The Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic is a yearly spring conference organized by postgraduate students of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge. Information on the next Colloquium, including details of registration and submission of abstracts, may be found on the Colloquium’s official website: http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/ccasnc/.

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ABBREVIATIONS


CCCM  Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis.

CCSL  Corpus Christianorum Series Latina.


EETS  The Early English Text Society.


Holm. papp.  Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, pappir [= paper manuscripts].


MGH  Monumenta Germaniae Historica.

MS  Manuscript.

OE  Old English.
It gives me great pleasure to introduce the seventeenth number of Quaestio Insularis, the journal of the annual Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (CCASNC). Both the journal and the Colloquium, established in 1999 on the initiative of the postgraduate community of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, have maintained an impressively high standard, driven by the enthusiasm and commitment of successive cohorts of students. The 2016 conference was highly successful and focused on the theme of Faith and Fabrication, which elicited a stimulating variety of papers given by graduates from a wide range of institutions, headed up by the plenary speaker Professor Richard Gameson, who shed new light on the St Augustine Gospels and its illustrations. The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic is delighted to continue its association with CCASNC and its published proceedings. Quaestio Insularis 17 and all back numbers of the journal can be ordered directly from the Department’s website (www.asnc.cam.ac.uk).

Dr Rosalind Love
Head of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic
University of Cambridge
The 2016 Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic took place in Room GR 06/07 of the Faculty of English on Saturday 13 February. The audience enjoyed a day of lively discussion on the theme of ‘Faith and Fabrication’, followed by a dinner hosted at Selwyn College. We were delighted to welcome nine postgraduate speakers from institutes around the country as well as our keynote speaker Professor Richard Gameson from Durham University, who invited us to be the first to hear the results of his analysis regarding the pigmentation of the St Augustine Gospels. Our speakers approached the conference’s theme from every angle — historical, palaeographical, literary and linguistic — and the diverse exchange of ideas culminated in some common reflections on the challenges involved in the faithful translation and interpretation of medieval texts and the importance of examining the intersections of sacred and secular discourse. As the conference drew to a close, we expressed our thanks and appreciation for our speakers, the organising committee and, in particular, our tireless team of undergraduate helpers — James Miller, Amrit Sidhu-Brar, Timothy Liam Waters and Basha Wells-Dion — for their hard-working efforts which enabled the day to run so smoothly.

Session I (Chair: Ben Allport)

Fraser McNair, ‘Time and Norman Sanctity in Dudo of Saint-Quentin’s Historia Normannorum’

Agnieszka Mikołajczyk, ‘One King to Rule them all? Papal Voice in the Negotiation of Royal Authority in Iceland in Þóðar saga kakala and Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar’

Nancy Jiang, ‘The Theme of Exile within Old English Christian Poetry: Developing the Positive Exilic Hero’
Plenary Speaker (Chair: Katherine Olley)
Professor Richard Gameson, ‘Faith and Fabrication in the St Augustine Gospels’

Session II (Chair: Rebecca Thomas)
Thomas Spray, ‘Faith in Translation: Friðþjófs saga Revisted’

Session III (Chair: Ben Guy)
Harriet Soper, ‘Eald æfensceop: Poetic Craft and the Authority of the Aged in Old English Literature’
Mark Laynesmith, ‘The Making of a Martyr: Christian Britain and the Passion of St Alban of Verulamium’
Jesse Harrington, ‘Vain Spells or Vain Songs?: The ‘vanissima carmina et friuoleas incantationes’ in the Hagiography of St Dunstan of Canterbury’

The members of the colloquium committee for 2015–16 were:
Ben Guy, Katherine Olley, Ben Allport, David McCay, Rebecca Thomas, Indeg Williams and Jon Wright.

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Quaestio Insularis 17 was edited by Ben Guy, Katherine Olley, Ben Allport, Rebecca Thomas, Indeg Williams and Jon Wright. The editors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Caitlin Ellis, Dr Rosalind Love and our anonymous peer reviewers. Editorial design is by Alistair Vining and the Quaestio Insularis logo was drawn by Katharine Scarfe Beckett. The production of this volume and the
successful running of the conference have been made possible through the generosity of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic and the support of the Faculty of English.
The ability to compose and perform poetry or song is repeatedly linked with a state of old age in the Old English poetic corpus. This paper will highlight in turn the presentation of elderly, lyrically gifted individuals in *Beowulf*, Cynewulf’s epilogue to *Elene* and Riddle 8 of the *Exeter Book.* All assert a relationship between ideas of advanced age and poetic compositional ability, one which relies upon complex ideas of wisdom and sagacity, accumulation of knowledge and access to memory of various past experiences. This aspect of the poet’s identity in Old English literature has not yet been fully investigated by scholars. Equally, studies of ideas of old age in the poetry have not


2 Early efforts sought to locate the romantic figure of the oral bard or *scop* as a historical figure in Anglo-Saxon England; on this tradition, see Roberta Frank, ‘The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 75 (1993), 11–36 (p. 12). More recently, Emily V. Thornbury has compiled a balanced overview of the scholarly literature surrounding the figure of the Anglo-Saxon poet as well as a detailed survey of references to poets in Old English literature, both forming part of a larger study
focused on poetic aptitude. The implications of such a connection nonetheless resonate widely across the body of vernacular verse surviving from Anglo-Saxon England.

First, the two most extended descriptions of elderly people in Beowulf both have vocal expression, specifically poetic performance, at their centres. The earlier of these depicts a *gomel*, or ‘old’, figure,

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5 Analysis of *gomel* and the rest of the vocabulary of old age in Anglo-Saxon writings is provided by Porck, pp. 59–71, 239–94; Ashley Crandell Amos, ‘Old English Words for Old’, in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, Held 25–26 February and 11–12 November 1983*, ed. by Michael M. Sheehan, Papers in Mediaeval Studies, 11 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), pp. 95–106. Both Porck (pp. 264–65) and Amos (p. 97) agree that the sense of
possibly Hrothgar, entertaining others in the hall after the victory over Grendel. The account is nested in Beowulf’s direct speech, part of his description of his experiences with the Danes at the point of returning to Hygelac:

Me þone wælres wine Scildunga
fættan golde fela leanode,
manegum maðmum syððan mergen com
ond we to symble geseten hæfdon.
Þær wæs gidd ond gleo; gomela Scilding,
felaafregende feorran rehte;
hwilum hildedeor hearpan wynne,
gome(n)wudu grette hwilum gyd awræc
soð ond sarlic hwilum yllic spell
rehte æfter rihte rumheort cyning;
hwilum eft ongan eldo gebunden,
gomel guðwiga gioguðe cwiðan,
hildestrengo hreðer (in)ne weoll
þonne he wintrum frowd worn gemunde.
Swa we þær inne andlange dæg
niode naman oð ðæt niht becwom

---

gomel (or gamol, a variant) as ‘old’ is clear, but its etymology remains uncertain. See also Ferdinand Holthausen, *Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1934), s.v. gamol.

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,\(^8\) 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.

The second extended passage focusing on an elderly figure is likewise placed within Beowulf’s direct speech, just before his fight with the dragon.\(^9\) This passage follows the experiences of another man who is gomel, here bereaved and unable to avenge his son’s death, due, apparently, to his being legally executed, as argued by Whitelock.\(^10\)

\(^7\) Beowulf, ll. 2101–17, in Klaeber’s Beowulf, pp. 71–72.  
\(^8\) On this translation of felafricgende, see Alfred Bammesberger, ‘Fela Fricgende: Royal Entertainment in the Hall Heorot (Beowulf, lines 2105–14)’, Notes and Queries, 61 (2014), 3–8.  
\(^9\) For a discussion of this passage, see Dorothy Whitelock, ‘Beowulf 2444–2471’, Medium Ævum, 8 (1939), 198–204. For arguments that the figure of the old man is Hrethel himself, see Arnold R. Taylor, ‘Two Notes on Beowulf’, Leeds Studies in English, original ser., 7–8 (1952), 5–17 (pp. 5–13), as well as Francesca Chiusaroli, Storia, memoria e conoscenza nell’Inghilterra medioevale (Rome: Il Calamo, 1995), p. 73. See also Klaeber’s Beowulf, pp. 245–48.  
Eald æfensecep

The old man is, in this respect, like King Hreðel, who in the second part of the passage mourns that he cannot settle the *fæghð*, ‘feud’ or ‘state of enmity’ (2465b), with the *feorhbona*, ‘life-slayer’ (2465a), of Herebeald, as this is Hæthcyn, another of his sons:11

Swa bið geomorlic gomelum ceorle
to gebidanne, þæt his byre ride 2445
giong on galgan. Þonne he gyd wrecce,
sarigne sang, þonne his sunu hangað
hrefne to hroðre, ond he him helpe ne mæg,
eald ond infroð, ænige gefremman,
symble bið gemyndgad morna gehwylce 2450
eaforan ellorsið; oðres ne gymeð
to gebidanne burgum in innan
yrfeweardas, þonne se an hafað
þurh deðes nyd dæda gefondad.
Gesyhð sorhcearig on his suna bure 2455
winsele westne, windge reste,
reot[gl]e berofene; ridend swefað,
hæleð in hoðman; nis þær hearpan sweg,
gomen in geardum, swylce ðær iu wæron.
Gewiteð þonne on sealman, sorhleoð gæleð 2460
an æfter anum; þuhte him eall to rum,
wongas ond wicstede.

Swa Wedra helm

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11 Porck (pp. 185–213, especially pp. 204–05) sees the following passage as supporting a broad contrast in the poem between Hrothgar as a largely negatively presented, passive old king (implicitly aligned with King Hrethel, similarly characterized by inaction) and Beowulf as a positively presented, active old king, as part of a wider scheme by which *Beowulf* forms a ‘mirror of elderly kings’. In this respect he follows and develops the position of Adrien Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1950), p. 52.
æfter Herebealde heortan sorge
weallinde wæg; wihtne meahte
on ðam feorhbonan fæghðe gebetan;
no ðy ær he þone heaðorinc hatian ne meahte
laðum dædum, þæah him leof ne wæs.
He ða mid þaere sorhge, þe him sio sar belamp,
gumdream ofgeaf, Godes leoht geceas;
eafersum læfde, swa deð eadig mon
lond ond leodbyrig, þa he of life gewat.12

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 sorry 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 offspring’s journey elsewhere; he does not care to wait for other heirs within the stronghold when one has through death’s compulsion experienced deeds. In anxious sorrow, he sees in his son’s chamber an abandoned wine-hall, the 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.

So the Weders’ guardian carried sorrow welling in the heart for Herebeald; he could in no way settle the feud with the lifeslayer; yet nor could he abuse the warrior with deeds of loathing. He, whom that sorrow befell, then on account of that suffering gave up men’s joys, chose the light of God. To his offspring, as a prosperous man does, he left his land and peopled towns, when he departed this life.

12 Beowulf, ll. 2444–71, in Klaeber’s Beowulf, pp. 84–85.
Tonal differences between this passage and the description of Hrothgar are obvious. As both are spoken by Beowulf, there is potentially space for a reading which privileges the hero’s individual psychological development. His attitude may be seen to shift towards a more pessimistic view of old age, centred upon negative attributes of helplessness and vulnerability in contrast with the pleasures and social centrality which characterise Hrothgar’s performance.\footnote{Such an interpretation would accord well with readings of Beowulf which focus on Beowulf’s absence of male heirs at the end of the poem. See Francis Leneghan, “The Poetic Purpose of the Offa-Digression in Beowulf”, Review of English Studies, 60 (2009), 538–60.}

However, some more general observations can also be made of the two passages when held against one another. In the first, the description of the gomela Scilding is firmly orientated around poetic performance; all of the activities taken up by the elderly figure are artistic or communicatory in function. Previously, this passage has been scrutinised as revelatory of Old English literary genres, with the different performance-related words including *gyd* [...] *soð ond sarlic*, ‘a poem, true and sorrowful’ (2108b–09a), *syllic spell*, ‘a strange tale’ (2109b), as well as the verb *cwiðan*, ‘to lament’ (2112b), applied to the topics of lost youth and strength in battle.\footnote{See Klaeber’s Beowulf, p. 233; Earl R. Anderson, Understanding Beowulf as an Indo-European Epic (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2010), p. 176; David Howlett, British Books in Biblical Style (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), pp. 531–33.} Whether or not these labels are generalised by scholars into broader significance, they stress the performer’s command over a broad range of genres of composition. Throughout the passage, emphasis is also placed on change, opportunity and the presence of choice; this is seen for instance in the structuring device of *hwilum*, ‘sometimes’ or ‘for a time’, as activities are selected and dropped (2107a; 2108b; 2109b; 2111a). The second passage, so different in tone, is characterised by a concern with compulsion and absence of choice, seen clearly in the
old man’s inability to avenge his son’s death; equally he cannot provide his son with _helpe_ [...] _ænige_, ‘any help at all’ (2448b–49b), when he is on the gallows. The absent potential for choice asserts itself in this passage in subtler ways. Contrast with the first passage can be seen, for instance, in the difference between the temporal adverbs employed. Where the first uses _hwilum_, ‘sometimes’, which is not clearly located within any chronological sequence, the second uses _þonne_, which is more clearly sequential and linear. Thus instead of _hwilum gyd awrcæ_, ‘sometimes he expressed a poem’ (2108b), in the first passage, the second offers _þonne he gyd wrecæ_, ‘then he may express a poem’ (2446b). The subjunctive verb does dislocate the song-act from a specific moment in time, introducing an element of conditionality, but it also may be seen to communicate the propriety or fittingness of the singing, creating a space for potentially habitual and repetitious behaviour.\(^{15}\) Throughout the rest of the passage, terms of chronological sequence preside: _ða_ (2469a) and _þonne_ (2447b; 2453b; 2460a). Similarly, the half-line _an æfter anum_ (2461b) is taken by the most recent editors of _Klaeber’s Beowulf_ as referring to the old man’s series of laments, such that the songs are sung ‘one after the other’, ‘in sequence’.\(^{16}\) In the old man’s situation of restriction and compulsion, even his performance of verbal art can be seen as organised in a less eclectic, impulsive manner. In the same vein, the first episode commences on a single morning, _syððan mergen com_, ‘when morning came’ (2103b), a single event of individual importance; the old man’s experience after the death of his son is contrastingly

\(^{15}\) _Gyd_, in its broad semantic range, is also translatable as ‘song’, ‘riddle’ or ‘proverb’: _Dictionary of Old English: A to G Online_, ed. by Angus Cameron and others (hereafter _DOE_) (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007) <http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/dict/index.html> [accessed 2 August 2016], s.v. _gydd_, 1; 1. a.; 5.

\(^{16}\) _Klaeber’s Beowulf_, p. 247.
partitioned into a sequence of mornings, *morna gebwylc*, ‘each or every morning’ (2451b).

Both passages nonetheless share the same interest in performance and communication, to the extent that they employ that one very similar half-line, *hwilum gyd awreca* (2108b) and *Donne be gyd wrecce* (2446b). Where the first passage invokes the contested ‘genre’ descriptions *gyd* […] *sod ond sarlic, syllic spell*, and the verb *cwīdan*, in the second passage the old man *gyd wrecce, | sarigne sang*, ‘expresses a poem, a sorry song’ (2446b–47a), and later *sorhleoð gæleð*, ‘sings a sorrow-lay’ (2460b). Although the passages present the two old men markedly differently, particularly with respect to dynamics of volition and constraint, they both foreground the shared figure of a verbally, artistically adept old man.

Juxtaposed with these, it is profitable to consider Cynewulf’s epilogue to *Elene*, which draws to a close a poem full of references not only to old poets, but also insistently to interrelationships between words, oldness more generally, and concepts of ‘wisdom’. The epilogue itself shares territory with other works signed by Cynewulf in associating wisdom with accomplished speech and song. *Christ II*, for example, asserts the following:

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Se mæg eal fela
singan ond secgan þam bið snyttru cræft
bifolen on ferðe.
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17 The noun *gyd* is frequently paired with *wrecan* or *awreca* in the poetic corpus, including elsewhere in *Beowulf* at 2154b (*gyd æfter wræc*) and 3172a (*wordgyd wrecan*), and in *Vainglory* (*Exeter Book*, pp. 147–49) at 51b (*ond þæt gyd awræc*), where the speaker is a *frod wita on fyrdagum* (‘wise man experienced in the old days’ or ‘an experienced wise man, in the old days’).

18 For example, on the significance of *frod fyrgewritu* (431a) and *frod fyrnwiota* (438a) in the poem, see Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, pp. 129–32.

The man whose mind has been given the art of wisdom can sing and say all kinds of things.

_Elene_’s epilogue is particularly concerned with the notion that poetry is associated both with wisdom and with experience over time and over a life course:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Þus ic frod ond fus,} & \quad \text{þurh þæt fæcne hus,} \\
\text{wordcræftum wæf} & \quad \text{ond wundrum læs,} \\
\text{þragum þreodude} & \quad \text{ond geþanc reodode,} \\
\text{nihtes nearwe;} & \quad \text{nyssse ic gearwe,} \\
\text{be ðære rode riht} & \quad \text{ær me rumran geþeaht,} \quad 1240 \\
\text{þurh ða mæran miht} & \quad \text{on modes þeaht,} \\
\text{wisdom onwreah;} & \quad \text{ic wæs weorcum fah,} \\
\text{synnum asæled,} & \quad \text{sorgum gewæled,} \\
\text{bitrum gebunden,} & \quad \text{bïsgum beþrungen,} \\
\text{ær me lære onlag} & \quad \text{þurh leohthe had,} \quad 1245 \\
\text{gambarum to geoce,} & \quad \text{gife unscynde} \\
\text{mægencyning amæt} & \quad \text{ond on gemynd begeat,} \\
\text{torht ontynde,} & \quad \text{tidum gerymde,} \\
\text{bancofan onband,} & \quad \text{breostlocan onwand,} \\
\text{leoðucræft onleac} & \quad \text{þæs ic lustum breac,} \quad 1250 \\
\text{willum in worlde.}\quad 20
\end{align*}
\]

So I, wise in years and ready, through that treacherous house, wove with the craft of words and wondrously gathered it together; at times I have meditated and sifted my thought in the closeness of the night; I did not fully know the truth about the cross until wisdom revealed wider knowledge through its

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20 Modified from _Elene_, ll. 1236–51a, ed. by Gradon, pp. 71–72 (including 7 expanded, g for þ, w for þ, diacritics omitted).
Eald æfenseop

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 as a comfort for old age, measured out the unflawed gift and invested 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 happily, with delight in the world.

Initially the speaker is frōd ond fus (1236a).\(^{21}\) *Froth* here is seemingly used in its broad sense of ‘old, aged; worthy of veneration/respect on account of age/experience/wisdom’.\(^ {22}\) It is then linked by Cynewulf


to the body’s proximity to death and decay, established in the following half-line, *þurh þæt fæcne hus*, ‘through this treacherous/deceitful house’ (1236b). Previous discussion of this passage has revolved around the language of meditation used by Cynewulf. Éamonn Ó Carragáin argues that the use of the verb *lesan*, ‘to gather, collect’, in the second line ‘could [...] refer to the process of associating disparate texts by verbal reminiscence which is central to monastic meditation’. P. O. E. Gradon takes the verb *reodode* (1238b) as deriving from *hriðian*, ‘to sift’, and Ó Carragáin interprets these lines as ‘Cynewulf’s urgent efforts to sift out what is valuable from his texts and to write what is true about the Cross’. But these themes of discernment and discrimination, established as part of the poetic compositional process, are also firmly set within a framework of reference to the poet’s age. The gift of *lare* is described as *gamelum to geoce*, ‘a comfort for old age’ (1246a), compensating for implicit negative attributes of later life, the details of which are left unclear. What is clear is the concomitance of old age and skills of judicious selection and combination as part of the weaving of *wordcraft*.

In its description of the process of poetic composition, the coda to *Elene* has been discussed in relation to ideas of poetic inspiration within the Latin tradition. Ziolkowski focuses particularly on

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23 Anderson argues that this half-line is inspired by Ecclesiastes 12. 1–4 (*Cynewulf*, p. 17), but Porck (p. 106) considers it more likely that it reflects the common metaphor of the body-as-house in Old English (as in *banhus*).


25 Gradon, p. 71; Ó Carragáin, p. 189.
Cynewulf’s composition in *nihtes nearwe*, translated as ‘in the anguish of the night’; he explores the extensive background of the composition-at-night motif in Latin literature, though ultimately concluding that as ‘the brew of possible classical, local, Christian and individual influences is thick, early medieval occurrences of nighttime composition cannot be traced to a single source’.\(^{26}\) Thornbury draws attention to this motif along with the rhyme scheme of the passage and also the trope of the poet’s ‘unworthiness’ as all likely influenced by Latin models.\(^{27}\) But despite the language of sinfulness and inadequacy present in Cynewulf’s epilogue, the ‘unworthiness’ trope which Thornbury identifies, described by Curtius as ‘affected modesty’ or ‘the modesty topos’, does not map precisely onto Cynewulf’s presentation of his age and its relation to his poetic gifts.\(^{28}\) The poet’s compositional activity in *Elene* is not anxiously sought from a position of disadvantage, but rather presented as habitual and immediate, much in the manner of the aged poets in *Beowulf*. Both of the vernacular poems associate individuals advanced in age with seemingly related skills of verbal communication and poetic craft.

The nature of this conceptual connection in vernacular poetry should nonetheless be considered further in relation to comparable motifs in contemporary Latin writings. The poetry of Alcuin may be seen to contain the clearest parallel to the figure of the poetically...


gifted old person in the vernacular corpus. Alcuin’s poem to Charlemagne, *Carmen 40*, 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 uentre poeta,
et pueri tristes planxerunt carmine Flaccum.29

Snow falls from the sky, while freezing showers mount their attack: the person who had said to Albinus, ‘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 in their verses.\(^{30}\)

Here is presented an image of a *Tristis [...] senior [...] poeta*, ‘a sad old poet’ (5), suffering from a lack of patronage, seemingly striking a note of accord with the references to old poets in the vernacular verse. But although Alcuin’s figure is both old and a poet, it is not clear how far these two ideas are interlinked. It could well be argued that Alcuin’s figure of the aged poet functions as a general marker of deficit rather than a more specific, self-contained theme. *Carmen 40* goes on to describe a hypothetical change of fortunes in which ‘Dum redeunt iterum calidi bona tempora Phoebi, | Mox pristina redit virtus in carmine Flacco’ (10–11) [the warm sun and good times return again | former vigour will return to Flaccus’s verse]; increased age is here a hindrance to poetic success rather than a facilitator.\(^{31}\) Alcuin’s picture of the aged poet is heavily intertwined with other images, forming one component of a larger contrast — seasonal, meteorological, social, interpersonal and economic. His tendency to use old age as part of a larger symbolic reversal is attested elsewhere, including in part of his much-discussed *O mea cella* (*Carmen 23*):

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Qua campis cervos agitabat sacra iuventus,
    Incumbit fessus nunc baculo senior.
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In the fields where the holy youths chased the stag

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\(^{31}\) Trans. by Lapidge, p. 63, n. 84.
the old man now leans weerily on his staff.\textsuperscript{32}

In this text the image is once again surrounded by broader reflections on worldly transience. The rhetorical stance is immediately broadened in the next two lines:

\begin{quote}
Nos miseri, cur te fugitivum, mundus, amamus?
Tu fugis a nobis semper ubique ruens.
\end{quote}

Why do we wretches love you, fugitive world?
You always flee headlong from us.\textsuperscript{33}

The contrast between the \textit{sacra iuventus} and the \textit{baculo senior} thus nestles alongside other perceived indicators of mutability. Indeed, Scott regards the ‘old man with the staff’ here as a ‘commonplace allusion’ which in Alcuin’s hands ‘symbolizes […] brief mortality’.\textsuperscript{34} Godman makes a parallel point in rejecting critical interpretations of the poem which celebrate its descriptions of nature. He argues instead that in this text ‘idyll is subordinated to personal lament’ which ‘leads in turn to the central theme of temporal mutability’, characteristic of the lyric poetry of the last decade of Alcuin’s life.\textsuperscript{35}


\textsuperscript{34} Scott, p. 242.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance}, p. 19.
When considering Alcuin’s figure of the *senior poeta*, then, its semantic resonance may be seen as similarly supporting a large tonal reversal rather than constituting any particularly unique connection between advanced age and poetic aptitude. Simultaneously, Alcuin’s use of the old poet motif can be understood as wholly continuous with his own personal posturing in epistolary contexts, resonating with the emphasis he strategically places on the ‘infirmity of Flaccus’ in his letters.³⁶ The old poet motif in Alcuin’s poetry thus seems to engage with wider conceptual scripts of decline and inadequacy, vulnerability and modesty. Cynewulf’s epilogue does also move into a collection of meditations upon the transience of the world, as part of which *geoguð is gecyrred*, ‘youth is changed’ (1264b), and which Porck suggests could show influence from Alcuin.³⁷ Nonetheless, Alcuin’s use of the ‘old poet’ figure can be seen as distinct. In a further example of the figure of an aged man set amidst a scene of worldly dissolution in Alcuin’s work, his poem on the destruction of Lindisfarne presents its vision of old age as marked by diminished orality and audibility:

\[
\text{Clarior ecce tuba subito vox faucibus haesit,} \\
\text{Auribus adpositis murmura clausa ciet.} \\
\text{Quid iam plura canam? Marcesit tota iuventus}
\]

Voices, clearer than trumpets, suddenly stick in the throat summoning up a subdued whisper for attentive listeners.

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³⁷ Porck, pp. 101–08.
Let my poem be brief. All youth fades away.

The shift to the first-person poetic voice in this passage, announcing ‘Let my poem be brief’ or, more literally, ‘What more can I now sing?’, strongly asserts the idea of encroaching verbal paucity as characteristic of the poet’s belated stage of life. In Alcuin’s symbolic scheme, song is not expansively loosed in the breast of the elderly as it is for the speaker of the epilogue to Elene. It is rather presented as limited, endangered and imminently to be finished.

The Old English poets are working within a conceptual framework which differs substantially from this model. Thornbury has suggested that the role of skill and technical ability plays a greater role in the compositional process as understood in a Germanic tradition than in more inspiration-driven Classical models. It may follow logically that, from the perspective of texts such as Elene and Beowulf, this skill is associated with those who in temporal terms have had a chance to hone it, congruous with a state of advanced age. Rather than threatening poetic skill (and thereby making any

38 Alcuin, The Destruction of Lindisfarne, ll. 109–11, in Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance, pp. 126–39 (pp. 132–33). It may nonetheless be worth noting a possible analogue to the nihtes nearwe in Cynewulf’s poem (1239a) in the diminished light of Alcuin’s old speaker (ll. 105–06): ‘Longa dies oculos atra caligine claudit | Solivagos athomos qui numerare solent’ [The long day closes in black darkness eyes | which used to count each solitary wandering mote]. A clear analogue can also be seen in Bede’s story of Cædmon (Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, iv. 24, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), pp. 414–21).

39 In this regard, Alcuin’s characterization here has much more in common with the self-effacing, compositionally afflicted ‘old author’ topos which Anderson sees as distinguishing Cynewulf’s voice in the epilogue to Elene (see note 21 above).

40 Thornbury, ‘Aldhelm’s Rejection of the Muses’.
achievements in verse seem all the more remarkable), old age in the vernacular passages discussed above is seen distinctly to enhance skill. Cynewulf and the *Beowulf*-poet appear to be drawing upon a largely separate tradition of poetic composition to that which Alcuin invokes. Their connection of old age with skilled poetic craft is internally coherent and comfortable, not fraught with tension and discord.

This connection in the vernacular poetry furthermore relies upon crucial notions of thoughts and experience gathered over time in the form of concept or concepts of ‘wisdom’.

In exploring this network of association, one key aspect of the historical Anglo-Saxon poet’s profession might be considered, namely the connection of poets with teaching and, relatedly, with age difference. Links between wisdom poetry and the instruction of youth have been well established with

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42 On poets and pedagogical work, see Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, pp. 40–65. An explicit link between advanced age and the role of teacher can be found in the *Canons of Edgar* when Wulfstan declares that it is fitting that ‘læran þa yldran georne heora gingran’ [the elders earnestly teach their youngers]: Wulfstan, *Canons of Edgar*, ed. by Roger Fowler, EETS, original ser., 266 (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 2. Similarly, Ælfric states in the preface to his *Grammar* that ‘ðam ealdum gedafenað, þæt hi tæcon sum gerad heora junglingum, forðan ðe ðurh lare byð se geleafa gehealden [diacritics omitted]’ [for the old it is fitting that they teach some counsel to their children, because the faith is preserved through teaching]: Ælfric, *Grammatik und Glossar*, ed. by
reference to the Old English corpus. A link between poetic craft and pedagogy may furthermore be seen to underlie yet another representation of verbally skilled old age in the Old English corpus. This is situated in the *Exeter Book* riddles, which on the whole do not focus on entities occupying a state of old age. The only riddle to use the term *eald* to describe a riddle-creature is also a text profoundly concerned with vocal expression, poetry and song. This is the nightingale riddle, Riddle 8.


44 One apparent reference to an aged state in the *Exeter Book* riddles can be found in Riddle 74, which describes a nebulous creature temporarily taking up the form of a *feaxhar cwene*, ‘grey-haired woman’ (2b). John D. Niles solves this riddle as *ac*, ‘oak’ or ‘a ship made of oak’, with *feaxhar* describing the appearance of the fully grown tree: *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), pp. 11–56. The stag which grows the horns destined to hold ink in Riddle 93 is described as *degrime frod*, ‘wise in the count of days’ (7a). Riddle 93 was first given its ‘inkhorn’ solution by Franz Dietrich in ‘Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs. Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 11 (1859), 448–90 (p. 486).

Ic þurh muþ sprece mongum reordum, wrencum singe, wrixle geneahhe heafodwoþe, hlude cirme, healde mine wisan, hleþre ne miþe, eald æfensceop, eorlum bringe 5 blisse in burgum, þonne ic bugendre stefne styrme; stille on wicum sittað nigende. Saga hwæt ic hadde, þa swa scirenige sceawendwisan hlude onhyrge, hæleþum bodige 10 wilcumena fela woþe minre.46

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.

The half-line eald æfensceop (5a) has long been a bone of contention. Eald here is usually translated as ‘traditional’, and scholars such as Williamson claim that the word in this context does not otherwise

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46 Riddle 8, in *Exeter Book*, p. 185.
readily make sense. But if we turn to Pliny’s *Natural History*, seemingly a source for the parts of the poem about the nightingale’s song, we can find (toward the end of the passage) evidence for the nightingale being itself, personally, old:

Luscinis diebus ac noctibus continuis xv garrulus sine intermissu cantus densante se frondium germine, non in novissimis digna miratu ave. primum tanta vox tam parvo in corpusculo, tam pertinax spiritus; deinde in una perfecta musicae scientia: modulatus editur sonus, et nunc continuo spiritu trahitur in longum, nunc variatur inflexo, nunc distinguitur conciso, copulatur intorto, promittitur revocato; infuscatur ex inopinato, interdum et secum ipse murmurat, plenus, gravis, acutus, creber, extentus, ubi visum est vibrans — summus, medius, imus; breviterque omnia tam parvulis in faucibus quae tot exquisitis tibiarium tormentis ars hominum excogitavit […] meditantur aliae iuveniores versusque quos imitentur accipiunt; audit discipula


48 Williamson (p. 155) cites Pliny as a possible influence on the poem in general and particularly on the riddle’s presentation of the bird as poet, reciting memorised songs in a competitive manner. Salvador-Bello (pp. 58–59) develops Williamson’s discussion, noting similarly informed analogues in Alcuin’s *De luscinia* (in which the nightingale is likened to a devout Christian praise-poet), as well as in later medieval Western European poetry. For an edition and translation of *De luscinia*, see *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, pp. 144–45.
intentione magna et reddit, vicibusque reticent; intellegitur emendatae correctio et in docente quaedam reprehensio.

Nightingales pour out a ceaseless gush of song for fifteen days and nights on end when the buds of the leaves are swelling — a bird not in the lowest rank remarkable. In the first place there is so loud a voice and so persistent a supply of breath in such a tiny little body; then there is the consummate knowledge of music in a single bird: the sound is given out with modulations, and now is drawn out into a long note with one continuous breath, now varied by managing the breath, now made staccato by checking it, or linked together by prolonging it, or carried on by holding it back; or it is suddenly lowered, and at times sinks into a mere murmur, loud, low, bass, treble, with trills, with long notes, modulated when this seems good — soprano, mezzo, baritone; and briefly all the devices in that tiny throat which human science has devised with all the elaborate mechanism of the flute […] 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.

The last line presents an explicit association between older birds and improved musical skill. In light of this aspect of the source, it seems at least possible to posit that eald is capable of functioning in Riddle 8 as a marker of advanced age and its concomitant qualities, rather than as a broad comment on the ‘traditional’ nature of the æfenseop role.

These qualities are specifically related by Pliny to the older nightingale’s role as a teacher within a pedagogical framework. Riddle 8, however, does not choose to focus on this association attached to nightingales. The riddle turns instead around the continually changing voice of the bird, a contrast with the men sitting quietly inside the buildings of the town. Throughout, the Old English text prioritises the plurality, modulation and change within the nightingale’s song, as does the earlier part of Pliny’s description above. In the Old English the bird sings in *wrencum*, ‘modulations’ or possibly ‘twists’ (2a);^50^ ‘changes’ its vocalisations through the verb *wrixlan* (2b); calls out with a *bugendre | stefne*, a ‘varying’ or ‘bending voice’ (6b); mimics or imitates (*onhyrge*) the ways of a *scirenige*, ‘actress’ or possibly ‘jester’ (9a–10a);^51^ and offers men *fela wilcumena*, ‘many welcomes’ (11a). This poem is awash with references to variations of tone and register, multiple utterances, and quotational speech.

It may be here that the significance of the *eald* poet lies, rather than in the pedagogical association which Pliny invokes in his description. The riddle’s emphasis on amassed options for speech is as congruous with the conceptual scheme of the mind-as-container motif which Mize has identified in Old English literature; multiple items of knowledge are collected together, providing opportunities for selection and vocalisation in communication with others.^52^ Throughout all the passages discussed in this paper, patterns of modulation and variety have been persistently foregrounded in representations of verbally skilled old age. In the first passage, the range and variations of Hrothgar’s performance in *Beowulf* are core to the description at 2105–14. Through the repetition of *hwilum* and the

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^50^ In light of the verb *wrencan*, ‘to twist’: Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *wrencan* I.

^51^ On the ambiguity of *scirenige*, see Williamson, p. 158.

identification of various different kinds of poetic art, the passage is sharply focused upon change and alteration. At the same time, it is charged with references to multiple previous experiences and memories: ‘gomela Scilding, | felafricgende, feorran rehte’ [the aged Scylding, when many having asked, told of far-off things] (2105b–06), \(^{53}\) ‘he wintrum frod worn gemunde’ [wise with winters, he remembered many things] (2114). These two ideas appear interrelated, with the range of poetic and verbal ability interwoven with the collection of various experiences over time. In the second passage from *Beowulf* the element of choice and change is framed differently; the old man’s familial situation is one of passivity and constriction and in his singing is more linear and sequential. Emphasis is nonetheless placed on modulation within this framework: the passage diversifies in time and place as the old figure invokes the conceptual space of the deserted hall (2556–59) and of the land more broadly (2461–62a), meanwhile passing through more domestic living spaces in the form of the son’s chamber (2455b) and the couch (2460a). The poem simultaneously offers a range of terms for verbal and musical expression, including *gyd*, ‘poem, song’ (2446b) and *sorbleoð*, ‘sorrow-lay’ (2460b), as well as the absent *hearpan sweg*, ‘sound of the harp’ (2458b).

In the epilogue to *Elene*, the poet’s creative process is clearly presented as one of variation and readjustment: Cynewulf, with his status as *frod ond fus*, claims that he ‘wordcræftum wæf ond wundrum læs’ [wove with the craft of words and wondrously gathered it together] (1237), processing thoughts through the verbs *lesan*, ‘to gather, collect’ (1237b), and *reodian*, seemingly ‘to sift’ (1238b), both of which foreground processes of reconsideration and

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\(^{53}\) On *felafricgende* as an absolute participle, ‘when many asked’, see Bammesberger, pp. 3–8.
The epilogue then goes on to explore the divine knowledge which Cynewulf has received and which has enabled him to compose his verse: experience and the acquisition of knowledge are once again linked to the plurality of understandings and approaches to which this poet has access. These connections are attested also in the passage from Christ II: ‘The man whose mind has been given the art of wisdom [snyttru cræft] can sing and say all kinds of things [eal fela].’ Perhaps Riddle 8 is more revelatory than has been credited in its highlighting of the manner in which access to multiple perspectives informs the poetic gifts of aged individuals. Poets who are late in their life courses seem fundamentally attuned to plural discourses.

The connection between Anglo-Saxon ideas of wisdom and the significance of multiple perspectives in the form of dialogue and interpersonal exchange has often been noted. Repeatedly in Old English texts, dialogue is figured as the ultimate facilitator of enhanced insight, or ‘wisdom’. Elaine Tuttle Hansen, in her study of wisdom literature in Anglo-Saxon England, concludes that, across the poems that she discusses, ‘wisdom is inseparable from its verbal expression in and through the communicative process’. After a study of some of the relationships between speaker and solver in the Exeter Book riddles, Hansen concludes the following:

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54 Zwikstra notes that the reflection on the past in The Wanderer is ‘filtered through the internal person and processed mentally by means of thought (geþohte, geondþenceð) and memory (gemon), by means of thoughtful memory’: ‘Psychology of Wisdom’, p. 133. Zwikstra earlier observes that frod seems to designate ‘a wisdom […] born of process not of state’ (p. 99).

55 Hansen, Solomon Complex, p. 143. Paralleling Hansen’s references to multiplicity and contingency, Poole (p. 16) argues that ‘wisdom will come more readily if [an] elderly person has not simply lived for many winters but also as a matter of deliberate policy cultivated an awareness of vicissitudes, mutability, and the world’s few stable principles’. 

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The Old English riddles as a genre begin to construct, however tentatively, the reassuring notion that the power of the human intellect resides in its ability to engage in a communicative act (with other human beings and with God) to solve the problems that threaten communication, to interpret and learn from the multiplicity of possible perspectives, and in doing so to see that change and contingency are the stable part of human experience.  

Wisdom can here be understood as dependent primarily on the interaction of various modes of perspective, an appreciation of which is honed by prolonged existence in the world. This aligns neatly with what we have seen of the link between poetic skill and awareness of plurality present in the depictions of aged speakers.

In the light of the extracts discussed above, set alongside parallel observations in the scholarship attendant on wisdom literature, it can be posited that poetic composition and the practices of nurturing and exercising wisdom both hinge upon the possibilities afforded by processes of modulation, adjustment, and review. These skills are enhanced through exposure to many and various experiences and points of view over time, and, seemingly, over a life course. Multiple perspectives form the heart of the connection, bringing together issues of age, wisdom and poetic compositional ability. Further studies might productively consider exploring this network of association when approaching Old English verse.

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