapter, but the power of the audience tends to be particularly elevated in the case of the aged women we find in the corpus.

In any navigation of the territory of old age, wisdom, grief, and poetic skill in Old English poetry, the Exeter Book 'elegies' must inevitably be guests at the table. In this chapter, they are largely unobtrusive, but I do wish to note the salience of *The Wanderer* to the ensuing analysis, especially as this poem foregrounds a series of related figures of long experience in the world, including one who, 'wise [/aged] in spirit, often remembered from afar' ('frod in ferðe, feor oft gemon', 90).[15] Broadly speaking, the poem's argument can be summarised as follows: 'wisdom is founded on experience; no one can be wise before he is old; an old man will live to see ravaged the scenes of his youthful happiness; in the contemplation of these ruins he shows his wisdom by moralizing'.[16] *The Wanderer*, along with other short poems of the Exeter Book, may specifically show influence from Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae* in its depiction of 'the idealized figure of the sage', as the speaker seems to evolve into 'the one wise in spirit' ('snottor on mode', 111a), 'having attained this state through both personal suffering and philosophical reflection'.[17] Elsewhere, the worldly ruins that the speaker contemplates have even been interpreted as representative of the world in its Sixth Age – a time of physical decay and spiritual opportunity, according to Augustine.[18] By this logic, the individual speaker's accumulated experience of loss allows for an appreciation of the belatedness of the cosmos itself, crumbling in its fabric, and therefore access to the kind of spiritual insight traditionally available in the Sixth Age. But how exactly personal loss and spiritual insight relate to each other in this poem is one of the great cruces of *Wanderer* scholarship. Where Peter Clemoes sees the allusions to roaming thoughts, settling on visions of lost friends and places far removed, as the fruitful meditations of a mind travelling beyond the physical bounds of the body, Francis Leneghan sees them as the kind of dangerous distractions which can tempt a person towards the sin of despair.[19] The poem is never wholly explicit on this matter. Is fixation on what has been lost an important step towards the renouncing of earthly

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matters, or does it constitute a hazardous distraction from the proper goal of salvation?

To take a step towards the discourses of trauma, we might approach the question by wondering whether the figures of *The Wanderer* are at times dissociative, dislocated from the present moment, and stuck reliving instead fragments of the catastrophic experiences of the past.[20] As the 'essence of trauma', dissociation sees 'physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own' such that 'sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived'; they thus compromise a person's ability to be 'fully alive in the present'.[21] To see the figures of *The Wanderer* this way is not so different from seeing them as teetering on the edge of – and possibly learning from a brush with – the spiritual trap of despair, or the temptation of distraction. Like despair, like distraction, the experience of trauma is essentially stultifying, but certain psychological approaches to processing a traumatic event can prompt a person towards repair, healing, and sometimes even a kind of 'wisdom'.[22] Trauma is itself inherently preverbal, resisting narrative, but the construction of narratives offers a powerful tool for negotiating and resolving trauma. Putting these narratives together involves great depths of psychological and spiritual enquiry: 'the traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, a philosopher, and a jurist'.[23] As part of resolving trauma, senseless and overwhelming personal experiences must be comprehended as part of deeper moral, ethical, spiritual, social, and political frameworks. Viewed this way, the distractions of the past in *The Wanderer* are at once dangerous to the soul, and the foundation of the psychological and spiritual growth which shape the reflections of its second half.

A similar psychological mobility characterises the conditions of many of the aged figures of this chapter as they mentally travel to the events of their past, connect them to those of others, and return to the present. At times, as when Beowulf describes an old man lamenting the death of his son, the experience of dislocation from the present moment is very pronounced. At others, as when he describes an old singer in Heorot (possibly Hrothgar) recounting various songs and stories, the aged figure is more clearly present psychologically, although he is still said to reach back far into the past when he tearfully describes his old age (2111–14). Given the strong emphasis on an attentive audience in this episode, we might think of Jonathan Shay's dictum that 'healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma – being able to safely tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community'.[24]

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Grief and wisdom are not presented, on such occasions, as oppositional or contrastive concepts: rather, they feed into each other, such that the process of negotiating trauma and grief can be strongly nonlinear. The result is a kind of mental turmoil that is potentially profound in nature, one which can lead to great poetic and intellectual feats, but which also risks dragging the aged person away from their lived experience in the present.

Living in the Absence of Others

Before discussing *Beowulf* and Cynewulfian epilogues, this chapter will briefly survey the ways in which the wider Old English corpus indicates that living into old age constitutes a kind of outliving, bestowing the status of a survivor. A person's old age is frequently contextualised by the people and entities who have had their lives curtailed at an earlier stage. This is not to suggest that the elderly in this period were culturally considered strange oddities in their survival, possessing a 'rarity value' – historians have for many years disputed the once popularly held idea that people in early medieval England could expect to live only into their thirties.[25] It is simply that Old English poets are often invested in the significance of some individuals outliving others, and they reflect on this as part of the meaning of old age. *The Seafarer*, for instance, offers a vision of old age as an overwhelming physical force which falls upon a person at the same time as knowledge of the death of loved ones:

> Blæd is gehnæged,
> eorþan indryhto ealdað ond searað,
> swa nu monna gehwylc geond middan-geard.
> Yldo him on fareð, onsyn blacað,
> gomel-feax gnornað, wat his iuwine,
> æþelinga bearn, eorþan forgiefene.[26] (88b–93)
>
> Vitality is humbled, the nobility of the earth grows old and withers, as now does each person throughout earth. Old age comes upon him, his face pales, the grey-haired one expresses grief, knows his friends from before, children of nobles, have given up the earth.

This aged individual is the lone remainder of a once close social group. His old age is concurrent with the witnessing of death – he lives on in the absence of others, experiencing a major shift in his physical state at the same time as undergoing this social loss. His realisation of loss and elderliness thus emerges as a catastrophic disruption of identity, even the creation

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of a new identity. It is comparable to the kind of breakage and emergence that Catherine Malabou describes, once a life course 'jumps' its 'bed': 'A new being comes into the world for a second time, out of a deep cut that opens in a biography'.[27] The figure described in this passage becomes the 'the grey-haired one' ('gomel-feax', 92a), just as the primary figure of *The Wanderer* – if this poem can even be said to have one – becomes associated with different epithets across the course of the poem: 'solitary one', 'earth-stepper', 'friendless man', and 'wise man' ('an-haga', 1a; 'eard-stapa', 6a; 'wineleas guma', 45b; 'snottor', 111a).

As noted at the end of Chapter 2, several Old English poems suggest that old age is simply one of several possible ways that a life course can alter radically, comparable to illness and violent death. To escape one is to be in the path of another. This principle is articulated slightly earlier in *The Seafarer*:

> Simle þreora sum þinga gehwylce
> ær his tid-dege to tweon weorþeð;
> adl oþþe yldo oþþe ecg-hete
> fægum fromweardum feorh oðþringeð. (68–71)
>
> One of three things will always become uncertain for any person before his end-day: illness or old age or the sword's hate will crush the life out of each one doomed to depart.[28]

For further examples of this kind of formulation one might turn to Hrothgar's 'sermon' in *Beowulf* (1735b–9, discussed at the end of Chapter 2), *Maxims I* (8b–10), and *Riddle 41* (1–4a). As Moses declares in *Exodus*: 'now those arch-thieves share dominion, old age and early death' ('nu regn-þeofas rice dælað, / yldo oððe ær-deað', 539–40a).[29] From this perspective, old people are in the dubiously privileged position of outliving those who die earlier by other means, while enduring a different kind of physical and mental onslaught. In large part, this is what it means to live in a fallen world, as explored in other biblical verse narratives such as *Genesis B*, which makes the following observation about the tree of life:

> moste on ecnisse æfter lybban,
> wesan on worulde se þæs wæstmes onbat,
> swa him æfter þy yldo ne derede,
> ne suht sware[.][30] (469–72a)
>
> he would be allowed thereafter to live on and to exist in the world in eternity who ate of that fruit, so that age did not harm him after that, nor severe sickness[.]

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Elderliness is fundamentally deviant according to this theological tradition, manifesting elsewhere, for example, in Augustine's sense of old age as just one deviation from an ideal condition of 'supreme health of body, and entire tranquillity of soul' ('Summa in carne sanitas, in animo tota tranquillitas').[31] It is a form of distinctly postlapsarian suffering, paralleling other ways in which physical and spiritual well-being can be compromised.

The most extended meditation on old age in the poetic corpus takes the form of a passage in the dialogue poem known as *Solomon and Saturn II*, which frames the workings of 'age' or 'old age' in the world as a kind of continual destruction, visible everywhere:

Saturnus cwæð:
Ac hwæt is ðaet wundor ðe geond ðas worold færeð,
styrnenga gæð, staðolas beateð,
aweceð wop-dropan, winneð oft hider?
Ne mæg hit steorra ne stan ne se steapa gimm,
water ne wildeor wihte beswican,
ac him on hand gæð heardes and hnesces,
micles ond mætes; him to mose sceall
gegangan geara gehwelce grund-buendra,
lyft fleogendra, lagu-swemmendra,
ðria ðreoteno ðusend-gerimes.
Salomon cvæð:
Yldo beoð on eorðan aeghwæs cræftig;
mid hiðendre hilde-wræsne,
rumre racen-teage, ręceð wide,
langre linan, lisseð eall ðæt heo wile.
Beam heo abreoteð ond 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.[32] (104–23)

Saturn said:
But what is that wonder that travels throughout this world, goes sternly, beats the foundations, wakes weeping drops, struggles often hither? Neither star, nor stone, nor the high jewel, water nor the wild animal, escape it one bit, but there goes into its power both hard and soft, big and small. To it must go as food every year three times thirteen thousand-count of the earth-dwellers, of the air-flying, of the ocean-swimming.
Solomon said:
Age is crafty in every way upon the earth; she reaches wide with a plundering battle chain, with roomy fetters, with a long rope, she subdues all that she wishes. She destroys the tree and breaks branches, stirs the

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> standing trunk on her journey, fells it to earth. After that, she devours the wild bird. She defeats the wolf; she outwaits rocks, she surpasses steel, she bites iron with rust, does the same to us.

Solomon states that the solution here is *yldo*, but this passage forms part of a web of related Latin and Old English riddles with solutions also including 'time' and 'wind'.[33] Several details remain suggestive of a gale, sweeping through the world, and others suggest simply 'time', given that everything eventually falls to this creature's will. In aligning time and age with the destructive force of the wind, released and constrained at God's will (as described elsewhere in Exeter Book *Riddle 1* and Cynewulf's *Elene*, 1270b–6), this passage suggests that to exist a long time in the world is to witness an ever-escalating attack inflicted upon both human and nonhuman parts of the cosmos. As such, it gives rise to 'weeping drops' ('wop-dropan', 106a), seemingly a kind of mourning experience, although it is not clear who or what is crying.

As we will see over the course of this chapter, humans suffer the violence of age just like nonhuman parts of the cosmos, and (as is sometimes also implied to be the case for nonhuman entities) this violence prompts them to reflect upon – and construct narratives about – those they have lost and the terror of death. When the elderly speak of themselves as remnants of prior times and societies, they sometimes imply (as does *Solomon and Saturn II*) that the world is a place of attrition and erosion. At these times, old age seems to constitute a psychological condition more than a stable developmental phase: a way of looking at the world which is inextricably connected to having one's existence extended past people, things, and places that one once knew. This can enable wisdom and verbal adroitness while also threatening to lead a person to fixate on sorrow.

To turn to our first example from *Beowulf*, when we see Hrothgar's counsellors mulling at the edge of Grendel's mere, they jump all too easily to the presumption that they have, once again, survived someone they know, and at this point, the poet takes care to visually demarcate the group as aged:

> Sona þæt gesawon snottre ceorlas,
> þa ðe mid Hroðgare on holm wliton,
> þæt wæs yð-geblond eal gemenged,
> brim blode fah. Blonden-feaxe,
> gomele ymb godne ongeador spræcon
> þæt hig þæs æðelinges eft ne wendon,
> þæt he sige-hreðig secean come
> mærne þeoden[.] (1591–8a)

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> Straightaway the wise men who were looking at the water with Hrothgar saw that the blended water was all mingled, the sea stained with blood. The men with blended hair, old ones around the good one, declared together that they did not hope to see that prince again, that he would come to see that renowned lord, victory-triumphant[.][34]

The blended nature of the bloody water mirrors the very hair on the heads of the old counsellors: although a 'general term for old', the compound *blanden-feax* signals specifically 'hair which is mingled with grey'.[35] These lines accentuate the magnitude of Beowulf's death-defying success, but they also indicate the complex emotional experience of old age in this poem, involving so much familiarity with violence. The aged have lived in intimacy with loss. This experience can be a prompt to what we might identify (after Simone de Beauvoir) as meaningful 'projects' taken up in old age, including 'devotion to individuals, to groups, or to causes, social, political, intellectual, or creative work'.[36] It can also lead to total absorption in the experience of loss and a difficulty in seeing beyond it. Hrothgar's counsellors carry out their own culturally valuable intellectual and verbal work in this scene, but they are quick – in this case, too quick – to see loss.

Elderliness and Poetic Craft in *Beowulf*

Beowulf's elderly figures are frequently presented as painfully conscious of their own existence extending beyond the lives of others, and they often articulate a familiarity with what might be termed trauma. Fragments of disruptive and destructively transformative experiences are sometimes accessed in a near-dissociative manner, with little sense of narrative order. At other times, the revisiting is presented more positively, notably when integrated into a more coherent narrative that is being recounted to others. The elderliness of King Hrothgar and King Beowulf respectively has attracted a wealth of scholarship, much of which has hotly debated whether these figures are compromised or improved by their elderliness: is Hrothgar passive and feminised? Is Beowulf a *senex fortis*, or foolish and prideful?[37] This chapter is concerned with both figures, placed alongside other aged individuals in *Beowulf*, and follows those scholars who see the text itself as ambiguous on the matter, overtly condemning neither king.[38] Rather than evaluating their worth as kings, this chapter explores those parts of their identities that the poet seems to subtly connect with their elderliness without necessarily soliciting judgement from the audience one way or the other.

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One of the poem's lengthiest descriptions of a condition of old age seems to centre on Hrothgar, as Beowulf describes an unnamed old Scylding performing songs in the hall after Grendel's defeat. Upon returning to Hygelac's court, Beowulf reports the entertainment:

> Me þone wæl-ræs wine Scildunga
> fættan golde fela leanode,
> manegum maðmum, syððan mergen com
> ond we to symble geseten hæfdon.
> Þær wæs gidd ond gleo, gomela Scilding,
> fela-fricgende, feorran rehte;
> hwilum hilde-deor hearpan wynne,
> gomen-wudu grette, hwilum gyd awræc
> soð ond sarlic, hwilum syllic spell
> rehte æfter rihte rum-heort cyning;
> hwilum eft ongan eldo gebunden,
> gomel guð-wiga gioguðe cwiðan,
> hilde-strengo; hreðer inne weoll
> þonne he wintrum frod worn gemunde.
> Swa we þær inne andlangne dæg
> niode naman, oð ðæt niht becwom
> oðer to yldum. (2101–17a)
>
> For that slaughter-rush, the friend of the Scyldings rewarded me with much plated gold, many treasures, when morning came and we had sat down to the feast. There was song and music; the old Scylding, when many asked, told of far-off things; sometimes the battle-bold one plucked the merry-wood, the joy of the harp, sometimes he expressed a poem, true and sad, sometimes the roomy-hearted king told rightly a strange tale; sometimes, again, the old warrior, bound with age, would lament his youth, his battle-strength; his heart welled within when, wise with winters, he remembered many things.
>
> So all day long we took pleasure in there, until another night came to men.[39]

The performer here moves through various kinds of lyrical and musical art, possibly referring to distinct genres of poetry.[40] In this convivial and celebratory context, the capacity of narrative and language to create an impression of order and social unity is front and centre. Towards the end of the passage, though, there is a hint that not everything can be neatly articulated – Hrothgar's heart floods with emotion, and we are told that he remembered many things, not that he necessarily recounted them.

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Before advancing a full interpretation of these lines, I wish to juxtapose them with an ostensibly very different passage: the description around 300 lines later of an unnamed old man whose son has been hanged, also narrated by Beowulf – this time in his last speech before he confronts the dragon. The implication may be that this figure cannot avenge his son because he has been legally executed.[41] This account shades into Beowulf's description of King Hrethel's bereavement as one of his sons, Hæthcyn, kills the other, Herebeald. When describing the nameless bereaved father, the poet highlights a powerlessness that is similar to Hrethel's:

Swa bið geomorlic gomelum ceorle
to gebidanne, þæt his byre ride
giong on galgan. Þonne he gyd wrece,
sarigne sang, þonne his sunu hangað
hrefne to hroðre ond he him helpe ne mæg,
eald ond infrod, ænige gefremman,
symble bið gemyndgad morna gehwylce
eaforan ellor-sið; oðres ne gymeð
to gebidanne burgum in innan
yrfe-weardas, þonne se an hafað
þurh deaðes nyd dæda gefondad.
Gesyhð sorh-cearig on his suna bure
win-sele westne, windge reste
reotge berofene; ridend swefað,
hæleð in hoðman; nis þær hearpan sweg,
gomen in geardum, swylce ðær iu wæron.
Gewiteð þonne on sealman, sorh-leoð gæleð,
an æfter anum; þuhte him eall to rum,
wongas ond wic-stede. (2444–62a)

In the same way, it is miserable for an old man to endure that his son should swing young on the gallows. Then he may express a poem, a sorrowful song, when his son hangs, a pleasure for the raven, and he, old and very wise, cannot provide him with any help; always each morning he is reminded of his child's journey elsewhere; he does not care to wait for other heirs within the stronghold when one has through death's compulsion experienced trials. In anxious sorrow, he sees in his son's chamber an abandoned wine-hall, a windy resting place deprived of joy; the riders sleep, heroes in darkness; there is no sound of the harp, merriment in the courts, as there was before. Then he goes to his couch, sings a sorrow-lay, one after the other. To him the land and dwelling-place seemed all too roomy.

No great leaps are required to connect this passage with the psychological and physiological phenomena associated with trauma. This figure is trapped,

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reliving the unbearable moment of his son's hanging on the gallows, and experiences his loss as sensory fragments, so typical of trauma – the silence of the courts, the presence of wind, the image of the sleeping warriors. He feels a sense of profound helplessness, which may be explained by practical considerations brought about by the legal execution of his son, but may be more psychological at root. His outlook is shaped by a pronounced lack of interest in the present moment; he does not await a new heir, refusing any kind of social functioning in favour of returning to his bed. His only voluntary action in this passage, described both at the beginning and at the end, is his singing of laments, which resemble a kind of self-soothing – indeed, singing and chanting have been suggested to help with self-regulation and the healing of trauma, and seem to be treated by this figure as a more bearable alternative to the silence he perceives in the courts.[42]

This passage contains several details which parallel *Beowulf*'s opening lines.[43] In addition to calling back to the poem's beginning, this passage also seems to rework the representation of Hrothgar singing in Heorot. Similarities include the avoidance of both elderly figures' names, while the two are referred to through adjectival constructions using *gomel* (2105b, 2112a, 2444b), and the related adjectives *frod* and – intensified – *infrod* (2114a, 2449a). One very similar half-line makes an appearance: 'hwilum gyd awræc' ('sometimes he expressed a poem', 2108b) and 'Þonne he gyd wrece' ('then he expresses a poem', 2446b), with *gyd* also translatable as 'song', 'riddle', or 'proverb'.[44] The difference between the two temporal adverbs is indicative, however, of how these passages differ. The first employs anaphora on *hwilum* ('sometimes' or 'at times', 2107a, 2108b, 2109b, 2111a), whereas the second uses the more explicitly sequential *þonne* ('then' or 'when', 2447b, 2453b, 2460a). The half-line 'an æfter anum' (2461a) seems to refer to the old man's series of laments, such that the songs are sung 'one after the other', possibly meaning 'in sequence', or perhaps 'continuously' (although this phrase could also refer to the figure of the solitary father singing after his son).[45] The description of the coming of morning, which both passages share, also differs in its expression. The first episode commences 'syððan mergen com' ('when morning came', 2103b), as a one-off event. The bereaved old man's behaviour takes place 'morna gehwylce' ('each' or 'every morning', 2450b), much in the manner of the laments made by the initial solitary figure of *The Wanderer* 'uhtna gehwylce' ('each dawn', 8b): there is a notable contrast, then, with the spontaneity and variety of Hrothgar's performance.

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Taken together, these passages begin to configure old age as a condition of survival. This is more pronounced in the second passage, and as we will see, there are several other ways in which the idea of age as survival is accentuated in the last third of the poem, especially when the dying Beowulf identifies himself as the last of his kin, recalling the earlier plight of the figure known as the Last Survivor.[46] At the same time, the passages highlight the situational and affective contingencies of elderliness. Hrothgar is certainly familiar with loss, but he is not subject to the traumatic rupture of losing a child in the manner of the unnamed father. Each figure's social setting in the present also differs greatly. Hrothgar recounts his stories to an attentive and engaged audience; he performs 'fela-fricgende' (2106a), which seems to be an absolute participle: 'when many asked'.[47] Elsewhere, Hrothgar is presented as a carefully watched figure: earlier in the poem, we hear that Beowulf's retinue evaluate Hrothgar's kingship on their journey home. His gifts are praised, but it is said that *yldo* took away his 'joys of strength' ('mægenes wynnum', 1887a). By contrast, the father is presented to us in isolation. He soothes himself alone, lacking an audience for his poetry. These differences keep the two experiences of elderliness distinct, for all their shared emphasis on remembrance of what has passed away and construction of song. As the poem continues, vagaries of social setting and audience remain pivotal in determining experiences of elderliness.

A strong interest in the social context of the aged is not unique to *Beowulf*, and in particular the idea of the aged person as a spectacle surfaces elsewhere. In *Genesis A* (seemingly composed in the early eighth century, and possibly known to the *Beowulf*-poet), a picture of the aged Sarah is embedded in the reported speech of Abraham:[48]

> Abraham ða ofestum legde
> hleor on eorðan and mid hucse bewand
> þa hleoðor-cwydas on hige sinum, 2340
> mod-geðance. He þæs mæl-dæges
> self ne wende þæt him Sarra,
> bryd blonden-feax bringan meahte
> on woruld sunu. Wiste gearwe
> þæt þæt wif huru wintra hæfde 2345
> efne hundteontig, geteled rimes. (2338–46)
>
> Then Abraham quickly put his face to the earth, and with laughter turned those speeches over in his own mind, his thoughts. He himself did not expect the appointed time that Sarah, grey-haired woman, could bring a son

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into the world. He knew clearly that the woman had truly a hundred winters exactly, told by number.

The scriptural equivalent of this passage in the Vulgate (Genesis 17:17) has Abraham identify both himself and Sarah as improbable parents. In the Old English poem, Abraham's attentions and laughter are centred on his wife and her infertility – it is her postmenopausal condition that becomes a site of comic dissonance, and her old age that is visually striking. Sarah's own laughter and speech (Genesis 18:12) are reported by the poet at 2382–9, but are 'muted into indirect narration'.[49] Her elderliness is something mainly perceived from the outside, particularly conspicuous at a moment of perceived restriction: her apparent inability to have children. As Beauvoir remarks in her study of old age, this phase of life is often – in unsettling ways – 'seen from without'.[50]

Indeed, the compound *blanden-feax* is used in *Beowulf* in a context which similarly emphasises how aged men and women are contemplated by others. In addition to describing Hrothgar and his advisors in *Beowulf* (1594b, 1791a, 1873a), it is employed within Wiglaf's speech after Beowulf's death, attached to Ongentheow:

> Þær wearð Ongenðio ecgum sweorda,
> blonden-fexa on bid wrecan,
> þæt se þeod-cyning ðafian sceolde
> Eafores anne dom. (2961–4a)

> Then Ongentheow, the grey-haired one, by the edges of swords was compelled to stop, so that the king of the people had to submit to the single judgement of Eofor.

Ongentheow is at the mercy of others, his vulnerable condition here linked to his hair. He is subsequently physically picked over, losing his mail-coat, sword, and helmet in death as the victor conveys the 'hoary one's armour' ('hares hyrste', 2988a) to Hygelac. Ongentheow's wife too is characterised by material loss, described as an 'old woman from past days, bereft of gold' ('gomelan iomeowlan golde berofene', 2931).[51] In these moments, old age is connected with conspicuous vulnerability.

Indeed, in a much later context, the tenth-century *Battle of Brunanburh* describes Constantine in a similar way, again using *blanden-feax*:

> Swilce þær eac se froda mid fleame com
> on his cyþþe norð, Costontinus,
> har hilde-ring; hreman ne þorfte
> mecga gemanan: he wæs his mæga sceard, 40

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freonda befylled on folc-stede,
beslagen æt sæcce, and his sunu forlet
on wæl-stowe wundun forgrunden,
giungne æt guðe. Gelpan ne þorfte
beorn blanden-feax bil-geslehtes,
ealdinwidda[.][52] (37–46a)

Just so, there also the old one by flight came to his land in the north, Constantine, hoary warrior; he had no cause to exult the meeting of men: he was deprived of his kin, robbed of friends on the battlefield, bereft in the strife, and gave up his son on the battle-place, destroyed with wounds, young at war. The grey-haired warrior had no cause to boast of the clashing of swords, the old guileful one.

Visually conspicuous, Constantine is thrown into relief by his surrounding loss, deprived of kin and friends. This figure parallels Beowulf's bereaved old man: in both cases, extension of life is all the more intense for the premature death of the child before the parent. It is worth bearing in mind these vulnerable figures of obvious loss when approaching the mournful old men of *Beowulf*, especially Hrothgar, but also Beowulf in the latter half of the poem, who shares more with Hrothgar than is usually thought.

When *Beowulf* introduces the dragon which ultimately kills the hero, we meet a figure known to critics as the Last Survivor, who clearly evinces the poem's continued concern with the problems of outliving. This individual is not explicitly aged, but his existence is painfully prolonged past the lives of his people, his treasure is old, and he does not expect to live long:

Ealle hie deað fornam
ærran mælum, ond se an ða gen
leoda duguðe, se ðær lengest hwearf,
weard wine-geomor, wende þæs ylcan,
þæt he lytel fæc long-gestreona
brucan moste.[53] (2236b–41a)

Death took away all of them, in former times, and then there was yet one of the experienced warriors of that people, he who moved around the longest, the friend-mourning guardian, who expected the same, that that he might enjoy that old treasure for a short time.

Until his death, he is said to grieve 'one after all' ('an æfter eallum', 2268a), later echoed in Beowulf's description of the old man singing laments 'one after the other' ('an æfter anum', 2461a). The reference to the roaming movement of the Last Survivor is also analogous to the bereaved old father's reiterative movement around his dwellings. This figure may not be explicitly

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occupying a clearly delineated life stage of old age, but he feels himself to be belated in a way which resonates with the aged figures discussed earlier.

The Last Survivor furthermore shares some traits with the dragon that supplants him in the barrow, with scholars occasionally contending that after his suffering, the human figure actually transforms into the dragon.[54] This includes his patterns of movement: before his death, the survivor 'miserable, moved around, by day and night' ('unbliðe hwearf / dæges ond nihtes', 2268b–9a). On noticing the intruder's footprint, the dragon enters into a similar pattern of recursive motion:

> hat ond hreoh-mod hlæw oft ymbehwearf
> ealne utanweardne; ne ðær ænig mon
> on þam westenne – hwæðre wiges gefeh,
> beadwe weorces; hwilum on beorh æthwearf
> sinc-fæt sohte[.] (2296–300a)
>
> hot and rough-minded, it often moved around the barrow, all around the outside; there was no person in the wasteland – nonetheless, it rejoiced at deeds of battle; sometimes returned to the barrow, sought the treasure-cup[.]

The dragon's physical movements parallel its cognitive fixation: the creature seeks the cup and instead finds a *westen*, just as Beowulf's nameless old man will roam around, returning to his son's chamber, only to look into a 'win-sele westne' ('abandoned wine-hall', 2456a). This creature's behaviour may even be seen as a heightened version of the more inert and non-progressive elements of the aged father's trauma response. The dragon is an extremely 'old' being ('eald', 2271a), who has specifically had 'three hundred winters' ('þreohund wintra', 2278b), stretching far beyond a human lifespan.[55] Moreover, its long experience is directly referenced when its failure to engage in profitable activity is described:

> he hæðen gold
> warað wintrum frod; ne byð him wihte ðy sel. (2275b–6)
>
> he guards heathen gold, experienced in years; he is not a bit better for that.

The judgement of 2276b is usually considered to pertain to the dragon's guarding of the gold, constituting the fruitless hoarding of a 'mock "gold-king"'.[56] But the assertion that the dragon is 'not a bit better for that' is nonetheless connected by alliterative stress with the description of the dragon as *frod*. Indeed, this creature may fail to profit from both the gold and its many years of life experience, as it is trapped in a suspended condition of unreflective old age for a vast portion of its life course. Unable or declining to sing laments or to tell stories, the aged dragon

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offers a foil to the poem's other elderly figures, who articulate and process their grief and their relationship with death through the organising structures of narrative and song.

Contrastingly, the aged Beowulf speaks aloud on the theme of his own belatedness, his survival, and his existence in the absence of others, when contemplating the imminent end to his own 'count of days' (*dogor-gerim*, 2728a). His reflections on his death span nearly a hundred lines before and after the dragon fight, and are never referred to as songs by the poet. However, Joseph Harris has suggested they cohere as a kind of 'death song', by analogy with Old Norse examples of the genre (and, as will be seen later in this chapter, we can compare some Old English ones too).[57] Beowulf's final words mull upon those he is following into death:

> '. . . ealle wyrd forsweop
> mine magas to metod-sceafte
> eorlas on elne: ic him æfter sceal.'
> Þæt wæs þam gomelan gingæste word
> breost-gehygdum[.] (2814b–18a)

> '. . . fate has swept away all my kin to their death, earls in strength: I must [go] after them.' That was for the old one the final speech of the thoughts of his breast[.]

The hero here reflects on those he has painfully outlived, and the poet is quick to follow his reflections with an overt mention of his status as old (*gomel*). Beowulf sees himself as the last survivor of the Hrethlings, experiencing both the end of a life course and the end of a dynasty, like his counterpart figure in the barrow.[58] A similar preoccupation shapes Beowulf's utterances before he even descends to meet the dragon. As he sits on the headland, knowing his death is close, the poet reveals that 'for him his heart was sorrowful, wavering and death-ready' ('Him wæs geomor sefa / wæfre ond wæl-fus', 2419b–20a). Beowulf speaks then of his survival of previous battles earlier in his life, as well as his early experience of being taken away from his father (a shadowy, almost wholly absent figure in the poem) when first fostered by Hrethel:[59]

> 'Fela ic on giogoðe guð-ræsa genæs,
> orleg-hwila; ic þæt eall gemon.
> Ic wæs syfan-wintre þa mec sinca baldor,
> frea-wine folca æt minum fæder genam;
> heold mec on hæfde Hreðel cyning . . .' (2426–30)

> 'In my youth, I was saved from many battle-rushes, in times of war: I am mindful of all that. I was seven when the lord of treasure, the lord-friend of

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> the people, took me away from my father; he held and kept me, King Hrethel . . .'

Beowulf never elsewhere suggests that his childhood experiences were anything other than positive, but his description of his fosterage here comes quickly on the heels of a reference to having his life preserved in the context of battle. He is strongly concerned here, at the end of his life, with being protected earlier in life, only provisionally saved from death.

When Beowulf goes on to describe Hrethel's loss of Hæthcyn, the bereaved old man's loss of his son, and Ongentheow's defeat, he recounts others' experience of death, unavenged violence, and familial decline.[60] Critics have made much of how, earlier in the poem, Beowulf jolts Hrothgar out of his lamentations for Æschere's death at the hand of Grendel's mother and urges him towards revenge, seeing the poet as clearly privileging Beowulf's mode of energetic action over Hrothgar's passivity: 'Do not sorrow, wise man' ('Ne sorga, snotor guma', 1384a).[61] Nonetheless, at the end of the poem, Beowulf likewise spends his time meditating upon the 'unliving' (to borrow a term from his speech to Hrothgar, *unlifgende*, 1389a). In his 'digressions' in the face of death, J. C. Pope understands him to '[enter] into the bitter experiences of others, partly in magnanimous sympathy, partly as if to look steadily at the whole range of human suffering, what he has observed as well as what in his own person he has endured, and to prove to himself that he is not dismayed'.[62] Indeed, in his stories, he focuses particularly on survivors who have witnessed death. We might compare here the clarification that narratives of other's unbearable experiences can bring to an individual who has suffered similar troubles, as understood within trauma theory.[63] In his old age, Beowulf grows into an acute sensitivity to the presence of death in the world and the torturous experience of both witnessing the deaths of others and provisionally delaying one's own, narrating his longest series of 'digressions' anywhere in the poem.

In this regard, he is not so different from Hrothgar. Beowulf likewise organises his own sense of loss through the telling of stories, reflecting the blend of interrelating grief and wisdom, or loss and verbalisation, that is more widely typical of the depiction of old age in *Beowulf*. Looking at the treasure brought by Wiglaf may lift Beowulf's spirits, but when he sits on the headland he finds his 'heart sad' ('geomor sefa', 2419b), in a manner not obviously resolved or negated by his acceptance of death or final insights into worldly decline. This unresolved and dynamic interplay between sage perspective and sadness – like that of Hrothgar, or the bereaved old

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father – suggests something of the nonlinear nature of healing in modern psychiatric discourse: an ongoing practice, never firmly achieved. These aspects of the text come into clearer view when we focus on the similarities between the two kings which dominate *Beowulf*, rather than appreciating only the differences.

Elderliness and Poetic Craft in the Epilogue to *Elene*

Beowulf offers us at least two pictures of old poets, survivors from previous regimes, and implies that singing and narrative art can be pursued as a response to overwhelming loss. Such a response is apparently soothing and possibly healing, as well as (in Hrothgar's case) a source of fascination and edification to others. Undoubtedly the most well-known figure of an old poet in the Old English corpus, though, is the aged Cynewulf-persona who is half-revealed at the end of the Vercelli Book poem known as *Elene* (which is usually thought to date, along with the rest of Cynewulf's signed works, to *c.*750–850). This passage is much discussed – in older scholarship, for its potential value as an insight into the shadowy historical personage of Cynewulf and his conceptualisation of himself as an author, but more recently for the ways in which it dwells on themes of knowledge, revelation, and salvation that are important to the wider poem.[64] When specifically addressing old age as an aspect of Cynewulf's self-presentation, scholars have pointed to continuity with the 'aged author' topos of Latin tradition: a form of the modesty topos which stresses the diminished abilities of an elderly poet.[65] However, the connection forged between old age and poetic authority at the end of *Elene* works subtly differently to the 'aged author' topos as understood by, for instance, Alcuin. Old age in the Cynewulfian context is not presented as clear impediment to poetic expression, but facilitative of it – along the lines of the aged poets of *Beowulf* – while also requiring the external impetus of grace.

In this vein, Thornbury has previously observed that descriptions of poetic composition often differ across Latin and Old English traditions: Latin texts tend to stress the importance of outside inspiration, while vernacular poems often emphasise that composition is a skill that can be practised.[66] So, at the end of *Elene*, the poet figure is engaged in a kind of creative, meditative enterprise before divine inspiration is bestowed:

> Þus ic frod ond fus þurh þæt fæcne hus,
> word-cræft wæf ond wundrum læs,
> þragum þreodude ond geþanc reodode,

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nihtes nearwe. Nysse ic gearwe,
be ðære rode riht ær me rumran geþeaht
þurh ða mæran miht on modes þeaht
wisdom onwreah. Ic wæs weorcum fah,
synnum asæled, sorgum gewæled,
bitrum gebunden, bisgum beþrungen,
ær me lare onlag þurh leohtne had,
gamelum to geoce, gife unscynde
mægen-cyning amæt ond on gemynd begeat,
torht ontynde, tidum gerymde,
ban-cofan onband, breost-locan onwand,
leoðu-cræft onleac; þæs ic lustum breac,
willum in worlde. (1236–51a)

So I, experienced [/wise] and ready [for death], through that treacherous house, wove the craft of words and wondrously gathered it together; meditated for periods and sifted my thought in the closeness of the night. I did not clearly know the truth about the cross until wisdom revealed wider knowledge through its glorious power into my heart's thought. I was stained with deeds, bound by sins, torn by sorrows, fettered by bitterness, surrounded by afflictions, until in majesty the King of Glory granted learning to me through a state of light, as a comfort for old age, measured out the unflawed gift and bestowed it in my heart, revealed its brightness, in time broadened it, freed my body, unfastened my breast-enclosure, and loosed the craft of song; this I have used with pleasure, with will in the world.

Like much of Cynewulf's poetry, this is a deeply Latinate passage, informing even its use of sustained rhyme.[67] It is no surprise, then, that scholars have perceived here the workings of the 'aged author' topos, comprising elements such as the following: 'the author claims to be old and sick or near death', both 'in the context of disparaging his own weakness or sinfulness, or contrasting his own youthful sinfulness with the religious devotion or piety or penitence of his old age', and 'in the context of a concern either for some specific compositional problem, or for compositional problems in general'.[68] The trope of the 'author's unworthiness' has been detected here by Thornbury; nonetheless, as she goes on to observe, this passage diverges from Latin models of external inspiration in the heavy emphasis it places on study and technical ability – the speaker's enlightenment resembles 'a process of freeing pre-existing skill'.[69] Compositional success is not sought from a position of total disadvantage, but rather presented as closely connected with cultivated skills.

Building on Thornbury's observations, I suggest that the old age of the poet-speaker of Cynewulf's epilogue informs his poetic skill, rather than

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restricting it. For all the language of sinfulness present in Cynewulf's epilogue, the 'aged author' trope does not neatly map onto this poet-speaker's self-presentation. This distinction emerges more clearly through comparison with the poetry of Alcuin, who makes particularly enthusiastic use of the topos.[70] Alcuin's poem to Charlemagne, *Carmen 40*, for example, opens with the figure of an aged poet in a state of deprivation:

> Nix ruit e caelo, gelidus simul ingruit imber:
> non fuit Albino, 'Exspecta paulisper in urbe'
> qui iam dixisset, 'donec pertranseat imber,
> et calido pectus Parnasi fonte refirma'.
> Tristis abit senior ieiuno ventre poeta,
> et pueri tristes planxerunt carmine Flaccum. (1–6)
>
> Snow falls from the sky, while freezing showers mount their attack: the person who had said to Albinus [Alcuin], 'Wait a little while in the town until the shower passes, and restore your spirits from the warming fountain of Parnassus' was not present. The sad old poet departs on an empty stomach, and the mournful children lament Flaccus [Alcuin] in their verses.[71]

This image of a 'a sad old poet' ('Tristis . . . senior . . . poeta', 5), suffering from a lack of patronage, parallels similar references to poets in vernacular verse – including *Deor*. Alcuin's figure is a survivor, living in the absence of past loved ones. However, this poet's ability to verbalise his deprivations is considerably more compromised than the aged poets of *Beowulf*, for instance: in this scene, it is the children who compose poems about Alcuin. His verses themselves are said to be weakened, as *Carmen 40* goes on to describe a hypothetical change of fortunes in which 'the warm sun and good times return again, the former vigour will return to Flaccus's verse' ('Dum redeunt iterum calidi bona tempora Phoebi, / Mox pristina redit virtus in carmine Flacco', 10–11).[72] Alcuin's aged persona is closely intertwined with the lost *virtus* of the world, forming one component of a cosmic weakening and decline. He is physically weakened without discovering any new rhetorical power through ever-sharpening skills of poetic composition, outside of what is granted to him through inspiration.

Alcuin's tendency to describe the inadequacies of old age as part of a larger cosmic decline is attested elsewhere, including in part of his much-discussed *O mea cella* (*Carmen 23*), Alcuin's lament for his 'lost youth at York':[73]

> Qua campis cervos agitabat sacra iuventus,
> incumbit fessus nunc baculo senior. (29–30)

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> In the fields where the holy youths chased the stag
> the old man now leans wearily on his staff.[74]

The image of the elderly individual is embedded amid broader reflections on the lost youth of a wider community. This rhetorical scheme is developed in the next two lines:

> Nos miseri, cur te fugitivum, mundus, amamus?
> Tu fugis a nobis semper ubique ruens. (31–2)
>
> Why do we wretches love you, fugitive world?
> You always flee headlong from us.[75]

The contrast between the youths and the old man is thus contextualised amid the broader failing of the *mundus* in its final age. Alcuin's vision of the 'senior poeta', then, operates fully within a model of decline. His poetic aptitude is weakened. As one final example, Alcuin's poem on the destruction of Lindisfarne presents old age as marked by diminished audibility:

> Clarior ecce tuba subito vox faucibus haesit,
> Auribus adpositis murmura clausa ciet.
> Quid iam plura canam? Marcesit tota iuventus[.] (109–11)
>
> Voices, clearer than trumpets, suddenly stick in the throat, summoning up a subdued whisper for attentive listeners. Let my poem be brief. All youth fades away[.][76]

The shift to the first-person poetic voice in this passage, announcing literally 'what more can I now sing?' ('Quid iam plura canam?', 111) asserts encroaching voicelessness. In Alcuin's model, song is not expansively loosed in the breast of the elderly as it is for the speaker of the epilogue to *Elene*. It is limited and imminently to be silenced.

In contrast, the speaker of the epilogue to *Elene* places emphasis on the processes of careful contemplation and poetic composition. He uses the verb *lesan* ('to gather, collect', 1237b), which may point to 'the process of associating disparate texts by verbal reminiscence', at the heart of monastic meditation'.[77] Meanwhile, 'reodode' (1238b) may derive from *hriðian*, 'to sift', again signalling careful scrutiny of available materials.[78] These strategies, established as part of the poetic process, are juxtaposed with references to the figure's age. Initially the speaker is 'wise and ready [for death]' ('frod ond fus', 1236a), while later the divine gift of knowledge augments the speaker's solitary efforts in a manner that is described as 'a comfort for old age' ('gamelum to geoce', 1246a) – we might compare here Boethius' *Metre 1*, in which the speaker remarks, 'In sad old age [the Muses] now

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console my fate' ('solantur maesti nunc mea fata senis', 8), as this is closer to Cynewulf's sense than Alcuin's rhetoric of diminished poetic gifts.[79] However, in contrast to both Boethius' aged persona and Alcuin's, it is the Cynewulf-persona's skills of contemplation and judicious selection, paired with divine intervention, which allow him to begin working at the weaving of *word-cræft* (1237a). Rather than inherently threatening poetic skill, this figure experiences elderliness as a time when internal skills of poetic craft are available, even if divinely bestowed inspiration is also important. Cynewulf therefore seems to be drawing on a separate rhetorical tradition of poetic composition to that which Alcuin invokes – one in which the relation of old age to poetic composition is not fraught with the same tension and discord.

As for the old figures of *Beowulf*, poetic craft seems to constitute a psychological response to a plethora of distressing experiences. Alcuin's voice fades quietly away in his poem on Lindisfarne, but the description of poetic craft at the end of *Elene* borders on euphoric. This joy in literary expression both grows out of and mitigates the tortured condition of sin and sorrow that Cynewulf describes in lines 1242b–4. In describing a 'craft of song' ('leoðu-cræft', 1250a) used 'with pleasure' and 'with will' in the world ('lustum', 'willum', 1250b, 1251a), the speaker turns away from any hint of the modesty topos, stressing the uplifting power of religious song. The subsequent runic section of the epilogue is far more continuous with Alcuin's meditations on the lost youth of the world, such that Porck has persuasively posited direct influence – like Alcuin's verse, this passage is preoccupied with the transience of the world and the ways in which 'youth is changed' ('geogoð is gecyrred', 1264b).[80] That is not to say, though, that the aged Cynewulf-persona is straightforwardly a figure of decline. His acute sorrow and regret is accompanied by consoling and soothing work in the realm of narrative and song.

Cynewulf's Other Death Songs and Cynewulfian Aspects of *The Phoenix*

As mentioned, critics once viewed the epilogue to *Elene* as testimony to the advanced age of the historical personage of Cynewulf, often placing this poem at the end of a supposed chronology of his works, but a wave of scholars have since stressed the problems with interpreting Cynewulf's codas as straightforwardly autobiographical, or even as designed to assert any kind of authorial 'presence'.[81] There is considerable overlap between the aged poet-persona of *Elene* and that described in *Juliana*, *Christ II* and

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The Fates of the Apostles. Although none are as explicit as *Elene* in stressing the age of the poet-persona, they share that epilogue's fundamentally retrospective view on the worldly life course and its contemplation of imminent death. All Cynewulf's epilogues constitute death songs in some sense, I will argue, although they are not usually spoken of as such. Furthermore, influence from this Cynewulfian mode of singing in the face of death may have shaped *The Phoenix*, which, towards its end, addresses the reader in the first person and discusses the making of poetry in conjunction with facing death, before finally transitioning into bilingual verse in a manner which further parallels Cynewulf's use of runes. Together, these texts dwell on the theory and practice of singing in the face of death.

Juliana's keen interest in the youth of its saintly protagonist was addressed in Chapter 2, but at the close of this poem, the poet-speaker is conscious of the shape of his own life course. He seems to address the audience from 'beyond the grave', as Thomas Birkett has suggested, or perhaps in the very moment of death, lamenting the belatedness of his conversion when living:[82]

> Sar eal gemon,
> synna wunde þe ic siþ oþþe ær
> geworhte in worulde: þæt ic wopig sceal
> tearum mænan. Wæs an tid to læt
> þæt ic yfel-dæda ær gescomede,
> þenden gæst ond lic geador siþedan,
> onsund on earde. (709b–15a)
>
> I am mindful of all the pain, the wounds of sin, that late or early I brought about in the world: grieving, I must mourn that with tears. I was at that time too late in becoming ashamed for sinful deeds, while my soul and body travelled together, whole on the earth.

This passage contains several penitential motifs, including not only the description of the shedding of tears of compunction, but the specific recollection of sins committed 'late or early' (*siþ oþþe ær*) in the speaker's life.[83] Particular emphasis is furthermore placed on rumination. The speaker states he is 'mindful of all' this pain and sin ('eal gemon', 709b), and one might compare how the elderly Beowulf begins his final series of speeches, 'I am mindful of it all' ('ic þæt eall gemon', 2427b), or how Hrothgar starts to reflect on Beowulf's achievement in killing Grendel with a reference to a wise figure, 'old guardian of the homeland' ('eald eðel-weard', 1702a), who 'was mindful of all far-off things' ('feor eal gemon',

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1701b). Indeed, Beowulf's final speeches have been interpreted as a kind of confession: a self-evaluation of his deeds in the world.[84] In a different way to *Beowulf,* the coda to *Juliana* suggests the acute mindfulness – here of sin and wrongdoing – that comes with age and the contemplation of death.

The odd temporality of this passage is difficult to parse, but at this juncture, I wish to suggest the relevance of 'death song' traditions to Cynewulf's closing reflections. Cynewulfian epilogues are not usually discussed as death songs, although recent scholars have highlighted the importance of the theme of death, with Gabriele Cocco even suggesting that *The Fates of the Apostles* draws on death liturgy, as 'a heartfelt plea of someone on his deathbed'.[85] As a genre, the idea of the Old English death song has mainly been approached through the lens of the short text known as *Bede's Death Song* and, separately, Beowulf's 'last words'.[86] Cynewulf's mode of singing about his own death nonetheless recalls certain features from *Bede's Death Song*, which Cuthbert reports Bede singing (if not necessarily composing) in the *Epistola Cuthberti de obitu Bedae*, and which survives in more manuscripts than any other poem from pre-Conquest England:

> Fore ðæm ned-fere nænig wiorðe
> ðonc snottora ðon him ðearf siæ
> to ymbhycgenne ær his hinionge
> hwæt his gastæ godes oððe yfles
> æfter deað dæge doemed wiorðe.
>
> Facing that enforced journey, no-one can be wiser in thought than that it is necessary for him to consider, before his going hence, what shall be determined for his spirit, of good or evil, after his day of death.[87]

This poem's sharp sense of uncertainty about the fate of the individual soul is comparable to Cynewulf's epilogue to *Fates*.[88] There is also shared territory with the end of *Juliana*, given the poet's acute concern there with his missed opportunities to feel shame 'for evil deeds' ('yfel-dæda', 713a). The bare and impersonal quality of Bede's utterance at the door of death more generally resembles the mode of Cynewulf's meditations on death at the end of *Juliana*, where the lack of detail has long frustrated efforts to recover traces of a supposed historical Cynewulf. Emphasis is placed on a more abstract idea of intense mindfulness – the need to 'think around' (*ymbhycgan*) one's deeds – that comes when the end of life is imminent.

Separately to Chickering's project on *Bede's Death Song*, Joseph Harris has searched for analogues for Beowulf's 'death song' and found them mainly in Old Norse literature. Several of the motifs that Harris sees as

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distinctive of the 'Norse-English' death song tradition can nonetheless also be found in Cynewulf's verse, perhaps even more so than in *Beowulf*, most notably details such as 'the speaker's own affirmation that he must die', a 'retrospective on the speaker's life', and the speaker mentioning 'his condition, especially his wounds, at the moment of speaking' – recalling the 'wounds of sin' upon which Cynewulf reflects in *Juliana*, and his broken physical condition in *Elene*. Harris further stresses that the Norse analogues encompass several modes of conceptualising the relationship between speech and death, including one option of a 'death song [which] is conceived as neither preceding nor following the death wound but accompanying it and tracing the progress of death'.[89] This narration of death itself could easily describe the end of *Juliana*.

Bringing the death songs of Cynewulf and *Beowulf* into contact may help make sense of one of the more puzzling aspects of *Beowulf*'s death song, at least from Harris's perspective, as he wonders why, as Beowulf meditates on the Herebeald episode, the old father's lament, the death of Hrethel and the Swedish wars, the hero's discourse 'strays further and further from the personal experience at the heart of elegiac retrospectives'.[90] Shrugging off Pope's sense of Beowulf's heightened empathetic capacity as the reason for his wide-ranging meditations, Harris prefers to see Beowulf's discourse here as a subversive break from the death song genre. However, Cynewulf's posture at the verge of death offers an analogue for Beowulf's stories of others at the end of his life. Cynewulf's poems likewise operate on a scale far beyond the personal, before transitioning to first-person reflections which are rich in implicit contrasts and connections with the preceding narrative. In the very status of Cynewulfian epilogues, songs in the face of death appended to stories of the deeds of others, we could perceive the 'multiplicity of perspectives' identified by Hansen as core to wisdom in the *Riddles* and other Old English wisdom poems.[91] For this poet, as for the poet of *Beowulf*, the ability to engage with narratives of others' trials is core to thinking and composing towards the end of a life.

Turning from the close of *Juliana* to the opening of *The Fates of the Apostles*, we find a construction which echoes *Beowulf*'s opening lines ('So … how the nobles performed brave deeds'; 'Hwæt … / hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon', 1–3). These lines share features too with the descriptions of the aged figures in that poem:

> Hwæt. Ic þysne sang sið-**geomor** fand
> on **seocum sefan**, samnode wide

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hu þa æðelingas ellen cyðdon,
torhte ond tir-eadige.[92] (1–4a, emphasis my own)

Listen. I composed [/discovered] this song, journey-**sad**, in my **sick spirit**, widely gathered together how those nobles, bright and glory-blessed, made their strength known.

Beowulf similarly finds his 'spirit sad' ('geomor sefa', 2419b) on the headland, and later describes himself as 'sick from life-wounds' ('feorh-bennum seoc', 2740a) after his fight with the dragon, while the bereaved father sings his laments in a 'sad' situation ('geomorlic', 2444a). This passage furthermore shares its reference to drawing together far-flung material with the epilogue to *Elene* in *Fates*. The intellectual labour of creating poetry is again foregrounded in *Fates*, and it is seemingly the domain of one who has travelled a long time in the world (or, if *sið* is taken in its sense of 'death', one anticipating a journey of death).

The poet engages in this labour while physically depleted, but his condition does not undermine his authority – this poem begins with a simple active construction: 'I composed this song', or even 'I sought out . . . ', or 'I achieved this song' ('Ic þysne sang . . . fand', 1). A contrast might be delicately suggested between the apostles' strength (*ellen*) and the compromised condition of the poet, but this is not an instance of the modesty topos as we would recognise it from Alcuin. The value of the poet's experience is further suggested by his role as a kind of record keeper, gathering the stories of each apostle. By the end of *Fates*, the sickness of the poet figure has progressed to the embracing of death, as he asks for help from those who have enjoyed the poem (88–9), describes himself once again as sorrowful ('geomrum me', 89b), and prepares for a journey; he will go on, he says, 'to leave my body in my track, a portion of earth, slaughter-spoil, to remain as a comfort to worms' ('lætan me on laste lic eorðan dæl, / wæl-reaf, wunigean weormum to hroðre', 94–5). Like the epilogues to *Juliana* and *Elene*, this final phase of poem resembles a kind of a death song, relayed by a poet-figure who alludes to personal struggles, but also expansively considers the lives of others.

Christ II offers models for singing in the face of death which have the capacity to illuminate not only the epilogue to this poem, but all Cynewulf's epilogues. Christ's intervention in the world is figured, in this text, as the changing of humanity's tune. He enables a different kind of song with which to face death: one that is directional and hopeful, rather than mournful. The first kind of singing is compelled by God's initial

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postlapsarian ruling, and is not mentioned in the passage's source, Gregory the Great's homily on the Ascension:

> Ic þec of eorðan geworhte, on þære þu scealt yrmþum lifgan,
> wunian in gewinne ond wræce dreogan,
> feondum to hroþor fus-leoð galan,
> ond to þære ilcan scealt eft geweorþan,
> wyrmum aweallen; þonan wites fyr
> of þære eorðan scealt eft gesecan.[93] (621–26)

> I made you from earth, on which you must live in sorrow, dwell in suffering and experience misery, sing a death-song [/dirge] as a comfort to enemies, and to that same you must come to be again, flowing with worms; from there, from that earth, you must then seek the fire of torment.

Elsewhere in Old English poetry, *fus-leoð* is used once in *Guthlac B* (1346b) and *Andreas* (1549b): both times signifying a dirge. Christ's nativity and ascension make other kinds of singing possible, and the poet suggests this by threading the motif of singing into his description of Job's identification of Christ as a bird, where Gregory simply says Job 'figuratively . . . called' the Lord such ('per figuram . . . vocat'):[94]

> Bi þon giedd awræc Iob, swa he cuðe,
> herede helm wera, hælend lofede,
> ond mid sib-lufan sunu waldendes
> freo-noman cende, ond hine fugel nemde[.] (633–6)

> About that, Job related a song, as well he knew how, celebrated the protector of men, praised the saviour, and with love gave a noble name to the Ruler's son and called him a bird[.]

The poet asserts not only the status of this specific utterance as a song – later reiterating that 'the prophet sang' ('se witga song', 650b) – but also Job's identity as a singer more generally: he has knowledge in this area (633b). Solomon's skill in singing is likewise later emphasised as the poem builds towards his reflections on Christ's 'leaps': he is 'very wise in songs, in spiritual mysteries' ('giedda gearo-snottor gæst-gerynum', 713a), where Gregory simply says that he 'speaks' ('dicitur', 'ait').[95] Embellishing the source, *Christ II* elevates the status of Job and Solomon to wise singers rather than speakers. Their singing offers a contrast to humanity's dirge, as they meditate on divine matters and movement beyond the worldly, rather than simply the movement of the body down into the earth.

The audience is therefore particularly well prepared for *Christ II*'s concluding first-person meditations on death and judgement. The poet-persona is

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again interested in the progression of his own life and those of others when he reflects on his failures in a penitential manner: 'I did not successfully keep to what my saviour bade me in books' ('ic ne heold teala þæt me hælend min / on bocum bibead', 792–3a), and asserts his desire to teach others so that they can perform good deeds, 'each man in his life-time' ('gumena gehwylc / on his gear-dagum', 820b–1a). Long life experience once again informs the poet's authority. In the very last line of the poem, after all, the poet speaks of Christ's effect upon the metaphorical ship of the soul, thrown about in rough waters. Christ's gift is the knowledge of:

> hwær we sælan sceolon sund-hengestas,
> ealde yð-mearas, ancrum fæste. (862–3)
>
> where we must moor our sea-steeds, the old wave-horses, securely with anchors.

Although the rhetoric of elderliness is not very pronounced, it is nonetheless present in the form of *eald*. The poet speaks from a position of having witnessed the roughness of the world, and follows Job and Solomon in opting to sing about Christ's triumph over death and God's power, rather than reciting a dirge.

I wish finally to note here the workings of related ideas in *The Phoenix*, a poem which partly adapts a Latin poem attributed to Lactantius (*c.*240–320), *Carmen de aue phoenice*. This text has long been seen as part of the 'Cynewulf group', related in some way to the signed poems of Cynewulf.[96] By nature of its subject, this poem is extensively concerned with old age as part of the bird's life cycle – and it is truly a cycle here. However, this text has not formed a major part of scholarly accounts of old age in Old English poetry. Some scholars have nonetheless found rich material in the complex gender dynamics of this text, at times intersecting with its depiction of a life cycle. The poet claims that no one but God knows whether the bird is male or female (355b–60), while subtly skewing its gender towards the masculine by using male pronouns (referring to the grammatically masculine nouns as *fenix*, *fugel*, and *brid*) and referring to the bird as 'both its son and its dear father' ('ehwæðer / sunu ond swæs fæder', 374b–5a), where the source mentions 'her own father and her heir . . . her own nurse, always nursling to herself' ('suus . . . pater et suus heres, / nutrix . . . sui, semper alumna sibi', 167–8).[97] As is clear from this claim, it is not only the bird's gender identity that is in a state of flux, but its age identity too.

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At several junctures, the text signals that the experience of old age is a condition of decline, following Lactantius, who stresses that there is no place for 'sick [/anxious] old age' ('aegra senectus', 15) in the phoenix's paradisiacal garden. The aged bird in the Old English similarly experiences old age as kind of agitation:

> þisses fugles gefær, þonne frod ofgiefeð
> eard ond eþel ond gealdad bið,
> gewiteð werig-mod, wintrum gebysgad;
> þær he holtes hleo heah gemeteð[.] (426–9)
>
> the journey of this bird, when, aged [or 'wise'], it gives up its dwelling-place and homeland and comes to be old, mind-weary, troubled by years; it leaves for somewhere where it finds the high covering of a wood[.]

Once the phoenix has settled in its nest, its anticipation of death begins to look a little Cynewulfian, recalling especially the 'frod ond fus' persona of *Elene*, and perhaps even Beowulf's 'fus' reflections, sitting on the headland. The bird 'sits ready for the journey' ('Siteð siþes fus', 208a), within a somewhat ambiguous 'house of the very sad [/blood-stained] one' ('hearo-dreorges hus', 217a), reminiscent of Cynewulf's 'fæcne hus' (1236b). The poet reiterates at this stage that the bird is 'wise in long years' ('fyrn-gearum frod', 219a). The phoenix, of course, is a practiced singer too. Embellishing Lactantius with extra references to skill, the poet earlier reported that the phoenix 'varies song-craft' ('wrixleð woð-cræfte', 127a) and produces the most beautiful 'of all song-craft' ('eallum song-cræftum', 132a) since the music of Creation.

Echoes of Cynewulf are most apparent, however, when the poet-persona begins to speak in the first person towards the end of the text:

> Ne wene þæs ænig ælda cynnes
> þæt ic lyge-wordum leoð somnige,
> write woð-cræfte. (546–8a)
>
> None of mankind should think that I with lying words gather together this poem, compose it with song-craft.

In the poet's use of *samnian* (547b), there is a direct parallel with *Fates of the Apostles* (2b) – these are Bosworth-Toller's only two attestations for the use of the verb in its sense 'to get together materials for a poem to compose'.[98] The *Phoenix*-poet continues by comparing his truth-telling poetry with that of Job, just as that figure appeared in *Christ II* as a wise singer meditating on resurrection. The poet here links Job's singing to that of

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the phoenix itself through a verbal echo of line 126a, in which the bird was 'inspired in its heart' ('onbryded breost-sefa'):[99]

Gehyrað witedom
Iobes gieddinga. Þurh Gæstes blæd
breostum onbryrded beald reordade,
wuldre geweorðad, he þæt word gecwæð:
'Ic þæt ne forhycge heortan geþoncum
þæt ic in minum neste neo-bed ceose,
hæle hra-werig, gewite hean þonan
on longne sið, lame bitolden,
geomor gu-dæda, in greotes fæðm[. . . ']
Ðus frod guma on fyrn-dagum
gieddade gleaw-mod, Godes spel-boda,
ymb his æriste in ece life[.] (548b–72)

Hear the prophecy of Job's verses. Urged in his breast by the Holy Spirit's inspiration, the one honoured with glory boldly spoke, uttered this speech: 'I do not disdain the thoughts of my heart, that in my nest I will choose a death-bed, as a body-weary man, should depart from here on a long journey, surrounded with clay, into the earth's embrace, mournful of past deeds [. . . '] Thus an aged [/wise] man in the old days sang with a sagacious mind, God's messenger, about his resurrection into eternal life[.]

As Job is the archetypal figure of loss (including that of his children), intimately familiar with death and anticipating his own, it is no surprise that he becomes a wise old singer in *The Phoenix*, as in *Christ II*. The manner in which the *Phoenix*-poet describes Job's poetic skill moreover directly parallels Cynewulfian verse: the half-line 'breostum onbryrded' can be found in similar forms in *Elene* ('inbryrded breost-sefa', 841a; 'breostum onbryrded', 1094a) and *Juliana* ('breostum inbryrded', 535a).[100] Job refers to death as a 'journey' ('sið', 555a), and describes himself as 'mournful of old deeds' ('geamor gu-dæda', 556a), just as the Cynewulf of *Fates* is 'sið-geomor' (1b) and that of *Juliana* feels shame for 'yfel-dæda' (713a). Job, as described by the *Phoenix*-poet, has more confidence in his place in heaven than the personas of Cynewulf's epilogues, and divine inspiration governs his poetic performance to a larger degree. Nonetheless, this poem offers us a further vision of the death-songs which can be uttered in old age, each allowing reconciliation with the facts of loss and death in a manner which recalls Cynewulfian verse.

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Nonhuman and Female Poetic Craft: *Riddle 6*

The remainder of this chapter is concerned with both another bird and another aged performer who (like Hrothgar) delights audiences. The nightingale of *Riddle 6* participates in a long tradition of birds figured as poets, which we have already encountered in *The Phoenix*. *Riddle 6* and *The Phoenix* even share verbal parallels in their descriptions of singing, especially when they emphasise variety: the nightingale 'sings in modulations' ('wrencum singe', 2a), where the phoenix sings more beautifully than 'every [other] modulation' ('wrenca gehwylcum', 133b).[101] Most pertinently to the concerns of the present chapter, both birds are at some stage described as old, and the age of the nightingale particularly seems to underpin her authority and skill as a singer: a *scernicge* (9a), which seems to denote something like 'actress' or 'performer':[102]

> Ic þurh muþ sprece mongum reordum,
> wrencum singe, wrixle geneahhe
> heafod-woþe, hlude cirme,
> healde mine wisan, hleoþre ne miþe,
> eald æfen-sceop, eorlum bringe
> blisse in burgum, þon ic bugendre
> stefne styrme; stille on wicum
> sittað swigende. Saga hwæt ic hatte,
> þa swa scernicge sceawend-wisan
> hlude onhyrge, hæleþum bodige
> wilcumena fela woþe minre.
>
> I speak through my mouth with many voices, sing in modulations, change head-sounds frequently, cry loudly, maintain my ways, do not conceal my song, old evening-poet; I bring bliss to men in the towns when I call out with varying voice. Still in the buildings, they sit in silence. Say what I am called, who, like an actress, loudly imitates the ways of a jester, bids men many welcomes with my voice.

This poem speaks to the dangers in presuming that the Old English corpus is exclusively interested in male life courses, as Sánchez-Martí has suggested.[103] Especially if we open our field of vision to take in the *Riddles*, the picture is different, and we find an abundance of subjects coded as female and potentially reflective of human experience.

In developing our understanding of the nature of the nightingale's performance, we might turn to the birds figured as poets in the prologue to the *Satires* of the first-century poet Persius, a popular work in pre-

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Conquest England. This passage announces a rejection of the Muses in a manner which highlights the nature of verse-making as a job:

> Quis expediuit psittaco suum 'chaere'
> picamque docuit nostra uerba conari?
> Magister artis ingenique largitor
> uenter, negatas artifex sequi uoces.
> Quod si dolosi spes refulserit nummi,
> coruos poetas et poetridas picas
> cantare credas Pegaseium nectar. (8–14)

> What provided his 'Hello!' to the parrot, and what taught the magpie to try our words? Hunger was the teacher of art and the enlarger of genius, the maker of art to replicate the language denied him. So if hope of wrangling money glitters, you'd indeed believe the crow-poets and poetess-magpies sing forth the nectar of Pegasus.[104]

When *Riddle 6* unfolds its vision of a poet-bird, the description similarly stresses a cultivated skill, rather than invoking anything comparable to external inspiration. The Old English riddle has previously been compared with Alcuin's *De luscinia*, in which the nightingale is figured as a devout Christian praise-poet, but in some ways it has more in common conceptually with the skilled and pragmatic bird-poets of Persius' prologue. Alcuin's text reads as follows:

> Lata sub angusto gutture vox sonuit,
> dulce melos iterans vario modulamine Musae
> atque creatorem semper in ore canens.
> Noctibus in furvis nusquam cessavit ab odis
> vox veneranda sacris, o decus atque decor. (8–12)

> Your swelling voice sounded in your narrow throat, repeating its sweet tunes in different melodies, always singing odes to the Creator. On gloomy nights, your adorable voice never ceased your sacred songs, my pride and beauty.[105]

This nightingale's songs are distinctly devotional, and there is some suggestion of miraculous paradox in the expansive odes which constantly emerge from the bird's constricted throat. By contrast, the nightingale of the Exeter Book seems to be something of a canny professional, and there is no overt characterisation of the bird as a singer of Christian songs.

What's more, the Old English text paints a picture of an aged performer – an 'old evening-poet' ('eald æfen-sceop'). The compound noun *æfen-sceop* closely parallels Old English *niht-gale* ('night-singer'), but the usage of the

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adjective *eald* has long puzzled critics. In the 1940s, Frederick Klaeber wondered 'warum "alt"?' while A. E. H. Swaen asserted, 'There can be no reason for calling a nightingale old' – more recently, Craig Williamson has contested that unless we take *eald* as meaning 'traditional' or 'familiar', it does not readily make sense.[106] Pliny's *Natural History*, a possible source for *Riddle 6* and its Anglo-Latin analogues, nonetheless does mention the age of nightingales:

> Meditantur aliae iuveniores versusque quos imitentur accipiunt; audit discipula intentione magna et reddit, vicibusque reticent; intellegitur emendatae correctio et in docente quaedam reprehensio.
>
> Other younger birds practise their music, and are given verses to imitate; the pupil listens with close attention and repeats the phrase, and the two keep silence by turns; we notice improvement in the one under instruction and a sort of criticism on the part of the instructress.[107]

Older birds clearly have superior musical skill in this context, such that they naturally take on the role of teacher. It is possible that, in the vein of Pliny, *eald* is similarly functioning in *Riddle 6* as a marker of advanced age and the commanding, even teacherly authority it brings – indeed, this would make good sense in the historical context of early medieval England, given the close links between the work of poets and teachers.[108]

Riddle 6, nonetheless, does not make much of a pedagogical association attached to nightingales. Given all the observations made in this chapter, the adjective may simply serve here to highlight the poetic skill of this poet, sharpened by long experience. The dominant quality of the nightingale's voice is its continual variation, a contrast with the figures sitting statically and quietly inside the buildings of the town.[109] Throughout, the Old English text prioritises asserting the plurality, modulation, and change inherent within the nightingale's song, as does the earlier part of Pliny's description, and Aldhelm's *Aenigma 22* (*Acalantis*): 'My beautiful voice is varied in different ways' ('Vox mea diversis variatur pulcra figuris', 1).[110] In the Old English poem, the bird sings in 'modulations' or possibly 'twists' ('wrencum', 2a); 'changes' its vocalisations through the verb *wrixlan* (2b); calls out with a 'varying' or 'bending voice' ('bugendre / stefne', 6b–7a); 'mimics' or 'imitates' the ways of an 'actress' ('onhyrge'; 'scernicge', 9a, 10a); and offers men 'many welcomes' ('fela wilcumena', 11a). The riddle is primarily focused on describing the wealth of options which are available to the nightingale-poet.

It is likely here that the significance of the *eald* poet lies, rather than in Pliny's pedagogical tradition. The riddle's emphasis on amassed

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options for speech is congruous with the conceptual scheme of the mind-as-container motif so prominent in Old English literature.[111] Throughout all the passages discussed here, patterns of modulation and variety have been foregrounded in representations of poetically skilled old age. Range and variation are particularly key to Hrothgar's well-attended performance, connected with his multiplicity of memories. In the epilogue to *Elene*, the poet's creative process is also one of variation and readjustment. The importance of plurality in lyrical performance is attested also in another Cynewulfian context, in a passage from *Christ II*:

> Se mæg eal fela
> singan ond secgan þam bið snyttru cræft
> bifolen on ferðe. (666b–8a)
>
> The man whose mind has been given the art of wisdom can sing and say all kinds of things.

Here again, emphasis is again placed on breadth. In its depiction of multidimensional oral performance, *Riddle 6* relies upon a similar conceptual framework, and in describing the nightingale as old, the text further suggests that poets late in their life courses are particularly well equipped to command a plurality of verbal modes.

The nightingale's song has the potential to bring comfort to others – it pleases those sitting quietly inside (5b–11). At the same time, the bird's internality remains opaque. The life course of this figure does not unfold in a manner wholly different from the other aged singers discussed in this chapter, but we are not told of any grief or loss informing the bird's song in *Riddle 6*. An intersection between age and gender suggests itself here: as is broadly true of the rest of the poetic corpus, the poet does not dwell on the interior experiences of the aged female figure. The primary affective experience described in the poem is that of the bird's captive audience, entertained by the song.

The passages collected in this chapter trace connections between age, experience, wisdom, and poetic composition, and would thwart any reading which presupposed a strict divide between the emotional and the rational. The reflections on catastrophic experiences and the solace provided by song and narrative in *Beowulf* and Cynewulfian verse at times recall some of the core tenets of trauma theory: catastrophic events can disrupt any sense of narrative, and the act of forging new narratives

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constitutes a tool for responding to and resolving trauma, while engagements with others' narratives and songs can also be soothing and constructive. Some depictions of aged singers do not directly refer to a background of suffering, but *Riddle 6*, for example, does describe an aged female poet artfully varying her song in a manner which parallels other performances of poetically skilled old age.

The synchronicities between the activities of aged singers in Old English verse and modern psychological discourses of adaption to trauma can sometimes be quite close. We might compare especially the different forms of 'wisdom' now sometimes associated with positive adaptation to trauma, as formulated by P. Alex Linley, such as 'recognition and management of uncertainty', 'openness to change', 'integration of affect and cognition', and 'recognition and acceptance of human limitation'.[112] In the Cynewulf-persona's doubt about the condition of his soul – a kind of management of uncertainty – or in Hrothgar's tears over his lost youth – a confronting of human limitation – one might perceive adaptive responses to potentially traumatic suffering. As Bruno Bettelheim puts it, 'contrary to the ancient myth, wisdom does not burst forth fully developed like Athena out of Zeus's head; it is built up, small step by small step, from most irrational beginnings'.[113] Likewise, in Old English poetry, living to old age seems to involve needing to respond constructively to incomprehensible and overwhelming events. Old age begins to look a lot like survival, in a psychological as well as a physiological sense.

Many other Old English texts and contexts address related concerns – too many to deal with here. The study of trauma in Old English poetry has yet to flourish, and post-traumatic growth especially has yet to be considered in this context. Wisdom catalogues are especially ripe for this kind of consideration. The poet of *Maxims II* asserts that meditating on worldly strife makes a person wise: 'always must a wise man think about the struggles of this world' ('A sceal snotor hycgean / ymb þysse worulde gewin', 54b–5a).[114] It is only too easy to gloss over the connection between grief, experience, and wisdom in Old English poetry, referred to so often and so directly in these texts. Nonetheless, theories of trauma offer one way to illuminate the nuances of the experiential understanding of wisdom so key to this tradition, and especially the ways in which it develops from irrational beginnings: not only non-intellectual, but non-elective – in other words, a person often does not have a say in the experiences that transform them.

As *Solomon and Saturn II* asserted so forcefully at the beginning of this chapter, old age is not a purely human concern. There is some suggestion

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in this passage that grief might befall all things and creatures as they succumb to age: after all, age 'awakens weeping drops' ('aweceð wop-dropan', 106a). Elsewhere in Old English verse, there are occasions when nonhuman things are said to mourn their losses in a manner which parallels human grief; the tree of *Maxims I* must 'mourn its branches' ('leomu gnornian', 26b), after all. Like these other grieving figures, humans also mourn the death and destruction of the nonhuman, as evinced in *The Wanderer*'s deep concern with the decline of the cosmos:

> Swa þes middan-geard
> ealra dogra gewham dreoseð ond fealleþ.
> Forþon ne mæg weorþan wis wer ær he age wintra dæl
> in woruld-rice. (62b–5a)
>
> So every day this earth perishes and falls. Therefore a man cannot become wise before he has a share of winters in the world.

A wise person becomes so by fathoming the ways in which the whole world is declining, distilling conceptual coherence from otherwise unbearable loss as the distinctive experience of living into old age.

To be old is to outlive: to witness death and destruction, and to learn ways to comprehend it, often in a way which hinges upon verbalisation. Many of the apparently discordant features of elderliness in Old English poetry, such as grief and wisdom or weakness and authority, are not discordant at all from this perspective. To speak meaningfully on the world and its suffering, and especially to craft and recite poetry on the subject, is to renegotiate one's relationship with loss. Especially in *Beowulf*, old individuals are survivors of past communities, painfully conscious of the departure of loved ones, and reacting through the recitation of narrative and song. They notably experience elderliness in a range of ways, depending on the extent and nature of the outliving they have experienced, as well as the social context in which they find themselves. The personas of Cynewulf's epilogues also speak in the face of death, striving to integrate terror of the event into a coherent understanding of the fate of the soul, and reconciling worldly catastrophe with a wider spiritual framework. As we have seen, elderly figures are often conspicuous in their survival in Old English poetry: marked out visually and watched carefully by those around them. Attention will now finally turn to those who have receded from view, concealed in the 'darkness of the earth' ('hrusan heolstre', *The Wanderer*, 23a).

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