

‘Unregarded Age’: Texts and Contexts for Elderly Characters
in English Renaissance Drama, *c.*1480-1625

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to provide historical and literary contexts for elderly characters from English play-texts c.1580 to 1625. Its primary aim, from a literary perspective, is to draw attention to the ways that a better understanding of elderly characterisation can enrich the appreciation of much-studied play-texts, and to indicate some interesting features of more obscure ones. Its secondary aim is to suggest the value, for social historians of old age in early modern England, of play-texts as social evidence.

I have examined most of the published extant play-texts of the period, and have found approximately 150 of these to be relevant (the most important of these are listed in the Appendix). Because of the problems of handling all aspects of such a large amount of material, I have chosen to consider the plays chiefly as texts to be read, with little reference to their performative aspects. However, I analyse the dramas as literary as well as social documents. Specific plays provide illustrations for observations and support for various hypotheses about dramatic representations of the elderly. In some instances, I address plays which have received little critical attention.

The thesis falls into two parts. In the first three chapters, I discuss the socio-historical, cultural and non-dramatic literary contexts for representations of elderly men and women in play-texts. In chapters four through seven, I examine elderly characters in specific role or relationship categories: as sovereigns and magistrates, in sexual and marital relationships, and as parents. In the final chapter, I offer a detailed analysis of *The Old Law* by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley.

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CHAPTER 1: A HISTORY OF THE OLD

*I have five hundred crowns,
The thrifty hire I sav'd under your father,
Which I did store to be my foster-nurse,
When service should in my old limbs lie lame,
And unregarded age in corners thrown.*

(*As You Like It* 2.3.38-42)

Introduction: rationale and methodology

Old Adam's quiet remark in *As You Like It* presented itself as an apt phrase when considering a title for this work. Much has been written in studies of English Renaissance drama, about youth and the young¹ – they are, after all, the most common protagonists in the comedies and tragicomedies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and frequently the sufferers in tragedy as well, although that genre also features many mature and middle-aged central characters. Yet with the exception of *Lear*, elderly characters are rarely given more than secondary consideration, usually as they contribute to the hindrance or success of younger agents; they are virtually 'unregarded' in studies of the drama, despite their ubiquity in, and not inconsiderable importance to, play-texts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is not the intention of this work to examine possible reasons for this apparent lack of interest on the part of critics, although the tendency just cited, for central characters not to be old, is one likely factor. However, it is worth noting that a similar indifference has been

the norm amongst social historians as well, at least until quite recently. Since this study was originally conceived of as a combined literary and historical undertaking, as an examination of elderly characters in English Renaissance dramas considered alongside the lives and experiences of the old in England itself, the scarcity of historical investigation necessitated that available sources be scoured for evidence. The paucity of materials also suggested that, even more than had first been thought necessary, a detailed historical introduction would be needed as a general backdrop for understanding the ideas, beliefs, demands, restrictions, powers and experiences of the elderly English, and of their society in relation to them. With such information in hand, one can then turn to the plays themselves and scrutinise their authors' representations of elderly men and women with one's senses and faculties attuned to contemporary modes of thought and experience.

Writing an historical account of the elderly in Elizabethan and early Stuart England, then, poses numerous problems, the greatest difficulty being the newness of the subject. Work in the social history of European countries during the last quarter-century has shown the great number and variety of sources which one may investigate for information of a social nature. However, social historians of early modern England are only gradually becoming interested in the elderly as subjects for study. This means that thoroughness can be at this stage only relative, limited to those aspects of the old and their lives which are presently visible from historical records, and which have been

¹ E.g., Marjorie B. Garber's *Coming of Age in Shakespeare*.

exhumed by historians.² One consequence of this limitation will be a degree of generalisation in the following discussion. Another will be *lacunae*, some awaiting research to fill them and others probably more or less permanent due to an absence of data. To mitigate the first effect, individual examples will be drawn upon in an effort to breathe life into impersonal descriptions, and also to indicate where generalisations fail to take account of the multiplicity of actual experiences. In the case of *lacunae*, conjectures will be offered if they seem possible to make, in the hope of suggesting potential approaches for future work. In keeping, also, with the primarily literary nature of this study, illustrations, comparisons and contradictions in dramatic and non-dramatic literature will be offered whenever possible.

Thus, the purpose of this chapter and the subsequent two is primarily to give the reader an overall perspective on the lives of the elderly in this period – their numbers, occupations, lifestyles, status, experiences – as a prelude to this paper’s principal interest, which is to demonstrate first, the value, for literary scholars, of understanding elderly characters in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, particularly within their historical contexts, and secondly, the value, for social historians of old age in early modern England, of play-texts as social evidence. Chapter three, in addition, traces representations and views of the elderly in non-dramatic literature. Although some Renaissance literary scholars, particularly those interested in the pursuit of new historicist and cultural materialist analyses, do advocate the usefulness of historicising

² Being a literary scholar, not a trained historian, I have limited my research to secondary resources produced by social historians, with the exception of primary literary (in the narrower sense) documents – books, plays, poems, diaries, ballads and the like.

English Renaissance literature, the pertinence of some social, economic and political historical contexts has not yet been adequately explored. Further, new historicists and cultural materialists, interested in power structures and their 'subversion' within literary texts, have still to explore the importance of elderly men within the Elizabethan and Jacobean power hierarchy, with its many social organs and devices for maintaining order and regulating authority. As for elderly females, scholars interested in the position of women in this period, or in their representation in literature, have also tended to focus upon young and middle-aged women, possibly because these tend to be more visible in literary and non-literary sources.³ Information about elderly women is difficult but not impossible to recover, and the presence of elderly female characters in the drama is a valuable but virtually untapped resource.

In general, English social historians of old age have tended not to use literary texts as sources of information. Whilst recognising that such materials cannot be treated as straightforward, unambiguous evidence, one can discern in play-texts interesting angles on many contemporary social issues involving the elderly, and thereby illuminate aspects of old people's lives and their positions within the social structures and hierarchies of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. As the elderly, particularly elderly men, were key figures in the power and authority systems of the realm, information about them can also expand our understanding of English politics and social order in the period. It is thus with the hope of introducing new ideas and

³See, however, Linda Pollock's study of Lady Grace Mildmay, *With Faith and Physic*. The abundant scholarship on Elizabeth I is also a notable exception, however their elevated (in the case of Elizabeth, exalted) social status is crucial; see below for further comment on socio-economic factors.

materials to both literary and historical scholars that this study has been undertaken.

The question remains, 'why choose drama?' First, there are the constraints of time and writing space: to address all forms of literature – even of only imaginative literature – of this period was a task beyond the scope of a dissertation. In narrowing the field, plays were selected to be the focus, principally because of the unique accessibility of the theatre at this point in English history. Unlike most other printed literary forms, plays were encountered by a large cross-section of the population at this time, even (and particularly) by the non-literate.⁴ I felt it would be productive and rewarding to examine representations of the elderly in one of the period's most popular, prolific and lasting forms of entertainment. It must be made explicit at the outset that I have chosen to deal with plays *as texts* rather than in performance. Whilst the performative aspects of plays will be considered occasionally, this study is concerned to analyse and discuss dramas as printed documents. Again, space has been the limiting factor; to introduce aspects of staging, costuming and related areas into the investigation would have initiated an entirely new and (too) sizable domain for discussion. This study does, however, acknowledge the 'living' qualities of these plays in performance, particularly a player's scope for dramatic interpretation of the play-text characters, and endeavours to take such variables into account.

Roughly a hundred and seventy plays were read for this study, eighty percent of which yielded pertinent information.⁵ Although a narrower approach – say, selecting a

⁴Ballads were another widely available, although far less sophisticated, form of entertainment; see Alice Tobriner, 'Old Age in Tudor-Stuart Broadside Ballads'.

⁵ These are documented in the Appendix.

handful of plays for close analysis – would certainly have yielded a very different, more concentrated result, it is hoped that the wide-ranging nature of the sources and hypotheses in this thesis will raise questions to stimulate further inquiries into old age and its literary representations.



In this account of elderly life, emphasis will be placed upon the old as a highly diverse group of people – which of course they were, being defined as a ‘group’ solely on the basis of a biological phenomenon potentially common to everyone. This may seem too obvious a point to stress, however the elderly can be subject to a certain homogeneity of perception, which arises largely because of the tendency for their public activities (chiefly work) to decline with advancing age. As will be discussed, this seems to have been far less the case in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, though then too, some did retire. But the old were (and are) distinguished by sex, social status, economic position, occupations, education, geographical location, religion and all the other details which diversified them at previous stages in their lives. Added to this was the highly variable experience of ageing itself, influenced partly by the factors just listed, and partly by individual health, diet, constitution and personality. The significance of social and economic rank can hardly be overstated. The experience of

being old was, for commoners and even for 'the middling sort'⁶ of relatively prosperous merchants, craftsmen and professionals, in most respects starkly different than the experience of the gentry and aristocracy. Hence, while 'old people' is the nominal group under discussion, the variety of those people will constantly press against the boundaries of that unifying modifier 'old'.

I. Defining 'old age'

In order to deal with the historical materials, one must adopt an elastic definition of 'old', because contemporaries had no hard and fast chronological marker at which old age conventionally began, nor any legal boundary such as current age requirements for receipt of pensions.⁷ Although some rough numbers will be adopted here, they will be less important, except for statistical purposes, than the criteria measuring age in non-chronological terms. Keith Thomas has remarked that 'there is nothing constant about the social meaning of age' and this was most surely the case in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.⁸

For one thing, not everyone was certain of their exact age; for another, it was plain that different people did not age at the same rate or in the same ways. Coroners' records in the medieval period always give higher ages with the phrase '*et amplius*'

⁶'Middling sort' is a contemporary term recently reinstated by certain English social historians, applied to a middle 'sector' of English society but not to be equated with 'middle class'; see Barry and Brooks, eds., *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, society and politics in England, 1550-1800*.

⁷ There were a few exemptions based upon age: the Statute of Labourers of 1351 exempted those over sixty from service; the Elizabethan Statute of Artificers (1563) exempted men over sixty and women over forty from compulsory service (Pelling and Smith 6). Men over sixty were not required for military service – see e.g., Gough 116.

⁸ Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 205.

(literally, 'and more') after them; 'the description of the person as aged was based on his or her physical appearance and general health, not simply on calendar years'.⁹ When Lear describes himself as 'a foolish fond old man, four score/ And upwards, not an hour more nor less', 'And upwards' may be the vernacular of this common Latin terminology. Lear's blending of imprecision with exactitude in the concluding phrase, apparently due to exhaustion and confusion, can also be interpreted as expressing that whether or not one knows one's 'exact' age, one has still lived 'exactly' the same amount of time – age is experienced and felt, rather than counted.

Respondents in early modern records of various kinds continue to exhibit similar tendencies of rounding off ages to the nearest decade or half-decade – for example, 60% of the respondents of fifty years and older in the Norwich Poor Census of 1570 gave an age in round figures, and this was quite typical.¹⁰ Physical appearance and state of health were probably of primary importance. These were to some extent variable, depending upon personal predispositions, past experiences and (especially) socio-economic status. It may have been that those lower down the social scale showed signs of ageing sooner than their better-fed superiors; yet conversely, the often excessive and ill-balanced diets of the prosperous did not necessarily predispose them to better health than those eating more frugal fare.¹¹ One point of general agreement was that women

⁹ Hanawalt 228.

¹⁰ Pelling, 'Old Age' 79, who argues for the reliability of contemporary recorders' perceptions of age and gives examples of both rounded and precisely given ages. For caution against exaggerated ages, see Laslett, 'Societal Development and Aging' 215 and the same author's *A Fresh Map of Life* 108.

¹¹ 'Early modern observers found it natural that rich and poor should age at different rates' (Pelling and Smith 6). On early modern English diets, rich, poor and middling, see Appleby 'Diet in Sixteenth-Century England: Sources, Problems, Possibilities'.

aged more quickly than men did.¹² According to humoral theory, they had less ‘natural heat’ than men and were moister, which meant that the female ‘reaches puberty earlier, and ages more quickly because of the corrupting effect of her dominant humidity’.¹³

William Harrison evidently felt he was being very positive in his assessment of his ageing female compatriots when he declared:

And albeit that our women through bearing of children doo after fortie begin to wrinkle apace, yet are they not commonlie so wretched and hard fauoured to looke vpon in their age, as the French women, and diuerse of other countries with whom their men also doo much participate; and there to be so often waiward and peeuish, that nothing in maner may content them.¹⁴

Women would appear to have had a more definite boundary at which old age began – the menopause. However, there was no consensus on when that occurred, and anywhere from forty-two to fifty-five was suggested by different authorities.¹⁵ Merry Wiesner, surveying the life-cycles of women in Europe generally, has suggested that while a woman’s stages of life were not unimportant, they depended much more upon a woman’s marital status, and in this period ‘the ‘ages of woman’ correspond much less to her chronological age than the ‘ages of man’ do to a man’s’.¹⁶

When all of these complicating factors of appearance, perception, class, health, sex, life history and others are acknowledged, what may one do to set some satisfactory numerical starting point for the term ‘old’? Without rehearsing the opinions of

¹² Note the different ages for men and women’s exemption from service in the Statute of Artificers, in footnote 7.

¹³ Maclean 32, 35.

¹⁴ Harrison 155.

¹⁵ Crawford 308.

¹⁶ Wiesner 42; there were, incidentally, very few age schemes for women, and those few were almost without exception modelled after men’s, but with the emphasis upon marriage and reproduction only. This is also discussed in chapter two.

numerous contemporary authorities, it may be said that for men, fifty was a widely accepted figure for the beginning of old age, while forty to fifty was suggested for women. I favour the higher figure in the range for women because while they were thought to *look* (and therefore to *be*) old at forty to forty-five, women themselves tended to live as long as or longer than men, and to remain at least as physically active in their later ages. A definition of their old age therefore ought not to be based more upon cosmetic criteria than that of their male counterparts. Fifty of course was 'not necessarily the start of decrepitude' in these views¹⁷, which was more usually seen to begin at sixty or even seventy.¹⁸ This less definite sub-division of old age marked an essential distinction in the minds of contemporaries. Old age clearly did not come all of a sudden, and one could distinguish between 'young' old and 'old' old individuals.¹⁹ Those in the earlier phase of 'old' were still to a degree able-bodied, mobile and healthy, intact in mind and independent; those in the latter phase were the decrepit, sick, incapacitated and possibly mentally compromised. These two distinctions (which in reality could blend with one another as people aged) are important to keep in mind. The experiences of people in different states of senescence could be significantly dissimilar.²⁰

II. Numbers of the old

One widely held belief about the old in past times is that there were very few of

¹⁷ Pelling, 'Old Age, Poverty and Disability' 78.

¹⁸ Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 237; biblical support for sixty came from Leviticus 27.7 and 1 Timothy 5.9.

them, because 'life expectancy' was so much less than it is today, and they therefore had a scarcity value in their societies.²¹ The question of value will be addressed presently; however, the demographic position of the elderly needs to be clarified so that their presence relative to other age groups in the past is accurately understood.

Figures for life expectancy can be misleading when presented without explanation or comparison. In the mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth century, for example, during the period of greatest population growth in the early modern boom, expectation of life at birth in England was between about thirty and forty-seven.²² Average figures for the country as a whole were, between 1566 and 1621, never below 37.4 years (1591) and peaked at 43.7 (1581). These were higher than after population expansion ceased c.1650, and high by early modern European standards – between 1566 and 1586 English people had a better chance of survival than they would again until after 1815.²³ Further, these are only figures for life expectancy *at birth*. The most risky ages to be in early modern England, in terms of mortality, were from birth to thirty; thereafter, one could expect to live another thirty years, at fifty another eighteen years, at sixty another twelve, and at seventy even eight.²⁴ In this period, perhaps 20-25% of the English population (depending upon time and location) were over fifty, with 8-10%

¹⁹ These are modern, not contemporary terms.

²⁰ See Gilbert for a study which uses Vasari's *Lives* of artists to discuss renaissance definitions of old age.

²¹ Thus, in a very recent book the editors still must caution that this belief 'continues as an historical 'half-truth' to affect present day debates' (Pelling and Smith 3).

²² Being born in London, or another large town, for example, could seriously compromise life expectancy at birth because of the higher levels of disease present in these environments.

²³ Coward 37; statistics from Palliser 45-6.

²⁴ Laslett, 'Societal Development and Aging' 210.

of these being sixty or older.²⁵ Hence, the elderly were by no means an insignificant segment of early modern English society. Men and women could hope, simply on the basis of their own non-statistical observations, to reach a relatively high age, and the old would have formed a significant presence in most communities.

Some historians believe that there would have tended to be fewer elderly in the countryside than in towns, because there were more opportunities for the old to support themselves in urban centres, and facilities for help such as neighbourly assistance or community poor relief were more prevalent and accessible.²⁶ However, the limited figures available for London – where there was both a developed poor relief system and great occupational diversity – suggest that perhaps 5-6% of the population there was sixty or older. Jeremy Boulton notes that both John Graunt and Gregory King, later seventeenth-century ‘statisticians’, remarked on London’s low number of old people, King saying this was also the case in other towns; Graunt deemed the cause to be the unhealthy urban environment.²⁷ If their perceptions were accurate, it seems plausible that higher mortality in towns would have more than offset elderly immigration, which must in any case have involved very limited numbers at any time. Further, there is also the possibility that some of the elderly might have moved out of towns to the countryside, to live with friends or in guild-supported almshouses, or (less often) with members of their family. Records from parishes outside of London, particularly small ones in the countryside, have not been examined in any detail to

²⁵ Palliser 45; Sharpe 41.

²⁶ Laurence 29; for a discussion of elderly migration to towns, see Pelling, ‘Old Age, Poverty, and Disability’ especially 81-2.

determine whether elderly immigration to smaller towns and villages occurred.

In sum, old men and women were not rarities in the period, but formed a considerable portion of the population. It may be added that a good many, though obviously a smaller number, lived into their seventies and eighties, often remaining relatively active by modern standards. The tendency for people to exaggerate ages or give them in rounded numbers, which can be detected in plenty of early records, should not obscure the facts that (1) many also show an effort to be exact, and (2) census takers and other recorders were not passive recipients of information given them, and probably used their judgement and experience to gauge the credibility of their respondents' replies. The numbers, while not perfect, are sufficient to give us a clear picture: the old had a presence in England large enough to place demands and exert some influence upon many aspects of life in their communities.

III. Elderly lives

To reconstruct more accurately the experiences of being old in England at this time, it is pertinent to understand the overall broad structure of individual and familial life cycles which most people would have followed into old age. As this work is structured around the various roles and relationships which old men and women had both in English play-texts and in their everyday lives, this section presents a summary of information which finds expansion in later chapters. It is again important to stress that the following description does not attempt to include the numerous variations that

²⁷ Boulton 162.

undoubtedly occurred in all walks of life, nor to paint a static picture of either the 'English family' or 'English life'. Historians recognise that the sixteenth century was a time of enormous and rapid economic and social changes throughout most of England, with concomitant degrees of variability and instability in many citizens' lives. However, understanding the 'norms' for the time is still highly useful.²⁸

After early childhood, adolescents left home to enter apprenticeship or service, gain training, save money and secure an occupation before marrying and beginning their own family and household. English family formation, for those below the rank of gentry at least, followed what has been termed the 'European marriage pattern', more accurately, 'northern European': households were relatively small, consisting only of parents, children and servants, and the age of first marriage for both men and women was quite high (roughly in the mid-twenties), due to the custom of neolocality, i.e., newly married couples were expected to set up their own separate households, which meant that the partners needed savings and ideally some occupational security before marrying.²⁹ The practice of independent residence was apparently already well established in the medieval period.³⁰ Extended families were even less common – on average, no more than about 6% of English households at a given time appear to have

²⁸ The information for this summary has been drawn from a wide variety of sources, indicated both in footnotes to this section and in later chapters' references. Most comprehensive general and social histories of the period review the issues and findings of recent scholarly work on English family history; see e.g., Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* 66-118, Coward, *Social Change and Continuity in Early Modern England 1550-1750*. The best book-length introduction to the subject remains Houlbrooke's *The English Family 1450-1700*, with more recent work incorporated into the introduction and chapter essays in his *English Family Life 1576-1716: An Anthology from Diaries*.

²⁹ The foundation article for this topic is J. Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective', in *Population in History: Essays in Historical Sociology*, ed. D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley (London: Edward Arnold, 1965): 101-143.

³⁰ Coward 19-20. Although social historians of the family have hotly debated this subject, the validity of Hajnal's fundamental findings and claims has been verified and refined by subsequent researchers.

contained three or more generations.³¹ It should be noted here that the survival of more documents relating to the lives and marital transactions of the upper echelons can give a misleading impression. In these groups (i.e., peers, upper gentry and some very wealthy merchants) marriages could occur somewhat earlier, in the early twenties for men and late teens to early twenties for women³²; child-marriages also occurred, but with far lesser frequency than modern attention to them suggests.³³ Households also tended to be much larger, owing both to the presence of large numbers of servants, and sometimes to co-residence of the couple with one or other of the parental families, though this was often temporary. However, the historical visibility of these groups should not overshadow the practices of ordinary people. Though prominent, the economic élite were also an extremely small sector of the English population.

Once married, the majority of couples continued to have children until the woman reached menopause³⁴, trying meanwhile both to raise their family and save for their old age. When entering their fifties, they might have a younger child or two remaining at home, and when these were gone (unless any chose to stay) the couple was on its own again. It may or may not have been the same couple as at the start; widowhood was a common experience, remarriage probable for all but those wealthy enough to choose otherwise. Those who still ended up alone at some point in old age (as most naturally did) lived on their own if possible, with a servant if they could afford it. Children were

³¹ Laslett, *Fresh Map* 112.

³² Houlbrooke, *English Family* 65-7, Wrightson 72-3.

³³ Child-marriages have received much attention because of the prevalence of the practice in royal and noble families; see Stone *Crisis* 293-8.

³⁴ See Laslett, *Family Life* 203.

not expected either to stay at home to care for their elderly parents, or to return to live with and look after them, or to take them into their own homes.³⁵ Concern over potential conflicts of authority appears to have been a primary motive for separate residences; William Whateley described in his *A Care-Clothe or a Treatise of the Cumbers and Troubles of Marriage* (1624):

when thou art married, if it may be, live of thy self with thy wife, in a family of thine own, and not with another, in one family, as it were, betwixt you both. . . . The mixing of governours in an household, or subordinating or uniting of two Masters, or two Dames under one roof, doth fall out most times, to be a matter of much unquietness to all parties: Youth and age are so far distant in their conditions, and how to make the young folks so wholly resign themselves unto the elders as not to be discontented with their proceedings; or to make the elder so much to deny themselves, as to condescend unto the wills of the younger . . . in the common sort of people is altogether impossible.³⁶

Considering these widespread concerns provides some social context for Lear's troubles with his daughters; although their relationships in the play obviously cannot be simplistically reduced to a mirror of contemporary domestic conflicts between co-resident elderly parents and their children, nonetheless one finds echoes of the problem in Goneril's exasperated rant, act 1.3:

By day and night he wrongs me, every hour
He flashes into one gross crime or other
That sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it.
.
Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away!³⁷

³⁵ 'Historians have not been successful in finding evidence that children would return home from jobs or homes in other places to ensure the comfort and security of elderly parents' (Laslett, *Family Life* 177).

³⁶Whateley, sigs. A6-A6^v, quoted in Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love* 94-5. On intergenerational conflicts in the home, see also Houlbrooke, *English Family* 185-90.

³⁷ 1.3.3-5, 16-18. Lines 16-18 are found in Q1 and Q2, but not in F1. All references to Shakespeare's plays, unless otherwise indicated, are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition (1997).

At one level, *King Lear* articulates fears felt by some of the ordinary elderly population of England, that the love and trust one has for one's children may turn out to be misplaced if economic power is surrendered to them.

A small proportion of the old at any one time were solitary, and institutionalised living was uncommon, although almshouses run by guilds or private donors existed in small numbers. Those who had never married were not necessarily more economically disadvantaged, since children were not insurance against old age, and such single people had never had to struggle to support a family. The greatest determinant of the household status of the old was their economic position. Hence, the possession of savings and/or property, coupled with the absence of a social imperative upon children to care for necessitous elderly parents, were strong influences upon the living standards of the old in England. The 'economics of ageing' were thus intimately tied up with personal welfare, and also with the elderly's familial relationships, and the first part of chapter seven discusses how customs and laws regarding the transfer of property between generations could affect the nature of intergenerational relationships. The largest portion of most people's lives, below the gentry class, was occupied by work. Section four surveys the ways in which elderly men and women seem to have dealt with work as old age set in.

IV. The economics of ageing, part one: work and retirement

'Ageing in seventeenth-century society was a process of gradual withdrawal

from economic productivity and self-support'³⁸; retirement and work were not starkly separate, but blended into one another for most working people as they aged. Unlike the pattern in industrial nations today, retirement was not the assumed destiny for elderly men and women, not even the predominant one, and was determined largely by a person's wealth. For all but the very prosperous, the accumulation of savings, possessions and land was a long-term endeavour, most difficult in the years of raising a family, yet crucial at that time because child rearing could extend into the earlier years of old age. Land was of particular importance, making for some the difference between comfort and poverty, or poverty and destitution; even a small holding could provide enough room to grow necessary foodstuffs and support a cow, a pig or some chickens. The fates of poorer folk, however, generally did not encompass the option of retirement.

How many people did retire? Unfortunately the question does not admit of even a general answer, but certainly far fewer than today. This is not to say that it was not aspired to – although Keith Thomas has suggested that retirement was viewed as a sign of 'the weakness of old age, not its strength'.³⁹ Retirement in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was not a straightforward choice, nor an absolute one; instead, it could be more a matter of necessity, or a partial diminution of one's work rather than full withdrawal. At the upper levels of urban society, retirement was possible but not automatic. Being wealthy and high up in the social and political hierarchy did not guarantee the prospect of easy retirement; refusing service in the Court or community, as was often expected even of very aged men in the upper echelons, could have

³⁸ Wales 367.

negative repercussions for the appointee's family.

For those of more middling rank, retirement was probably much more a matter of personal choice and wealth. One could elect to pass over all of the estate to one's heir and rely upon him for maintenance (not a choice recommended or much followed in this period); less drastically, one could act as John Webb of Backwell, Somerset did in 1601, when he made an agreement with his son John for the latter to take charge of the estate and its costs, pay his father £10 per year and provide food, drink and other necessities to Webb Senior and his wife.⁴⁰ Ralph Josselin likewise gradually 'retired' from full activity, but 'was still doing manual work on his farm at the age of sixty-five'.⁴¹ John Locke retired at fifty-eight, but continued to spend one hundred days of the year in London performing official duties.⁴² For many men such as these who *could* choose to retire, a decrease rather than cessation of work may have been preferable. Robert Burton wrote in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* that old people are inclined to an excess of black choler, and not only for physical reasons:

common experience confirms the truth of it in weake old persons, especially in such as have lived in action all their lives, had great employment, much businesse, much command, and many servants to oversee, and leave off *ex abrupto*: as *Charles* the fift did to King *Philip*, resigne up all on a sudden: they are overcome with melancholy in an instant.⁴³

It would appear that depression induced by too abrupt a move into retirement was also a phenomenon in this early period.

³⁹ Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 237.

⁴⁰ Cited in Houlbrooke, *English Family* 190.

⁴¹ Macfarlane, *Family Life* 98.

⁴² Laslett, *Fresh Map* 125. See also Gough 193-5.

⁴³ Burton 1.204.

Retirement lower down the social scale was less often a matter of choice than an acknowledgement of reduced powers to work. It is not entirely clear what yeomen, craftsmen, tradesmen and labourers did in such circumstances – most probably they engaged in ‘semi-retirement’, working as much as possible until they no longer could, then using savings to employ servants to do domestic chores and care for them when they became unable. Some, too, probably made agreements with their offspring, like John Webb cited above, and became ‘sojourners’ in their own or their sons’ houses.⁴⁴ By and large, the retirement arrangements of ordinary men remain largely a matter for speculation. In London, some of the companies provided pensions for needy retired members.⁴⁵ It is possible that with the organisation of parish poor relief in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries more men came to rely upon the community, and their wife’s labours, to keep them when they became unemployed. Old Adam in *As You Like It* was probably voicing a very real concern for the majority of the population – that they save enough goods and money to support themselves when infirm, lest they join the category of ‘unregarded age in corners thrown’.⁴⁶

Basically, men continued to work at their occupation, employing help when they could afford it, like the aged parson in Eaton Constantine, Shropshire in the later 1620s who often had a lay person to read the common prayer because his eyesight was

⁴⁴ Spufford found a number of such ‘semi-retired’ men designated as sojourners (a work denoting wandering and rootlessness), although living in what had been their own homes (*Contrasting Communities* 105, 112).

⁴⁵ Archer 120. The size, wealth and functioning of the guilds and other craft organisations in smaller urban centres varied so greatly that one can only cite them as possible localised sources of help for retiring members.

⁴⁶ Adam’s extreme old age (nearly eighty) need not be taken as a literal representation, that eighty year-old men were regularly still in service; his great age to an extent a device to emphasise his association with Adam, the first patriarch. However, there were many old men who remained servants until their deaths, whether out of loyalty or sheer necessity.

failing.⁴⁷ Even more than men, older women 'seem . . . to have returned as far as possible to the labour market' after their own families were gone; it appears that '[a] certain moral disapproval was reserved for women regarded as able who made their presence felt outside the home but who did not work'.⁴⁸ A wife might be required to provide both financial support and nursing for an aged spouse. Boulton remarks upon 'the strong tendency for men of differing social standing to view women as unpaid nurses'; in one example he cites, an elderly couple was ordered by parish authorities to move into shared rooms with another aged and sick parishioner, so that 'the wife of Burgoyne might be helping to both men'.⁴⁹ Two standards thus appear to have existed for male and female unemployment. Nonetheless, both men and women on the whole worked well into their last years.⁵⁰ Their high level of continuing economic engagement strongly suggests that although the old formed a smaller proportion of the total population in this period than in the present day, their extended work lives made them a visible and fairly active part of life in English communities.

The degree of involvement of widows in business and trade has come under scrutiny recently, and the image of widowhood as an emancipation for women – a chance to become successful, independent entrepreneurs – has been seriously qualified; very few women were wealthy enough to act as independent investors, while most widows of craftsmen and tradesmen were not welcomed in the guilds and companies,

⁴⁷ Wrightson 183. Poor aged clergymen were a sore spot for the Church in the middle ages and continued to be so in this period; see Orme, 'Sufferings of the Clergy: Illness and Old Age in Exeter Diocese, 1300-1540'.

⁴⁸ Pelling, 'Old Age, Poverty, and Disability' 84.

⁴⁹ Boulton 131.

⁵⁰ Pelling, 'Old Age, Poverty, and Disability' 84, 94; standards of disability in this period were, not surprisingly, far different from today.

so that it now appears many more preferred (or were compelled by circumstance) to remarry rather than try to build upon their new 'independence'.⁵¹ If space permitted, one could spend several pages describing in detail the many humbler occupations of elderly women in this period. Instead, a few paragraphs must suffice.⁵²

Textiles and crafts were 'natural' areas of employment for old women – spinning, sewing and related activities (although weaving was usually reserved for men). The sedentary nature of these tasks and the limited dexterity demanded made them particularly suited to the old. Retailing of food and non-food items was also important for poor women, especially widows; most extant sixteenth-century town records show the presence of poor old women selling butchers' by-products (so-called 'tripe wives'), faggots, coals, bread and many other foods which they often bought from larger retailers and sold in small amounts to poor people who could not afford to buy larger quantities; they thus performed a valuable service for some of the indigent.

Distilling aqua vitae was also an option.⁵³ The drink trade in general was a significant source of employment for old women, and some men as well. Individuals from a greater range of social levels were involved, although in sheer numerical terms the poor still predominated. Modest alehouses grew in number during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Running such an establishment (often no more than the one- or two-room cottage in which the old persons lived) had the advantages of requiring no

⁵¹ See Brodsky 140-3 for a brief discussion of earlier scholars' assumptions and the situation among London widows.

⁵² For further information, see: Wales 368; Laurence 115; Todd 76; Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*; Wright, "Churmaids, Huswyfes and Hucksters": The Employment of Women in Tudor and Stuart Salisbury'.

⁵³ See for example Wales 367, citing a lame 56 year-old woman in Norwich who lived with her friends and had a small still.

special training or great strength, of not being controlled by guilds, and of needing no large capital investment. Official attitudes, and in some cases restrictions, encouraged tippling as an elderly occupation, recognising its advantages for the poor and infirm. The Privy Council urged local authorities in 1594 that alehouse licenses be granted 'to the ancients sort of honest conversation . . . that have no other means to live by'.⁵⁴ A later letter to the Privy Council, in 1608, described alehouse keepers as 'generally for the most p(ar)te verie aged and poore people whose labours are past and have no other means of lyving'.⁵⁵ Aside from Mistress Quickly in the *Henriad* plays, the title character of Dekker's *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*, and Lyly's *Mother Bombie* are other instances of old women in dramas who sell ale and spirits; these are generally genial representations, although female tipplers are also usually also associated with the sex trade.⁵⁶

Providing credit in various ways was another avenue for some elderly women to support themselves, from the higher to the low end of the socio-economic spectrum. Readily available currency was still a problem in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, and one scholar has concluded from his research on early modern widows that '[t]he most prominent economic function of the widow in English rural society between 1500 and 1900 was moneylending'.⁵⁷ Not all widows were old, of course, but a good number certainly were. Single women were also active in this capacity, though

⁵⁴ Cited in Peter Clark 79; the information on ale selling, unless otherwise indicated, is drawn from this book, 78-84.

⁵⁵ Cited in Sue Wright 110.

⁵⁶ *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*, for instance, also offers medical and midwifery services to prostitutes and unwed mothers.

⁵⁷ Holderness 436; see also Erickson 194-5.

there were fewer of them than widows. This was obviously only an occupation for those with some means, but these need not have been substantial. Although only a minority of rural widows at any time would have been lending money, Holderness found that their contribution to the credit network in a community 'was usually larger than that supplied by any other social group'.⁵⁸ Presumably this would have conferred some status and respect upon such elderly women. More modest amounts of capital were sometimes turned to pawnbroking, particularly by widows.⁵⁹ In the few dramatic representations of such transactions, older women lending money are portrayed as doing so in exchange for sex – implicitly or explicitly because they are too old to attract anyone without an 'inducement'. Although these characters (e.g., Mistress Quickly, or the old priestess in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Mad Lover*) apparently offer credit, the audience is given to understand that the men almost certainly will never pay it back (Falstaff is perpetually in arrears). This would appear to continue the long-standing association of women with currency which of course finds its most explicit expression in prostitution.⁶⁰ It is interesting to speculate that such negative portrayals were perhaps expressions of resentment at women having power in a sphere usually dominated by men – and particularly, having the power to lend money (and hence, power) to *men*. Whilst few such characters exist in surviving play-texts, it would be an interesting and possibly fruitful project for someone to examine other popular forms of print, particularly jest-books and ballads, to see whether they contain more such characters.

⁵⁸ Holderness 439, 441-2.

⁵⁹ Holderness 439; see also Sue Wright 111.

⁶⁰ The 'bawd' as a play character will be discussed in chapter six.

Attendance and treatment of the sick was an unquestioned role of women, and since experience often plays a significant part in healing skills, old women are frequently to be found performing a variety of medical or related services.⁶¹ Female medical practitioners existed at all social levels. Lady Grace Mildmay (1552-1620) is an example of an educated gentlewoman who used her knowledge of medicine to provide care for her neighbours and tenants, and achieved a considerable reputation in her own lifetime.⁶² Lower down the social scale, unlicensed female healers abounded, and they seem frequently to have been old women. Orthodox practitioners denigrated these 'lay' people⁶³; yet one author remarked, 'How many old Women [are] preferred before their greatest Doctor', and Thomas Hobbes was said to have preferred 'an experienced old woman' to any physician. In 1647 Sir Ralph Verney wrote to his wife to give their child 'no phisick but such as midwives and old women, with the doctors approbation, doe prescribe; for assure yourselfe they by experience know better than any physition how to treat such infants'. The hierarchy of authority for Sir Ralph is worth noting, as is the indication of a working relationship between 'lay' and 'professional'.⁶⁴ Some of the old women healers were known as 'cunning' or 'wise' women.⁶⁵ Dekker's *Wise Woman* is one of the few representations in extant play-texts.⁶⁶ Older women also worked in the lower status capacity of nurses to all varieties of sick persons, from post-natal women to

⁶¹ Jane Sharp, writing in the seventeenth century, stressed in her *Midwives Book* (1671 and many subsequent editions) the benefit of 'a long and diligent practice' in the occupation (cited in Alice Clark 271).

⁶² See Mildmay, *With Faith and Physic*.

⁶³ However, the overlap in treatments and remedies between professionals and lay people is illustrated by contemporary doctors' records; see Nagy 43-5.

⁶⁴ Purchas, *Microcosmus* 625, cited in Crawford 69; Hobbes and Verney cited in Alice Clark 258.

⁶⁵ Macfarlane, *Witchcraft* 120-1; Thomas, *Religion* chapter seven. On old women as midwives, see Alice Clark 271; Marland; Harley; Peter Clark 84; Beier 15-18.

victims of infectious diseases; the insalubrious occupation of 'searcher' (one who identified dead plague victims) was usually performed by old women as well. For some, suggests one historian, their workplace 'became a genuine home . . . and in old age, some became pensioners for life'.⁶⁷ Although such characters are not common in play-texts, other popular literature, as well as medical works, frequently present very negative stereotypes of midwives and nurses, often imputing evil dispositions and moral corruption. Thus, Pelling and Smith observe, 'Stereotypes of the midwife, the nurse, and the searcher from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries ascribe these roles *in a disparaging way* to women beyond childbearing age, but the social reality of such stereotypes is still under review'.⁶⁸ According to regulations (although these were almost certainly disregarded by many women), midwives were licensed by bishops, whose concern it was to ensure the women were of sound moral character, since midwives carried out baptisms of infants expected to die before a cleric could arrive. They were also instructed to ascertain the paternity of a bastard child from the mother during labour, and they acted as witnesses in court for cases of bastardy, rape, infanticide, incest, physical abuse and abortion, so it would seem unlikely that midwives in general were viewed with suspicion or distrust.

Thus, the elderly below the rank of gentry were in the large majority of cases engaged in a variety of occupations well into their late sixties, seventies and even eighties. Their high level of continuing economic engagement strongly suggests that

⁶⁶ The representation of such women as 'witches', however, did occur more frequently, as discussed below.

⁶⁷ Willen 571-2. On old women as midwives, see: Alice Clark 271; Marland; Harley; Peter Clark 84; Beier 15-18.

although they formed a smaller proportion of the total population in this period than in the present day, their extended work lives would have made them a visible and active part of life in English communities.

V. The economics of ageing, part two: poverty

Some of the poor elderly were able to make enough from their own work to live at what contemporaries regarded as a decent, if very basic, level – that is, to avoid destitution and the need for outside assistance in order to keep body and soul together.⁶⁸ Others could earn something but required either intermittent extra assistance, or regular supplementation of their inadequate income. Others again were beyond the capacity for work and hadn't enough personal means to survive unaided. As a person aged, he or she would probably move through these phases of increasing need. English individuals and communities in this period responded in not one but several ways to the elderly poor who fell into the latter two categories. A division can be drawn between support provided by family, and that provided by the community, but the interconnectedness of these categories must be stressed. They were not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing webs of assistance which interacted in varied and sometimes complex ways, depending upon the community and the particular

⁶⁸ Pelling and Smith 23, my emphasis; it is the *negative stereotyping* of these women, rather than their actual existence, which Pelling and Smith are calling into question.

⁶⁹ Slack in *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* discusses the relative nature of definitions of poverty, due to changing 'perceptions about what is an adequate standard of living', and surveys the changing perceptions of poverty in England during this period, on pages 2-5 and in his second chapter.

circumstances.⁷⁰

Tim Wales, examining poverty and its incidence at different points of the life-cycle in this period, has asserted that it is impossible to say definitely the likelihood of a poor person ending up on parish relief in old age. Nor were those who had not been poor earlier in life guaranteed immunity from a fall into neediness. Examples of downward mobility include a former minister of All Saints in Dorchester who died living in an almshouse⁷¹, an alderman of Ipswich who was receiving a pension because of his age and illness, and a deputy alderman's widow, who had always been 'esteemed with the better sort' but being left with no property had to turn to parish relief – an illustration of the potentially precarious position of widows discussed earlier.⁷² These are not isolated, spectacular instances of falls from the height of fortune, but ordinary, comfortable people for whom age, in combination with common adverse experiences, led to penury.⁷³ Age increased one's vulnerability to hardship.

Declining ability to work was decisive for many; according to contemporary writers John Dod and Robert Cleaver, callous employers might use people in their better years, 'and then, when age cometh . . . they turn them out of the doors, poor and helpless . . . to shift for themselves'; men, said William Bradshaw, live 'in fears and

⁷⁰ See also Pelling and Smith 19.

⁷¹ It should be noted that some almshouses, particularly those run by guilds for their members, could be relatively comfortable. The majority, however, were very rudimentary – hence Wales's comment that this was a downward move for a former minister. Canterbury offers an example of both: in the centre of town has been preserved an almshouse for the very poor, which would have provided shelter and a bedstead, but little more; a mile or two away is St. John's, once a comfortable almshouse, and now (with considerable remodelling) a retirement residence.

⁷² Wales 383; examples cited in Slack 38. The most vulnerable member of society, writes Richard Smith, was the poor widow ('Some Issues Concerning Families and Their Property in Rural England 1250-1800', Smith, ed., 78) – and to be old naturally increased the burden of disadvantage.

⁷³ See also Boulton 154-165, 225 on downward mobility in the urban life-cycle. Gough's parish of Myddle offers further illustrations on pages 122, 145, 191-2, 215 and 217-18.

distrust in regard of the time to come, how they shall do when they are old and not able to work'.⁷⁴ Most of the elderly continued to work in a reduced capacity until utterly infirm. Margaret Pelling's work on Norwich suggests that, although local authorities might differ somewhat in their assessment of ability and impotence, generally only a very small percentage of the poor were designated as entirely unable to work – 1.5% in Norwich, nearly all of whom were elderly, while those over sixty comprised nearly 15% of the total poor in this town.⁷⁵

These people, preserved for modern historical analysis in censuses of the poor, were being assessed for their eligibility to receive support from the parish relief system. Usually, the old poor received partial assistance to supplement their own efforts, rather than complete support, and relied upon informal community and family support of various kinds.

i. Parish relief

The Poor Acts of 1598 and 1601 established in law the obligation of every parish to carry out annual assessments of its households, collect rates from those who could afford them, and arrange payments and other provisions for those poor who required relief. This was not a sudden event. The larger towns had been well ahead in such actions, and all had their own organised rates by 1600 without the prodding of national legislation. Nevertheless, the Poor Law of 1601 took a long time to function as its

⁷⁴ Dod and Cleaver, *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandements* (1618 ed.) 222, Bradshaw, *Meditation of Mans Mortalitie* (1621) 13, both cited in Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 241.

⁷⁵ Pelling, 'Old People and Poverty in Early Modern Towns' 42-3.

creators had intended.⁷⁶ Hence, the elderly poor receiving regular parish relief would have in this period been limited in number, the large majority living in towns. For those who did receive parish help, there were two basic types of payment: pensions and occasional relief. Pensions were assessed annually by appointed overseers of the poor, and were given out weekly, often at the church, where recipients were expected to indicate their gratitude to the rate payers and officials. Throughout the sixteenth century, especially earlier on, wide attempts were made by poor authorities to have regular pensioners wear badges signifying their status, although their efforts were less frequent by the end of the sixteenth century (experiencing, however, a resurgence from the 1670s onwards). Slack views these as 'shame sanctions' aimed to act 'as a deterrent to claimants on relief'⁷⁷, but how consistently they were actually worn and how the poor elderly felt about them is not known.⁷⁸

Another way that the parish aided the poor, and one particularly relevant to the old, was by helping with medical care and treatment costs. In London there existed a two-fold system of such care: that provided by pensioners for each other, and the 'official' medical services of physicians, surgeons and apothecaries. The Poor Law authorities paid extra money for access to both alternatives. Andrew Wear found that this system in one London parish benefited both the poor and the rest of the

⁷⁶ See Slack 127-8, 170 on the halting implementation of the Poor Law.

⁷⁷ Slack 193-4. For example, in St. Bartholomew's Exchange in London, those receiving bread doles risked getting no bread if they did not come to the church to collect it, and they had to wear pewter 'P's with their names engraved (Wear 45). Boulton also indicates the deferential relationship of pensioner to benefactor in St. Saviour's parish, and that pensioners there also wore badges (Boulton 144, 224-5).

⁷⁸ Andrew Wear feels that despite the badges, 'the relationship between parish and pensioner [in London] was not simply coercive or degrading'; the parish related to its poor with a 'mixture of benevolence and coercion in various forms' (Wear 45).

community, since funds for treatment were thereby often kept within the parish and paid to the poor themselves. Authorities there did not use coercion, as they might have, and force the poor to care for each other without payment, but treated their work as paid employment.⁷⁹ Neighbours who were not poor might also be paid by the parish to look after sick and elderly individuals; as Richard Smith notes, '[n]eighbourly support might in reality mean the parish paying a neighbour to look after a pauper relative' or someone unrelated.⁸⁰ In some cases, family members were paid for care –Wear notes a daughter who received 2s for washing her elderly sick mother's linen (not a negligible sum for the time period).⁸¹

It is unnecessary to delve further into the details of parish relief of the old, since it was still, in the first half of the seventeenth century, one of several equally or more important sources of assistance to the aged poor:

So far as the alleviation of poverty is concerned, the impact of statutory relief was probably marginal, at least until the middle of the seventeenth century. Until then the redistribution of wealth by . . . formal means . . . was slight.⁸²

In London, while the bulk of parish relief at this point went to the aged, the very young and the impotent, Archer concludes that '[i]n practice the limits of the formal relief system meant that the poor kept their heads above water by selling off what few comforts they had left, and by mobilising the support of their kin and exploiting the informal charity of their neighbours'.⁸³ As was stressed at the outset of this section,

⁷⁹ Wear 49, but note also 45.

⁸⁰ Smith, 'Some Issues' 79.

⁸¹ Wear 48-9.

⁸² Slack 207.

⁸³ Archer 183, 197.

family and private community efforts combined, and were in some places supplemented by organised rate-paying and pension schemes. In practice, individual case histories were often complex blends of complementary provisions.

ii. Private relief

In the course of the seventeenth century the balance of community charity shifted in England from private to public. The later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries fall in the period of transition when there was a blend of both in several forms and varying levels of quantity, distribution and consistency.⁸⁴

The most formalised type of private charity was institutional – almshouses and hospitals. However, while some of the old poor were relieved in institutions, they were never more than a small portion of the total. According to Peter Laslett, few almshouses between 1480 and 1660 contained more than twelve to twenty inmates at a time, so that overall, living in such a place would have been a ‘rarity’ for the elderly.⁸⁵ Some of the London companies had almshouses for their members – the Merchant Tailors’, for example, was specifically reserved for liverymen in their old age. Widows of members could also turn to the company as a possible source of temporary help, and the social connections forged within companies might widen the circle of potential friends in times of need. Again, though, the majority of the poor were not assisted in this way.

One-time doles and individual alms-giving were both important sources of relief for the poor, including the elderly. The actual amount of money testators gave to be

⁸⁴ See Slack 172 for details.

⁸⁵ Laslett, *World* 295; see also above, note 71.

doled out to the poor was only about 17% of the total for private relief between 1480 and 1660, but it was the most common form of charitable activity for small-scale benefactions (under £10), so that such charity reached a large number of people. It was common to distribute the money at the donor's funeral, and though the scale of such donations decreased through the seventeenth century they remained 'a customary final act of charity' at least to 1700.⁸⁶ Sometimes the poor recipients could form part of a funeral procession, displaying the deceased's generosity⁸⁷; at the front of the grand funeral procession of Sir Philip Sidney in London, 1587, walked thirty-two poor old men (the number of his age at death), who no doubt received not only alms but also the long coats, hats and other garments they can be seen to have worn, in the third plate of Thomas Lant's engraving of the funeral.⁸⁸ Ian Archer comments that '[f]or wealthy testators the clothing of the poor in funeral gowns provided a way of securing their attendance, and of advertising their own status'.⁸⁹

Another community-based source of aid for the old was gleaning, the communal right of the impotent aged (and of the very young) to gather the remnants from the village fields after the harvest.⁹⁰ There is also some evidence to suggest that such common rights, including that of allowing a poor individual to keep a cow or pig on the common, may have been very important for some of the elderly, especially old women.

Individual alms-giving and neighbourly support are the most elusive forms of

⁸⁶ Slack 166.

⁸⁷ See Archer 175 for an example.

⁸⁸ The plates are reproduced in Duncan-Jones 308-339 (the old poor men are on 310).

⁸⁹ Archer 175.

⁹⁰ See Hanawalt 236 on gleaning rights in the late middle ages, Pelling and Smith 28 on restrictions in the sixteenth century, and the loss of gleaning and grazing rights by the 1800s.

private charity, 'frustratingly intangible because they are impossible to measure', writes Paul Slack. 'We do not know how many London citizens kept 'poor boxes' in their houses, as Nehemiah Wallington and Samuel Pepys did; or how many early Stuart gentry, like Sir John Scott of Kent, fasted on Fridays and distributed bread to the poor, as preachers said they should'.⁹¹ Keith Wrightson emphasises the strength of neighbourhood ties, stating that '[p]arochial authorities and neighbours alike were expected to cushion individuals against the effects of poverty and disaster'.⁹²

'Help-ales' were another manifestation of community concern for the aged poor; during the Middle Ages and continuing into the Tudor and Stuart period, money was raised for the very poor and the aged by selling food and drink as a village social event, an 'ale'. Says Wrightson, 'over a period of years, occasional ale-selling by a large number of poor households could constitute a system of circulating aid in which economic activity, neighbourly assistance and festivity were subtly blended' – although hostile officers could bring charges of unlicensed selling against organisers of ales.⁹³

In short, the mechanisms of private relief were still very substantial in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Some of this charity can be roughly quantified, but most cannot, being *ad hoc* and rarely recorded. From an intensive study of the capital's mechanisms of relief, Ian Archer has concluded that 'private charity remained a major component in the relief of the poor', contributing over twice the

⁹¹ Slack 166.

⁹² Wrightson 26.

⁹³ Wrightson, 'Alehouses' 5.

amount of the poor rate in the 1590s.⁹⁴ The impression given by both formal and informal evidence of private charity is of the old as particular targets for community concern and support.

VI. Personal aspects of ageing

It is much easier for historians to establish *what* things people in the past experienced than *how* they experienced them; and it is possible to describe behaviours but usually decidedly difficult to determine the motivations and emotions of the individual actors. Thus, this discussion is bedevilled at the outset by tantalising questions, the answers to which remain for the most part hesitant suggestions. The chief problem is the absence of personal documents such as diaries, autobiographies and letters, from any classes other than the gentry and aristocracy. Not many such items survive from this early period, even from these groups, those which do being nearly all concerned with recording business affairs, daily tasks and spiritual experiences or reflections. Old age itself might have been a barrier to some individuals who would have wished to record their thoughts, feelings, experiences and reflections at the closing years of their lives; Pelling and Smith observe that '[e]ven in respect of literate individuals among the more prosperous, the onset of such obvious disabilities as blindness and rheumatism militated against the recording of the experience of old age in letters and diaries'.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Archer 181-2, 122.

⁹⁵ Pelling and Smith 2.

When one is trying to ascertain how others responded to the old, with regard to status, respect and affection, sources which seem to offer straightforward answers cannot be treated as 'open texts'. Books of advice, moral tracts, sermons, may all be interpreted in diametrically opposite ways: as either faithfully reflecting social realities, or prescribing attitudes and behaviours thought to be appropriate by a small élite group but not held and practised by the populace at large (or even, perhaps, by the members of the small élite group either). Imaginative literature, too, requires caution; is one reading fantasy, truth, exaggeration wrapped around a kernel of reality – or a mixture? The following paragraphs, as well as other related discussions in later chapters, are based upon material from a variety of sources, blended with cautious speculation.

i. The community

A typical question asked by historians and lay persons is, were the old respected and valued in the past? The complete picture of the old in their communities in Tudor and Stuart England cannot be reconstructed, but enough can be glimpsed to say that if it could, it would still yield a very mixed response to the question of elderly status. From the material available so far, a safe generalisation seems to be that the old were accorded some particular respect and status by virtue of their longevity, but that this was heavily qualified by several behavioural requirements which, if not met, could disqualify the old person from special regard or treatment. However, this generalisation cannot be said to have equal application to men and women; there is some foundation for arguing that elderly women were considered less eligible for the respect and status

accorded their male counterparts. Socio-economic position was also relevant. Keith Thomas has argued that, 'in England between the sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries differences of age . . . did not cancel out those of class and sex, but they still did a great deal to determine how people were treated, how they were expected to behave and what degree of authority they enjoyed'.⁹⁶ From his work on the London borough of St. Saviour's, Boulton has concluded that wealth, marital status and age all influenced a person's social standing, but the drop in income which often accompanied old age could result in the loss of householder standing, with the independence and comfort implicit in that position. 'The aging process . . . greatly affected the possession of status in the Boroughside', most often negatively.⁹⁷

The most obvious asset of the old was their experience. Wisdom and prudence were two key qualities in the cultural picture of the old man. Humoral theory bolstered the alleged calming effect of the passing years by arguing that older men, being cold and dry, are naturally more prudent than younger men, who are hotter and moister and therefore more impulsive; regardless of age, however, men were considered to be more prudent than women.⁹⁸ Old men's experience made them fit for positions of authority, although they might be less physically active in the affairs of their community. A man's position in craft fellowships and guilds was usually determined not primarily by wealth but by age; in the London companies, men elected to the highest position of master

⁹⁶ 'Age and Authority' 205.

⁹⁷ See Boulton 163-4, and 290.

⁹⁸ Maclean 49.

were usually at least in their mid-fifties.⁹⁹ Urban historians have likewise found that in studying urban oligarchies over a life-cycle period, it becomes evident that while wealth was certainly important, 'power at the top of urban government was the end of a *cursus honorum* which did not come until later life'.¹⁰⁰ In smaller communities, a shortage of old men of the appropriate social level may have dictated a greater mix of ages. In no geographical locale were the old truly oligarchic, but their presence and involvement in community ruling structures seems to have been considered desirable. Physical and mental competence of incumbents were, of course, important qualifying factors.

Apart from formal positions of authority, elderly men could also be important sources of information. As repositories of knowledge about their community, they were sometimes valuable, and valued, witnesses in court disputes.¹⁰¹ Thomas cites examples which show the continuance of this role well into the mid-seventeenth century, and amongst these is a cartload of elderly inhabitants from Godalming who bore vehement witness to their vicar's ownership of his house. In St. Saviour's, 'the elderly were a source of oral tradition, being called in to settle boundary disputes within the parish'.¹⁰²

Preservation of local customs and rituals was also considered a significant role of the elderly. 'In a semi-literate society, still much dependent on oral tradition, it was the old who controlled access to the past. They were the repositories of local history and

⁹⁹ Rappaport 359; see also Phythian-Adams 114-15, 122, 273-4 on guilds in Coventry, and Thomas 'Age and Authority' 211-12 – this article remains the best discussion of the presence and absence of status and authority for the old in this period.

¹⁰⁰ Barry 25.

¹⁰¹ See Cressy 116-17, but note that Cressy errs slightly in interpreting his figures as showing the *low* number of elderly witnesses.

¹⁰² Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 234, Boulton 164; see the discussion above of midwives being used as witnesses.

custom, of pedigree and descent'.¹⁰³ Others members of the community, or strangers, could thus approach the old for information about local history, such as William Harrison did when gathering material for his famous *Description of England*.¹⁰⁴ Richard Gough was an old man of 66 when he began writing his invaluable account of Myddle, using a mixture of written records and oral knowledge to reconstruct the parish's history, and referring several times to 'antient persons' as sources.¹⁰⁵

Several other attributes form a counter-image to this positive one of sagacity and temperance, and suggest the strict demands and restraints imposed upon the old as conditions for receiving respect and authority. Richard Burton furnishes a standard sample:

[T]hey [the old] dote at last: (*senex bis puer*) and are not able to manage their estates, through common infirmities incident to their age: full of ache, sorrow, and griefe, children againe, dizardes, they Carle many times as they sit, and talke to themselves, they are angry, waspish, displeased with every thing, *suspitious of all, wayward, covetous, hard, (saith Tully) self-willed, superstitious, self-conceited, braggers and admirers of themselves*. . . .¹⁰⁶

Lists like this contributed to a literary topos which derived from and reinforced actual social imperatives. The negative qualities identified as typical for the aged man were signposts for correct behaviour, warnings to elderly males of what expectations other generations had of them: that they should acknowledge their waning abilities and surrender power to the waxing strength of those younger; and that they transmit their wealth likewise, since it is the necessary key to power. Censoriousness, self-absorption

¹⁰³ Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 233.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g., Harrison 1.239-242, cited in Wrightson 121.

¹⁰⁵ Gough 77, 84, 96.

and covetousness were proscribed because these qualities indicated an unwillingness to accept the requirements. The authority of old men described earlier in no way contradicts these dynamics. While their experience was valued and solicited, this was with the understanding that the old were acting in the service of others, not themselves, since (the argument went) their concern at life's end should be with giving up, not gaining.¹⁰⁷ Thus, in spite of the 'gerontocratic' appearance of deference towards and regard for elderly men, their roles were highly circumscribed by the needs and demands of those in the full bloom of life.¹⁰⁸ Behavioural requirements not directly relevant to power or wealth nonetheless reinforced the atmosphere of contingency – grave deportment, sobriety, modest and functional dress, a renunciation of sexual activity.¹⁰⁹ Deviation from these strictures brought derision and usually also meant forfeit of the offending elder's claim to status and respect.

For old women the situation was arguably worse. Never having had a right to claim communal authority and status in their younger years, their position did not improve with age unless they were high enough in the social hierarchy. Old widows bulked large in virtually every community's poor, a further indication of the generally low status of elderly women. Wealth was probably the only means for an elderly woman to secure a position of respect in her community and, if she chose, exercise some authority through its use; but this was not age-derived status. Whereas men were

¹⁰⁶ Burton 1.204. The Latin phrase means 'an old man is twice a child' (i.e., becomes a child again); 'dizard' is 'a foolish fellow, idiot, blockhead' (*OED* 2.); 'carl' is '(?) To act or behave like a carl; to talk with a gruff, snarling voice; to snarl' (*OED* v 1.1).

¹⁰⁷ See e.g., Gough 124, 209.

¹⁰⁸ Both Thomas and Laslett emphasise the dominance of middle-aged values and power in this period; see Laslett, *Fresh Map* 138, Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 245-8.

acknowledged to gain in wisdom what they lost in strength, women's intellectual capacities were viewed as essentially limited. That an old woman had accumulated experience was undeniable, but the *value* of that knowledge was not rated highly, nor were her powers of thought and discretion. On the other hand, menopause was regarded by some doctors as a transition to a healthier bodily state; because she no longer experienced the humoral irregularities of menstruation the older woman was thought to become more man-like – calmer, more consistent and more reliable in judgement.¹¹⁰ By inference, old women were also expected to have a grave, sober deportment. Lady Grace Mildmay's precepts for 'elder women' are exemplary:

let the elder women likewise be of such behaviour, as becometh holiness; not false accusers, not subject to wine but teachers of honest things. That they may instruct the younger women to be sober minded, that they love their husbands, that they love their children. That they be temperate, chaste, keeping at home, good and subject to their husbands, that the word of God be not evil spoken of.¹¹¹

Just as for men, the dress of older women was to be modest and plain, and sexual activity was to cease after menopause.

As has been mentioned, midwives were accepted as valid witnesses in court; how much actual status this conferred upon them is open to question, given that it was necessary for the authorities to use them in these cases (since these involved inspections of women's bodies or attendance at childbirth, activities still for the most part confined to women in this period). Nevertheless, their involvement shows that old women were not regarded as entirely redundant. A few of the economic activities discussed earlier

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 243.

¹¹⁰ Pelling and Smith 11; Moscucci 103.

(e.g., moneylending, business management) may also have conferred some status and authority upon certain old women; but wealth was responsible for these advantages to an extent not paralleled for elderly males. While an old man might still command esteem and yield some power in a community without the need of riches, the converse was not true for a woman.¹¹²

There may have been a greater respect and status accorded to old women amongst fellow women, who could gain from their experience in female-specific activities in a way that men would not. For instance, old midwives trained younger ones in unofficial 'apprenticeships'¹¹³ and old female healers likewise provided knowledge and help in what was predominantly a woman's duty – tending to the health of her household members. This possibility, however, remains in the realm of conjecture.

Perhaps the most extreme expressions of hostility towards elderly females were witchcraft accusations. While many medical theorists viewed the post-menopausal woman as healthy, another current of 'popular' belief (not, however, confined to the uneducated) viewed them as polluted, even dangerous.¹¹⁴ The eyes or breath of old women were believed by some to be capable of harming others, especially infants and children.¹¹⁵ Some observers viewed this as a more general contamination, a quality of aged women and men, although women seem to have been the objects of concern in far

¹¹¹ Mildmay 45.

¹¹² How the status of the highest woman in the realm, Queen Elizabeth, might have been affected as she grew old is an interesting question which will be addressed in chapter four.

¹¹³ See Marland 3-4 and Jane Sharp's *Midwives Book* (1671) referred to above.

¹¹⁴ Some medical authorities argued that the final cessation of menstrual flow produced pathological symptoms in women (see references in Crawford 56).

more instances. '[T]he bodies of aged persons are impure', wrote W. Fulbecke in his treatise *A Parallele or Conference of the Civil Law, the Canon Law, and the Common Law* (1618),

which, when they wax cankered in malice, they use their very breath and their sight, being apt for contagion, and by the Devil whetted for such purposes, to the vexation and destruction of others. For if they which are troubled with the disease of the eyes called ophthalmia do infect others that look earnestly upon them, is it any marvel that these wicked creatures, having both bodies and minds in a higher degree corrupted, should work both these and greater mischiefs? ¹¹⁶

Obviously such views were not applied indiscriminately to all old women (or men), nor were they held by the entire population, but they appear to have been operative in the labelling of some old women as witches.

Witchcraft in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England is a complex subject and no argument will be made here that the persecution of aged women indicates conclusively their degraded position in English society as a whole; neither issue is so reducible. However, the predominance of the elderly, especially women, among the accused evidently raises the question of how this community response relates to other aspects of elderly women's status. Both Thomas and Macfarlane have suggested a socio-economic analysis of elderly female 'witches'. Put baldly, poor old women requesting charity of their neighbours were sometimes refused, and the guilt arising in some refusers led them unconsciously to seek a means of turning blame back upon the cause of their guilt. When misfortune came in any of its myriad forms, and especially as illness in one's animals, family or oneself, the old woman might then be pointed to as

¹¹⁵ Wiesner 76; Crawford 56.

the cause of it, via witchcraft.¹¹⁷

Postulating relationships between witchcraft beliefs and the overall status of the old is necessarily speculative because of the absence of concrete evidence of such intangible human relations. But the communal tensions to which the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations points are of particular relevance to the experience of the old in their communities, and cast some further light on the ambiguous position of the elderly poor, especially women. The argument for a connection between their vulnerability to economic strains and their vulnerability to witchcraft accusations has held its ground. From the perspective of comparative anthropology, Macfarlane has also suggested several potential reasons for a particular society to view the old as disposed to witchcraft, including: resentment because they are economic liabilities to the community (a component of the socio-economic explanation already outlined); the unconscious belief that witchcraft is substituting for the power the old have lost in the world; tensions arising out of kinship and age systems; the belief that the old are embittered and disappointed at reaching life's end, and so wish to retaliate on others.¹¹⁸ These are all plausible elements in the English context.

Very often, it seems, an individual had a reputation for being a witch for a long time – several years even – before any accusation was brought to the authorities; it logically follows as a possibility that many more old people were so regarded than we know of, because they were never openly accused. The occupations of cunning folk

¹¹⁶ Fol.97, quoted in Thomas, *Religion* 553.

¹¹⁷ See Macfarlane, *Witchcraft* 163-4, Thomas, *Religion*, chapter sixteen 'The Making of a Witch', and especially chapter seventeen 'Witchcraft in Its Social Environment'.

were on the borderline between community acceptance and suspicion, purporting as they did to have knowledge ('cunning') and skills of a special, secret nature. The respect and support which an accepted cunning person had may have been augmented by a level of fear instilled in others by their mysterious abilities. They were, among their other services, frequently employed in diagnosing and treating cases of witchcraft. A limited power could accrue to a known practitioner of magic, but there was the possibility of community persecution if something – a particular personal conflict or unpleasant encounter between the old person and another member of the community, for example – upset the balance of trust and respect.¹¹⁹

Too much emphasis can easily be placed upon the often sensationalised subject of witches when discussing the elderly.¹²⁰ Whether they would be accused of witchcraft was not the primary concern of most old women and men in their communal relations; their status and authority depended only partially upon their age, and more (especially in the case of women) upon their economic position. Yet the scholar of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is compelled to wonder, what of the witch-plays written from the mid-1580s to the 1630s? On a first glance at extant plays, representations of witches and cunning women do not seem to have been very common; Diane Purkiss, however, does point out that a number of sixteenth-century witch-plays have been lost.¹²¹ Purkiss's study of witches in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays renders it unnecessary for the topic

¹¹⁸ Macfarlane, *Witchcraft* 229-30.

¹¹⁹ See Thomas, *Religion* 311, 520, 677, 756 for discussions of cunning folk being accused of witchcraft.

¹²⁰ See for example, Fraser 100-118, which makes witchcraft accusations seem virtually the only aspect of being an elderly woman in the seventeenth-century.

¹²¹ Purkiss 189.

to be rehearsed much further here.¹²² In Purkiss's view, '[b]oth the stage itself and debates about its magic reflect a social gulf between writers and populace. . . . Plays do not reflect any single discourse of witchcraft, but instead manufacture not one but many literary witches of their own that have only a tangential relation to the figures in other people's texts, much less the figures on the scaffold at Tyburn'.¹²³ Elizabethan witch-plays, she contends, transform 'the discourses upon which [they draw]'.

Moreover, the transformations in question are not in the case of witch-plays always driven by ideological or discursive power. As critics have always known, these appropriations are also driven by a sense of decorum, constraints of genre, questions of plot and plausibility, and commercial considerations. Stories about witches and tropes of witchcraft are often part of an attempt to bring to the stage some of the spectacle of popular print and perhaps oral culture, while also catering to the educated audience's fascinated dislike of these spectacles. In order to begin to see what the true place of the stage might have been in witchcraft discourses and debates, we must divest ourselves of the assumption that its place was central.¹²⁴

From this viewpoint, she argues against there being substantial historical reflection or truth-value in most witch-plays of the period. She points out, for example, the marked dissimilarities between on the one hand the hags in *Macbeth* and the majority of other witch-plays, and on the other Elizabeth Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton*, noting especially that whereas the singsong speech of the Weird Sisters and their ilk 'is marked off from that of the other characters in a manner which insists on their iconic status and also on their difference from the human', the speech of Elizabeth Sawyer is a mixture of

¹²² See her final four chapters, 179-275.

¹²³ Purkiss 182.

¹²⁴ Purkiss 180.

blank verse and prose, indistinguishable from that of the other villagers.¹²⁵ Even the portrayal of Sawyer, although ascertainably closer to what social historians know of actual witch persecutions, is blurred by the hodgepodge of characteristics she is given by Dekker, Ford and Rowley. Purkiss's final, succinct assessment is, 'We must face it: we are much more interested in witches than early modern dramatists were'.¹²⁶ In the light of her work and that of Thomas, Macfarlane and other social historians of English witches, it seems safe to argue that representations of elderly women as witches in English play-texts are phenomena best taken and examined *qua* phenomena, spectacles, rather than as genuine reflections of concerns over and perceptions of witches in the majority of the population.¹²⁷

In assessing the status of the elderly, then, the conditional nature of their relationship with the community is essential to grasp. Those elderly who received respect and authority had to fulfil certain behavioural expectations. Yet one story told by Gough shows the extent to which age alone could continue to command special consideration, despite utterly reprehensible conduct. William Tyler lived his entire life as an unprincipled rogue, criminal and bully – adultery, incest, escaping arrest for debt, savage violence, terrorising his landlord, were all among his deeds. In his old age, Tyler persisted in stealing sheep and was indicted at the sessions, but the judge released him because Tyler's grandchild testified against him, and 'the jury conceived it malicious,

¹²⁵ Purkiss 210, 227.

¹²⁶ Purkiss 271.

¹²⁷ Purkiss emphasises that the portrayals of witches in plays are conceptually incoherent and bear little resemblance to the witchlore of the common people.

and blamed him for offering to hang his grandfather'.¹²⁸ Such information does not conform to neat antitheses of respect or censure, consideration or neglect of the old.

ii. Family, friends and sexual relationships

In 1838, Charles Darwin was 29 and deciding whether or not to get married. Drawing up lists on a scrap of paper, he weighed the advantages and drawbacks, more than once noting the benefit of having a wife and children to stave off loneliness in old age. Not to marry (he wrote) meant:

No children (no second life) no one to care for one in old age – what is the use of working without sympathy from near and dear friends – who are near and dear friends to the old except relatives.¹²⁹

In the event, Darwin went on to marry, and lived to be 73, so having the opportunity to test his supposition. Discussion of the historical background to elderly marriages and sexuality is postponed to chapter six, but it may be noted here that marital relationships were important for the elderly for a variety of reasons.

Inevitably for many of the old, the deaths of friends and family members, or their departures to other places, could mean a diminishing level of companionship. This possibly varied in part according to community size. Being old, and especially old and poor, in London and other large towns might seem to have been a more isolating experience than in smaller towns and villages, but historians warn against assuming that urban parishes lacked an atmosphere of close neighbourly connectedness.¹³⁰ Barry Coward cautions that 'it would be rash to assume that bonds of neighbourliness were

¹²⁸ Gough 103-5.

less strong in towns than elsewhere'.¹³¹ Recent studies of London strongly reinforce the importance of neighbourhoods in the capital.¹³² Certainly personal experiences would have been diverse, according to the household arrangements, occupations, level of mobility, wealth, family relationships, age, general health and personality of any particular individual. It has already been noted that not many of the old lived entirely alone. Remarriage, or lodging with other families or other elderly people were common practices. Remaining employed would necessarily have kept the old in contact with their community and so militated against isolation, although arguably occupations such as spinning and mending could have been very lonely for those who were housebound. It is not possible to ascertain whether many of the elderly felt isolated and consequently depressed, however the fragmentary evidence of suicide in early modern England, gathered together by Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, seems to indicate a very high incidence of suicide among the elderly.¹³³ MacDonald and Murphy acknowledge that their data may not be entirely accurate, but if it is then this raises as yet unanswered questions about not only the happiness of the elderly, but of the efficacy of religious convictions for some people in later life, since suicide was viewed as a heinous spiritual crime.

Statistics on remarriage suggest that this was one way which some found to combat loneliness, and living as a lodger in another family's home may have been too

¹²⁹ Cited in Macfarlane, *Marriage* 4; Darwin's lists are reproduced more fully on this and the adjacent pages of that book.

¹³⁰ Wrightson 55-6.

¹³¹ Coward 27.

¹³² See Archer, Boulton and Rappaport.

¹³³ MacDonald and Murphy 251-56.

(even if this was not necessary for economic reasons). The continuing importance of neighbourly concern and support for the elderly poor is further evidence of regular contact between the old and others, and these relationships should not be interpreted simplistically as unequal and degrading for the old person; neighbourly ties were reciprocal¹³⁴, life unpredictable, and the giver at one time would often become the receiver at another. Wills often reveal the extent of friendship networks, at least for those who had possessions to bequeath. Hanawalt found that the late medieval wills she analysed indicate a high level of social contact for at least the propertied or comfortably off¹³⁵, and Brodsky found similar evidence in widows' wills in sixteenth-century London. There, the poorer concentrated their bequests on their children, but those with more showed 'a recognition of distant kinship ties, and the significance of friends, neighbours and servants in the lives of widows'; the high percentage of unrelated legatees (55% of named legatees in 200 wills) 'indicates the subjective strength of neighbourly relationships for many widows', whose bequests were often objects of trifling value, 'yet carefully described in many wills'.¹³⁶

The practice of neolocality, discussed earlier, did not preclude children living near their parents, and in spite of the high level of geographical mobility in English society, propinquity of kin was not rare; some old parents, especially widows, lived in one of their married children's households, or close by in a separate cottage on the

¹³⁴ See Wrightson 51-7 on the subject of 'neighbourliness' in English society at this time.

¹³⁵ Hanawalt 238-9.

¹³⁶ Brodsky 148-50; see also Erickson 212-13.

holding.¹³⁷ (The provisions made by some testators indicate a recognition that intergenerational tensions could arise, specifying alternate arrangements for a widow should co-residence prove unpleasant.¹³⁸) Those who became grandparents may have enjoyed the opportunity to help raise their grandchildren, helping with education and other expenses¹³⁹, or making the children presents of pocket money and other items.

While families seem, on the whole, to have tried to help elderly relatives, some contemporary sources suggest that a portion of children felt their destitute parents to be an embarrassment, and refused to acknowledge them. In Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, the poseur Andrew Lethe leaves his humble home in the countryside and his aged mother, to come to London and play the gentleman; when his poor mother seeks him out, he pretends not to know her (hence his name Lethe, for forgetting his roots and family). Lethe's comeuppance occurs when, after he is tricked into marrying a prostitute, he appeals to his mother for help and she refuses to acknowledge him.¹⁴⁰ Likewise, in Fletcher's *The Captain* the vain daughter Lelia is ashamed of her honest but impoverished father, refusing him help and forbidding him to visit her. The author of *The New Whole Duty of Man* (1658) described such children who, 'in the midst of their pride, scorn to own their parents in their poverty'.¹⁴¹ Reprehensible actions tend to be noted and recorded far more often than kind ones, so the unfortunate relationships

¹³⁷ See above pages 30-31.

¹³⁸ Spufford notes that testators in Willingham, Cambridgeshire could be quite explicit about anticipating their widow and child not 'getting along' (*Contrasting Communities* 163).

¹³⁹ Houlbrooke, *English Family* 192-3.

¹⁴⁰ Chapter seven addresses in detail dramatic representations of parent-child relationships.

¹⁴¹ Twenty-fourth edition (1792) 200, cited in Macfarlane, *Marriage* 110. Thus, Thomas Fuller also wrote that a good child 'confines him [i.e., his parent] not a long way off to a short pension, forfeited if he comes in his presence' (*The Holy State*, 1948 ed., 14). See also Thomas Becon, *Works* (1844 ed.) 358, also cited in Macfarlane, *Marriage* 109.

between some aged parents and their children ought not to obscure other evidence which demonstrates completely opposite instances of unconditional love and charity.¹⁴²

Loneliness was an inevitable possibility, but through their prolonged economic activity, their tendency not to live solitarily, and the probably involvement of family, friends and neighbours in much of daily life, most of the elderly probably had a range of personal contacts if they wished for them. It would be historical condescension as well as distortion to characterise their personal experiences in this period as other than diverse, complex and to a high degree determined by the needs and desires of the old themselves.



The study of the English elderly in the past is still in its early stages, particularly for the earlier periods. However, in this introductory chapter it has been possible to build up an outline of the lives of old women and men below the rank of nobility in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, in which diversity of experience is a key feature. The following two chapters deal with certain dominant ‘habits of thought’¹⁴³ about old age and the elderly in this period. Chapter two examines life-trajectory schemes commonly known as ‘the ages of man’, charting the ways in which such plans in both literature and the graphic arts may have partially shaped attitudes towards the final stages of life, and people in those final stages. Chapter three turns to the ‘habits of

¹⁴² Gough’s history of Myddle contains numerous examples.

thought' expressed in other creative literary forms antedating the play-texts under study, to gain a sense of the conceptual and literary tropes and stereotypes of which poets would have been aware and upon which they might have drawn for their own constructions of elderly characters, and of other characters' attitudes towards the old. We find one of the best-known example of such 'cross-breeding' of genres and ideas in the sexton (Clown 1) from *Hamlet*, who cheerfully digs Ophelia's grave whilst humming a corrupted version of Thomas Lord Vaux's song in the celebrated *Tottel's Miscellany*:

But age with his stealing steps
Hath clawed me in his clutch,
And hath shipped me into the land,
As if I had never been such.

¹⁴³ The phrase (and the sense in which it is being used) is borrowed from Deborah Kuller Shuger's *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: religion, politics and the dominant culture* (1990).

CHAPTER 2: THE AGES OF MAN

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.*

(As You Like It 2.7.139-43)

From very early stages of social development, humans have apparently sought to make sense of the progression of life from birth to death by imposing coherent conceptual structures upon it. In Western cultures, this impulse has been articulated in part through the construction of age schemes, or what current sociologists also term 'life course models'. In the present day, older works of literature which employ such schemes may strike some readers as quaint or curious, or perhaps absurd. However, such responses overlook the continuity of this custom of dividing life into parts. Modern industrial and post-industrial societies still retain age schemes which, while somewhat different in form and rationale, nonetheless derive from the same basic desire to make sense of the time a human being passes between birth and death. When examining age-schemes of earlier societies, it is essential to realise that applying current standards of plausibility – i.e., making judgements upon the extent to which given age-stages in various schemes conform to the 'reality' of physical ageing – may be not only anachronistic, but also inadequate and narrow views of a more complex phenomenon. Ageing is not only a physiological process, but a psychological, emotional and social

one as well. Chronological age and biological change are only two facets of the whole experience.

The hodgepodge of age schemes which circulated in visual, oral and print culture in Renaissance England may be interpreted as a tacit social acknowledgement that ageing cannot be reduced to and described by one path of experience. From a brief look at the various systems, one may garner some understanding of what were the formal conceptual materials available to literate and non-literate, educated and uneducated males and females of all ages, when they tried to understand the elderly and comprehend the state of being old. Initially, it is important to look (albeit briefly) at age schemes as a whole, rather than simply focusing upon the phases describing 'old age', because versions of the last portion of life are highly conditioned by the content of the stages preceding it, and by the overall structure of the age scheme in question. There were, for example, linear, circular and growth-and-decline models, and each macrostructure affected the microstructures within it.

I emphasise the availability and currency of the schemes because there is a tendency amongst scholars to view the 'Ages of Man' tradition as an elaborate and effete ornamentation which only the extremely bookish or the poets used to decorate their treatises and compositions. For example, one scholar of art history writing on the Ages of Man in medieval artwork states that 'the theme of the ages of man was a bookish one. The divisional systems, articles of knowledge, were passed on in the schools. Each scheme described an ideal life. No one ever died before seventy, no matter

what life expectancy might have been in the society at large'.¹⁴⁴ This is an extreme statement, contradicted, for example, by the fact that several of the schemes quite explicitly set no exact age for life's end, and often saw seventy as virtually the outermost possible limit. More important, however, is the overwhelming evidence for the Renaissance period that, if this *had* been a 'bookish' subject in the Middle Ages, the schemes escaped from their narrow confines and were definitely taken as articles of *common* knowledge thereafter. The lack of ready information on the schemes has induced some readers to think firstly, that there were only a couple of such schemes (those of the seven planets and of the four seasons), and secondly, that the complexity with which some authors treated them meant they were necessarily known *only* in these forms by a handful of the highly literate. It is now clear that many schemes existed, that they had a wide circulation through some of the books most-read in the period and through visual media and that they ranged in form from a high to a very simple level of complexity. It would be ridiculous to assert that people who knew one or more schemes strove to live their lives in rigid conformity to a particular pattern.¹⁴⁵ However, age schemes must be considered as having been influential as general guides by which ordinary, (and not so ordinary) people could live and expect others to be living, and which they could use in constructing an understanding of the experience of being old.

The first part of this chapter describes in brief the more important age schemes which Renaissance English people inherited from antiquity and the middle ages, while subsequent sections draw upon anthropologists' and sociologists' work on life course

¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* 6.

models to elucidate how age schemes are relevant to understanding what people may have felt (or thought they felt) about being old in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. A few specific pronouncements about old age from that period will illustrate how differently the experience could be viewed and constructed, and how schematic representations of old age could be turned by a writer to specific purposes.

I. Age schemes in early modern England

Aristotle's triadic model from *On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration* is one of the earlier and more important schemes.

Generation is the initial participation, mediated by warm substance, in the nutritive soul, and life is the maintenance of this participation. Youth is the period of the growth of the primary organ of refrigeration, old age of its decay, while the intervening time is the prime of life.¹⁴⁵

Aristotle articulated a simple set of observations, easily understood even by those not engaged in the pursuit of natural philosophy. To attribute every three-age scheme to Aristotelian influence would be a mistake, given the ease with which any model with a 'beginning-middle-end' structure can be conceived. However, among the educated, Aristotle's works were core texts and there is no doubt that his specific triadic pattern was known to many readers directly from his works or indirectly from the writings of others.

At least as widely influential as his biological treatises was the *Rhetoric*, in which Aristotle draws upon the triadic age structure during his discussion of *ethos* or

¹⁴⁵ See, however, Henry Cuffe, discussed below.

‘character’ in Book II. Whereas his description of physical growth, stability and decline remains very neutral and detached, the *Rhetoric* offers an interpretation of these life stages which introduces judgements about what constitute positive and negative characteristics: the young think that they know everything, they do ‘everything too much’, and they are fundamentally innocent, guileless and courageous, virtuous, generous and full of hope; the old are cynical, suspicious and hesitant, small-minded, cowardly, self-interested and greedy; those ‘in the prime of life’ strike a balance, between courage and caution, generosity and frugality, hope and reasoned expectation.¹⁴⁷ The *augmentum, status, decrementum* pattern lends itself easily to such psychological profiles, since the young have the time for improvement, while the old, after living through the perfection of a steady state (middle age), can (so the reasoning goes) only deteriorate. Such an interpretation of life evidently has implications for views of ageing and the aged, and I will address this point shortly. For now, it is sufficient to note that the three-age scheme from the *Rhetoric* was absorbed by numerous writers from the time of its first Latin translation in 1270¹⁴⁸, and that a particularly influential political work served as one of many indirect modes of transmission: Giles of Rome’s *De Regimine Principum*, written in the late thirteenth century and ‘one of the most widely-cited contributions’ to the important mirror-for-princes genre throughout the Renaissance.¹⁴⁹ It is also highly likely that it is Aristotle’s

¹⁴⁶ Aristotle, *On Youth* 24.479a.

¹⁴⁷ *Rhetoric* 2.12-14, 1389a-1390b.

¹⁴⁸ Made by William of Moerbeke (Burrow 8). Burrow’s *The Ages of Man: A study in medieval writing and thought* is the most lucid and meticulous study in English of age schemes in English literature.

¹⁴⁹ Burrow 9; Skinner 396.

Rhetoric which contains the ‘Words, words, words’ which Hamlet is reading when he taunts Polonius with that most unflattering verbal portrait of old men:

The satirical rogue says here to old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams.¹⁵⁰

A second and more complex biological system was that of the ‘Physical and Physiological Fours’ (i.e., the four ages, humours and seasons). This scheme, J.A. Burrow believes, ‘provided the most powerful and the most influential of all older attempts to explain scientifically the changes which human beings go through in the course of their life’.¹⁵¹ The metaphor of the four seasons of man’s life came to be so widely used that it had a virtual life of its own, largely independent (at least, superficially) of the technicalities of humoral theory. However, the underlying ‘scientific’ rationale was more comprehensive than its lay manifestations, and is a prerequisite to understanding certain contemporary generalisations about the various ages.

Tradition, rightly or wrongly, ascribes the origins of the concept to Pythagoras, in whose philosophy the number four was of pre-eminent, mystical significance.

Pythagoras coupled the four seasons with four twenty-year ages, but as early as 400 B.C. these two categories were also being linked to the four qualities of moist, dry, hot and cold. Hippocrates himself, the ‘founder’ of Western medicine (c.450-370 B.C.), connected the seasons and humours with these four qualities, so that the fusion of all four categories – seasons, qualities, humours and ages – was a relatively

¹⁵⁰ *Hamlet* 2.2.192, 196-204.

straightforward development for the intellectual descendants of Hippocrates. Galen (second century A.D.) was to be the most influential of subsequent authorities until the medical ‘revolution’ began in the seventeenth century. In several of his works he articulates the Physical and Physiological Fours, briefly summarised along with the four elements in the table below, which shows the sets of correspondences between the macrocosm of the world and the microcosm of man:

<i>Age</i>	<i>Qualities</i>	<i>Humour</i>	<i>Season</i>	<i>Element</i> ¹⁵²
childhood	moist & hot	blood	spring	air
youth	hot & dry	red choler	summer	fire
maturity	dry & cold	black choler	autumn	earth
old age	cold & moist	phlegm	winter	water

Not all writers were consistent in their assignation of qualities and humours to the ages, but this division was by far the most prevalent. Exact ages were not necessarily specified, nor, when specified, consistent between authors.¹⁵³ The general ‘complexions’ or temperaments which became attached to each age group were, however, fairly standardised. Children were sanguine, cheerful and energetic; young people hasty and quick to anger; mature individuals more sombre and inclined to melancholy; old ones cold, slow and sleepy. Either through direct reading of Galen, or of later medical

¹⁵¹ Burrow 12.

¹⁵² Table from Burrow 12.

¹⁵³ For this reason, the various exact numerological boundaries, as well as the technical age names (also highly variable) are deliberately left out of this entire discussion.

authorities drawing upon his works¹⁵⁴, scholars of medicine would thus have learned of the four ages and their typical characteristics. Popular medical treatises – generally handbooks discussing basic regimens for good health, and simple home remedies – also circulated the system among at least some of literate society.^{155 156}

Despite the importance of the physical and physiological concepts which gave a reasoned scientific basis for the age divisions and their supposed characteristics, the correspondence between four ages and the seasons was virtually ubiquitous as a quasi-independent metaphor. Possibly the most widely-read of sources for this idea in the Renaissance was Ovid's *Metamorphosis* Book XV (ll.199-236). There, Pythagoras himself speaks of *tempus edax rerum*, Time the Devourer, and gives a poignant description first of the seasons with human qualities, then of the four ages as seasons of life.

A third model of the ages also sprang from the realm of natural observation and speculation – the seven ages of astrological theory. Ptolemy of Alexandria, the second-century astrologer, first articulated the scheme in his *Tetrabiblos*. Its organising principle is that each of seven ages is governed by a planet, the qualities of which determine the general characteristics of every individual in that stage of life. Up to four years, 'infancy' is like the moon, changeable, imperfect and inarticulate; 'childhood' to

¹⁵⁴ The most influential of these were Johannitius or Hunain ibn Ishaq (ninth century) in his *Isagoge*, and the *Canon* of Avicenna (980-1037). For more details of sixteenth-century medical training and texts, see Jerome J. Bylebyl, 'The School of Padua: Humanistic Medicine in the Sixteenth Century'.

¹⁵⁵ For an assessment of the size and nature of the readership of sixteenth-century popular medical works – which the author deems to have been a small but not insignificant number of primarily 'leisured elite' – see Paul Slack, 'Mirrors of Health and Treasures of Poor Men: The Uses of the Vernacular Medical Literature of Tudor England'.

¹⁵⁶ Representative popular medical texts which contain this age scheme include the *Regimen Sanitatis Salerni* (Latin, with commentary translated into English, at least seven editions between 1528 and 1596), *Kalendar and Compost of shepherdes* (at least eighteen editions 1506-1631), Thomas Elyot's *Castel of Helthe* (1541 fol.13r, and in the many subsequent editions). In the autobiography of the musician Thomas Whythorne (1528?-1596) we find that Whythorne read Elyot's *Castel*, and wrote poems and songs to mark his approach to or entrance into the age stages delineated by

fourteen is influenced by Mercury, which induces learning to begin and ‘bring[s] to light individual peculiarities of character and faculties’.¹⁵⁷ Venus governs ‘youth’ until twenty-one, during which time ‘a kind of frenzy enters the soul, incontinence, desire for any chance sexual gratification’; then in ‘young manhood’, from twenty-two to forty-one, the Sun asserts mastery and brings the ‘desire for substance, glory, and position . . . a change from playful, ingenuous errors to seriousness, decorum, and ambition’. When Mars takes over ‘manhood’ until fifty-six, however, ‘severity and misery’ arrive, giving the body ‘some sense and notion of passing its prime’, and urging a man to accomplish things before his time runs out. But after this anxious phase, Jupiter reigns in the ‘elderly age’ until sixty-eight, bestowing ‘decorum, foresight, and retirement’ until Saturn takes up the helm of ‘old age’ and steers toward death. Joys and desires are impeded and the man has become sluggish, ‘dispirited, weak, easily offended, and hard to please in all situations’.

Ptolemy’s scheme enjoyed great popularity and circulation, not only through his own much-studied text but through the enormous number of astrological publications written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as by way of medical handbooks and a wide array of other literature.¹⁵⁸ Hence, Burrow comments:

If asked to provide a causal explanation for the changing ages of man, most educated people in the Middle Ages or Renaissance would have offered either this astrological theory or else the medical theory of the four

Elyot (Whythorne 7-12, 25, 66-7, 115-117, 170).

¹⁵⁷ *Tetrabiblos* 4.10.

¹⁵⁸ For example, William Vaughan in his *Directions for Health, Naturall and Artificiall* (1600) answers the question ‘Into how many Ages is mans life divided?’ in his second chapter, with a lengthy version of the Ptolemaic scheme (120-121). His book was very popular – at least seven editions had been printed by 1633 – and contains an amusing (and apt) description of puberty as that time when ‘there fals out in the body a tumultuous hurly-burly, or wambling commotion of humors’ (125).

ages. One might have a preference between them . . . but they were certainly not regarded as incompatible.¹⁵⁹

That the seven-age scheme has usually obscured the large variety of other traditions also in circulation since antiquity, is in large measure due to the attention paid to Jaques's speech in *As You Like It*. Nonetheless, it was undeniably popular, and provided a tidy and detailed account of a man's character from birth to death, which could serve the descriptive, prescriptive, or even explanatory needs of those who knew it.

The notion of life as a day in three or four parts from sunrise to sunset, was also current in the Renaissance. The metaphor very often carried the double weight of being a description of the passage of time, and an emphasis upon life's brevity – man's existence skims by like a single day and before he is aware, it is already well past noon. In Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, the Sun-god 'entered with the appearance of a beaming boy, in his middle course he was like a man panting for breath, and at the end he seemed an old man in decline'.¹⁶⁰ If the day was articulated into four parts, these could easily be fitted to the Physical and Physiological Fours described earlier, with a humour and a set of qualities governing every three 'hours' of one's life.¹⁶¹

Another plan based on time units used the seven-day week. In this analogy, each day of the week was a year, and every seven-year segment therefore constituted a 'year-week'. The oldest recorded use of the year-week was in Solon's ten-age system, in

¹⁵⁹ Burrow 38.

¹⁶⁰ *De Nuptiis* 1.76, trans. in Burrow 57. *De Nuptiis* was an important text in the Renaissance, widely used as 'a description of the whole range of knowledge' (Grafton 785).

¹⁶¹ Burrow 57.

which every seven years marked the end of an age. Later developments abandoned the ten ages but retained the hebdomadal concept and placed age-boundaries at various multiples of seven. The influential notion of 'climactericalls'¹⁶² or critical years in a man's life sprang from the year-week idea; every seven years were deemed particularly important and dangerous, and the 'great climacteric' came at sixty-three, at which time opinion varied as to whether one would come very close to death, or would simply have a rough year of illness and misfortune. Ralph Josselin (1617-1683), a seventeenth-century vicar of Earls Colne, Essex, wrote in his diary for the day 26 January, 1680: 'not troubled in 63 as a critical and dangerous year though I often thought of it'.¹⁶³ For individuals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the climacterics were common knowledge, as they had been in Greece since before Solon, and in the Roman West from at least the time of Varro (second to first century B.C.).¹⁶⁴ In 1596, when Queen Elizabeth was sixty-three and the nation was seriously concerned that she might succumb to illness or some other effect of that numerically malignant age, Bishop Anthony Rudd made the unfortunate mistake of preaching to the Queen and court on the Great Climacteric. As Christopher Hibbert describes,

The Queen, listening to him through the window of an upstairs gallery, was seen to be growing ever more restless and cross. So Rudd quickly left these numbers for others less contentious . . . But the damage had been done and, instead of thanking the preacher for his sermon as was her customary habit whenever she approved of one she had bothered to listen to, the Queen called down to him that he should have kept his numbers to

¹⁶² The term 'climacteric' was also in usage.

¹⁶³ Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin* 100.

¹⁶⁴ Eyben 228.

himself. 'I see,' she added, 'the greatest clerics are not the wisest men.'¹⁶⁵

Moving from these smaller units of time to the scale of history in its entirety, there is one other major age-scheme to consider. In his *De genesi contra Manichaeos* (1.23-41), and other of his works, St. Augustine described six ages of the world, from the Fall to the end of time, and compared these to six ages of man and the six days of creation. Although Augustine was not the originator of this scheme¹⁶⁶, his version was taken up by Isidore of Seville and included in the latter's massive encyclopaedia, the *Etymologiae* (1470), 'one of *the* ancient reference books throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. . . [giving] as good an idea as anything of what the literate man in the street knew of ancient thought'.¹⁶⁷ Isidore's work in turn provided material for subsequent writers of compendia, like Bartholomaeus Anglicus who wrote the *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (c. 1230). This work was frequently copied and was translated into English by John of Trevisa at the end of the fourteenth century.¹⁶⁸ Burrow concludes that, 'backed by the authority of two saints, and readily available in the best of all encyclopaedias, the doctrine of *sex aetates mundi et hominis* soon became common coin'.¹⁶⁹

Two important vehicles for Isidore's version were the *Zodiacus Vitae* of Marcellus Palingenius Stellata (pseudonym of Pietro A. Manzolli), and *A shorte dictionarie. . . for yoong beginners* by John Withals, both being sixteenth- and seventeenth-century grammar school texts. Palingenius's work, a lengthy Christian moral poem in Latin first

¹⁶⁵ Hibbert 251.

¹⁶⁶ Tertullian (late second century A.D.) was already aware of it (Eyben 224).

¹⁶⁷ Grafton 784.

¹⁶⁸ The translation was printed in 1495 and 1535 and a revised version appeared in 1582 with the title *Batman vppon Bartholome* ('Batman' being Stephen Bateman, the Anglican priest who revised it). This work was 'popular in Shakespeare's day' (Burrow 88).

printed probably between 1530 and 1535, was immediately popular in Europe – ‘among Renaissance Latin poems it enjoyed in England a popularity perhaps rivalled only by Mantuan’s eclogues’¹⁷⁰ – and these two works were frequently used, in addition to the works of Terence, for Latin instruction in some Elizabethan grammar schools.¹⁷¹ Filtered through Manzolli, the view of the six ages is distinctly dark, a bitter tone which is epitomised effectively in Jaques’s derivative ‘All the world’s a stage’ speech, although the two differ in many details. If this was a primary source for Shakespeare’s passage, as seems likely, the speech gives a vivid idea of one way that generations of school children and other readers of the *Zodiacus* were encouraged to view man’s life and old age. John Withal’s *A shorte dictionarie*, which was the regular dictionary used in grammar schools for Latin memorisation in Shakespeare’s day¹⁷², also featured Isidore’s scheme in a rudimentary version.¹⁷³

Hence, from at least his school days onwards, a literate male in sixteenth-century England could have learned about any of a number of age-schemes, depending upon his level of education and breadth of reading. Other models were also readily available.¹⁷⁴ Widely-known was a brief passage in Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, instructing the young Pisones on the importance of keeping character consistent with age in their poetical creations.¹⁷⁵ Horace laconically describes four ages in a bitter-sweet tone

¹⁶⁹ Burrow 83.

¹⁷⁰ Tuve, ‘Introduction,’ *The Zodiacke of Life* (1576) v.

¹⁷¹ Tuve v-vi; Baldwin 1.642.

¹⁷² Baldwin 1.531.

¹⁷³ See the 1599 edition, fol. 91^v–92^r. There were seventeen editions between 1553 and 1634.

¹⁷⁴ For more examples, see the schemes of Varro, Servius Tullius and Servius Honoratus described in *The Foreste*, below.

¹⁷⁵ Lines 56–78 in the Loeb edition.

distilled into his last words: 'Multa ferunt anni venientes commoda secum,/ Multa recedentes adimunt' – many benefits do the years bring as they arrive, and many they take away as they depart (175-76). No age is particularly attractive, and the author may have been less than serious in presenting them in this fashion, but through the Middle Ages and Renaissance various authors drew seriously upon Horace's scheme for their characterisations, and many may, to greater or lesser degrees, have shaped their own attitudes and expectations by it.

To close this historical overview of the ages, one work serves to represent what interpretations of man's life course a learned (or at least well-read) man of the sixteenth century could easily have encountered. In the first half of the century¹⁷⁶, a Spaniard named Pedro Mexia wrote and published the *Silva de varia leccion*, a voluminous and very successful¹⁷⁷ compendium of information; it was translated into English by Thomas Fortescue and printed in 1571 and 1576 as *The Foreste or Collection of Histories*. Book 1, Chapter 17 covers 'the distinction of the Ages of Man, accordinge to the opinion of most Astrologians' (fol. 45^r). As this title suggests, the seven-age astrological scheme figures most prominently (45^r-46^v), however Mexia also proceeds to outline several other versions. He then declares:

But here consideringe these variable opinions, I know not where, moste safely to arrest my selfe, neither may any man geue assured determination, as well for diuersitie of complexions, and dispositions of menne, as also that wee inhabit divers Landes and Countries, the consideration of our diette mattereth also somewhat . . . by meanes

¹⁷⁶ The earliest edition I have been able to locate was published in Anveres in 1544, listed in the British Library catalogue.

¹⁷⁷ The British Library catalogue records nine editions between 1544 and 1603, including a copy of the 1550 edition which belonged to King Edward VI, as well as numerous continental translations.

whereof . . . man either sooner or later altering, becommeth at times differente, olde and decrepite. For this cause saith Galen, hardly may man limite any times unto Ages: whiche well considered, cause that these so dissonante and so sundry opinions, seeme not all thinge so straunge, and so exiled from reason.¹⁷⁸

Clearly, then, age-schemes were abundant in sixteenth-century Europe, offering an enormous variety of interpretations of the interval between cradle and grave, including the later years of a person's life. Before focusing upon old age in the schemes, however, it is necessary to assess the relevance of these mental constructions to real people in their everyday lives. Why did (and do) people formulate these divisions of the life course? What are their implications for the individual's, and society's, development and existence? How may different schemes affect or reflect the view of an individual or society towards old age in particular?

II. Understanding life course models and age-grades

i. Perspectives from the social sciences

Anthropologists and sociologists provide some assistance in answering these questions. Studies of both traditional and modern societies have led researchers in these two fields to conclude that every human society as yet known exhibits the phenomenon of 'age-grading'¹⁷⁹, the conceptual division of the life course into different stages.¹⁸⁰ S.N. Eisenstadt's work from the earlier half of this century has provided the framework upon which present-day researchers continue to elaborate. In his studies of traditional

¹⁷⁸ Fol.48v.

¹⁷⁹ The accepted definition of an age grade was established by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown in 1929: '[an age grade is] the recognised division of the life of the individual as he passes from infancy to old age' ('Age Organisation Terminology').

societies, he established that the universal phenomenon of biological ageing is not dealt with in the same way throughout the world.

[I]n every human society this biological process of transition through different age stages, the process of growing up and of ageing, is subject to cultural definitions. It becomes a basis for *defining human beings*, for the *formation of mutual relationships and activities*, and for the *different allocation of social roles*.¹⁸¹

Similarly, recent sociologists who study ageing in modern societies agree that in these, too, the life course is a 'cultural unit', the categories of which are 'cognitive indicators of the important boundaries and significant identities' in a society.¹⁸² The age grades defined by a society supply broad definitions of 'human potentialities and obligations at a given stage of life'. Each stage in the graded system describes not a detailed role, but 'general, basic role dispositions into which more specific roles may be built'.¹⁸³ Hence, for example, old age in the scheme of the Physical and Physiological Fours is characterised by coldness, lethargy and forgetfulness; in the planetary scheme the old person is said to be low in spirits, irritable, demanding, but devoid of strong desires; in Horace's description the old man complains and criticises others, procrastinates, reminisces and is greedy. All of these are very general descriptions of qualities and behaviours. An age grade can thus contain within its broad definitions a wide range of individual and circumstantial variation – but it does exist to keep differences within certain socially normative boundaries.

This leads to the question of why systems of age-grading exist in every society?

¹⁸⁰ Eisenstadt 22; Gulliver 157.

¹⁸¹ Eisenstadt 21, my emphasis.

¹⁸² Fry and Keith 58. Fry and Keith's essential position is that 'the life stages [of a society], the intervals [of those

That is, what is their function? The key terms in Eisenstadt's analysis of this issue are *definition, formation, and allocation* – definition of self and others, and of the relationships between self and others; formation of interactive relationships between people; and allocation of roles within the social system which these relationships constitute.

[T]he expectations which are directed towards individuals with respect to their age constitute one of the strongest, most essential links between the personality system of individuals and the social systems in which they participate. On the one hand, they are among the major criteria by which *an individual defines his rights and obligations in relation to others*; they also serve to *define the types of units within the social system, to which various tasks and roles are allocated*.¹⁸⁴

The reason that age is such an important factor in the allocation of tasks and roles (and therefore in the establishment and maintenance of each individual's identity), is that each person can only be instructed in the social and cultural heritage of her/his society over time, and can only assume various positions in that society after certain knowledge has been accumulated – and in some instances, only after a certain level of biological development has occurred. In sum, *time* and *timing* are of crucial importance for social continuity. Births and deaths constantly require that information be preserved and passed down from generation to generation; the experience of a person throughout the life course is always changing in relation to others and to him/herself. Life under such circumstances cannot be lived haphazardly. Humans require a structure of significant stability which allocates tasks and roles appropriate to each individual, so that people of every age are on the one hand presently performing in ways beneficial to themselves

stages,] and their boundaries are culturally defined and are culture-specific' (Fry and Keith 54).

¹⁸³ Eisenstadt 22.

¹⁸⁴ Eisenstadt 32, my emphasis.

and others, and on the other being prepared for new roles and tasks as their position in the continuum of ageing changes. A system of age grades ensures that these general expectations are known and learned in advance, so that the transitions for the individual (from one point in life to the next) and for the society (from one pool of individuals to another) are as smooth as possible at every moment in time.

The success of this structure also entails that the 'relations between different age grades are necessarily asymmetrical' in terms of authority, respect and initiative. This asymmetry is requisite right from the beginning of the life course, since children, in order to learn, must respect the authority of their elders who teach and discipline them. Hence, '[t]he strong emphasis on the respect due to elder people, i.e., to age, is . . . a basic prerequisite for the successful maintenance of social continuity'.¹⁸⁵ The stress upon respect for age may be to a greater or lesser extent lip-service, especially in reference to old age. Yet the respect must exist to some degree even if it is mixed with hostility, simply because younger generations do continue to learn from their elders. When considering Elizabethan and Jacobean drama in the light of these observations – particularly, for instance, the generational battles in comedies – one can see the very deep-rooted and ancient social stresses finding new channels of expression. It must be emphasised that this observation is not intended to reduce and oversimplify play-texts to a one-dimensional mode of expressing age-related cultural tensions; however, a sociological perspective is useful for contextualising an expanding our understanding of many common scenarios in the drama.

At the level of individual psychology, divisions of the life course help to satisfy a desire for predictability about the future. Not only does a person need to be prepared for how to relate with others at various points in their respective lives. He or she also needs some degree of psychological security in the face of the unknown. Since the process of ageing is necessarily a new experience for every person, to have in advance a rough guide which has been constructed from previous generations' experiences, can provide at least a partial sense of preparedness. In general, ageing and its implications for societies and individuals necessitates a structured conceptual division of the life course. Individuals in a constant state of irreversible change in physical and mental functionality, and a society whose membership is always experiencing these changes, use age systems to cope with the effects of time upon human beings.

If we acknowledge that age grade systems help to assign roles and status to individuals, and to define human beings for themselves and in relation to others, then it becomes evident how these ideas apply to a specific age grade such as 'old age'. The presentation of old age in various systems ought to suggest how persons in that portion of life might have been perceived in both personal and social terms, and what roles and statuses they were assigned and/or allowed, at least in theory. Without naïvely construing a simplistic cause and effect relationship between age schemes and reality, one can at least discern significant tendencies in these abstract constructions, tendencies which could have conditioned individual and collective attitudes and responses towards old age in the period under study.

ii. The French Academie

That structured conceptions of the life course were taken seriously, and that they could function as suggested – i.e., as tools to educate and prepare men and women for their places in society, to assign status and authority, and to define for the individual a self-image, a set of duties towards others, and certain expectations of them towards himself – can be illustrated by a chapter from *The French Academie*¹⁸⁶, a widely-known treatise in the popular tradition of ‘fashioning the gentleman’.¹⁸⁷

The work is cast in the form of a Platonic dialogue, and the fictional structure is infused with norms relating to age. Four young gentlemen, about twenty years old, have been sent by their fathers to be educated for six or seven years ‘in the house of an ancient wise gentleman of great calling’ (FA 2). Now their fathers are visiting them in order to see the fruits of this education; the students arrange discussions for eighteen consecutive days, during which each young man may display his learning and rhetorical finesse (FA 5). Book 1, Chapter 52 is entitled ‘Of the divisions of the ages of man, and of the offices and duties that are to be observed in them’, and is embedded within a larger section on the family, preceded by chapters on marriage (chs.45 and 46), the duties of husband and wife (47 and 48), the duties of the head of a household (49) and of children to parents (50) and the proper education of children (51). This last task is a father’s duty to oversee: ‘The chiefe foundation of a happie life, is good instruction

¹⁸⁶ By Pierre de La Primaudaye (referred to hereafter as FA). In the original French version, the first of four volumes was published in Paris, 1577, and all four were completed by 1608. In England the first volume was translated by Thomas Bowes in 1586 and went through subsequent editions in 1589, 1594, 1602 and 1611. His translation of the second volume (1589) seems to have been less successful, with only one further edition in 1605.

¹⁸⁷ This text is not being presented as the model of how ‘everyone’ regarded the ages, or old age in particular. Rather, it shows how age schemes could and did function in Renaissance society, at levels not usually perceptible (but

begun in youth', therefore those who 'have authoritie over the younger sort' must 'be careful and diligent in the well ordering of the seede of youth, which is *the spring and roote of all prosperitie both publike and private*'.¹⁸⁸ This statement supports the observation described earlier, that societies possess an age-based authority structure to ensure proper instruction of the young in social norms. One of the young men in the FA feels that because some fathers do not take care for their sons' education,

we ought to search out some way whereby to amend the first faults [of poor instruction and discipline], *by handling the division of the ages of man, according to the ancient writers, and by setting down a briefe instruction of that which is most necessarilie required, and to be observed in every of them, especially in adolescencie, for the obtaining of true felicitie through good behaviour and instructions, which are the meanes therof.*¹⁸⁹

'Place and time are to be considered in all things' reads the marginal note to this passage, and the text opposite adds, '[I]n divers ages diversitie of honest behavior is required . . . bicause as nature altereth with age, so it behooveth that maners should change'.¹⁹⁰ The individual changes with time, so his/her relations with others will likewise be affected accordingly, and it is of supreme importance that the virtuous man learn the appropriate manners as he changes. This same speaker goes on to describe the six-age scheme of Isidore of Seville, fleshing out its skeletal structure with an elaboration of the characteristics, roles and duties belonging to each age. La Primaudaye selected a linear scheme for his young speaker, devoid of direct medical, religious, natural or any other specific contexts, as opposed to cyclical ones – like the four seasons

nonetheless very much present) in other literary instantiations of the age schemes.

¹⁸⁸ FA 518; my emphasis.

¹⁸⁹ FA 530; my emphasis.

¹⁹⁰ FA 530-31.

or the seven planets – which tend to depict man as part of a larger natural pattern of renewal; this feature, coupled with the passage's content, reveals the speaker's (and his society's) view of ageing as a process of great social as well as physical and personal consequence.

The text says little of 'infancie', because the child 'cannot then learne manners and vertue' for lack of comprehension or use of speech. 'Childhood' commences with speech, and although children have not yet 'the full use of reason . . . parents must exert themselves to instill a fear of God, reverence for their parents, [and] good manners'. 'Youth' marks the time when instruction in virtue by skilful teachers must begin. After this comes 'Adolescencie', bringing growth in strength, reason, virtue ... and vice. A man's nature and the 'inclination' of his mind first reveal themselves. Because adolescents naturally tend toward pleasure and idleness, they must be firmly governed lest they 'quickly turn to vice, hate those that give them good instruction, become presumptuous, and readie to leave that which before they loved' – that is, lest they threaten the social structure by rupturing the chain of responsibility linking past, present and future generations.¹⁹¹ Adolescents are in training for public roles, and their duties are

to honor their elders, and to marke who are the honestest men, and of best report, that by their counsell they may learn to live according to vertue and good maners, and have honor alwaies before their eies.

Like sailors preparing in calm weather for a storm,

so in time of adolescencie, men must furnish themselves with temperance, sobrietie, & continencie, laying up store of provision in due time, *wherby to*

¹⁹¹ FA 531-33.

*sustain old age the better.*¹⁹²

La Primaudaye is articulating a frequently reiterated principle of his day, that young people ought to prepare, materially and non-materially, for old age well in advance, which meant living in one age with certain definite ideas about the others to come. The fifth age is one of perfection, or the 'Mans estate or Virilitie' [which] shows a man 'ripe and settled. . . . most apt & fit to attaine to vertue and honestie'. His duties are 'to bring forth the effects of prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice', as well as to seek remedies for any defect in learning and character which he may retain from younger years.¹⁹³ He is thus very much oriented to the public realm of active service in the support of society at large.

After fifty, men begin 'to grow weake, and to decline continually until death'.

This is official 'Old age,' when

prudence is a very meet and necessary ornament, which those ancient men might attaine unto through long use of life, through knowledge, and through experience. Therefore it is their office to succor and helpe the yoonger sort, their friends, and the common-wealth by their prudence and counsell.

Governing, says the young speaker, rightly belongs to old men, as does the administration of justice and the task of providing good models of behaviour for younger men; not many elders, however, are still physically up to such tasks. For such men, a withdrawal from public duties is appropriate:

Therefore when we have passed over the greatest part of our daies to the profit of many, if then thorough [*sic*] weaknes of extreme age we are constrained to leave the managing of publike affaires, it will be very great

¹⁹² FA 535; my emphasis.

¹⁹³ FA 537.

honor, comfort, and contentation of mind unto us, to run the rest of our race quietly and peaceably in the study of letters, wherein delight is joined with honest contemplation.¹⁹⁴

The old man thus becomes a predominantly private figure (like the ‘ancient wise gentleman’ who has instructed the four young men of the *Academie*), passing on the torch of social knowledge and responsibility to coming generations.

The powerful function of an age-scheme in ordering and controlling the training of individual males for private and public roles is demonstrated not only by this particular chapter, but by the overall structure of the treatise itself. As pointed out earlier, the seven chapters previous to this one deal with marriage and different relationships within the family structure. After chapter 52 on the ages of man, the discussion moves promptly to the duties of magistrates, rulers and subjects; the disciplines of war and peace; and two chapters ending the book, on living a happy life and on death. The discussion of ages serves as a pivotal point between the private domestic sphere of a man’s roles and the public sphere, mingling both sides as the individual is sketched out at every stage of his ideal life. The overall picture and impression is one of continual changes in public and private roles, for which a person is always in training, potentially right through until death in old age.

The entirely masculine tenor of *The French Academie* reflects the fact that in antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, age-schemes for women were virtually non-existent. Very occasionally, a writer used feminine pronouns, or age-names, as well as the masculine forms, and different visual representations of the ages sometimes

¹⁹⁴ FA 540.

depicted one or more stages as, or including, females. However, separate and specific 'ages of woman' systems were not in circulation. The few exceptions to this do not display the same degree of detail and differentiation between different ages; they may be constructed to numerically parallel a male scheme, but this underlying aesthetic characteristic is undermined by the marked lack of distinction between successive ages, as contrasted with the varied life of the male. Samuel Chew's *The Pilgrimage of Life* includes two woodcuts depicting stairways of life, one for man and one for woman, each with nine ages. In the first woodcut the male engages in a variety of activities. In the second, however, the only distinctive roles for the female are wife and mother, the other ages being rudimentary depictions of female beauty or the loss of beauty with advancing age. Since age-schemes function in part to assign roles and statuses to individuals throughout the life course, it is not very surprising that there were no highly developed age-schemes to chart the life of woman. Her roles were ideally limited to the private sphere, to being a wife and mother, and her status – which depended very much upon her fulfilment of these combined roles – was of far less consequence (at least in theory) than that of a man. Ian Maclean shows through his study of *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* that theology, medicine, anatomy, physiology, practical and moral philosophies and law all concurred in 'the belief that woman cannot be considered except in relation to the paradigm of marriage'.¹⁹⁵ Accordingly, diverse and complex models of life were not necessary to ensure the appropriate succession of females from one stage of existence to another. The more specialised functions of the schemes – to

¹⁹⁵ Maclean 57, and *passim*.

help shape an individual's self-image and provide a sense of predictability in the face of future uncertainties – were similarly circumscribed by a comparatively limited vision of a female's roles, abilities and needs.

La Primaudaye's chapter on the ages, and its integration into a holistic analysis of the individual's relations in both private/familial and public/social spheres, indicates how age schemes were involved in the maintenance of social structures in Renaissance England. Age structures were a dynamic feature of the culture, shaping people's experiences of being old, and being shaped by their experiences in turn. The versions of old age which the schemes proffered can – cautiously – be used as evidence of English people's beliefs, hopes, expectations and anxieties about the later years of life.

III. The winter of our discontent: views of old age in the schemes

Just as there were many age-schemes with which people in Renaissance England could map out their lives, so there were also a variety of depictions of and responses to the ageing process and old age. The two facts are not unrelated, since it is most certainly the case that they arose from a common source – recognition of the diversity of individual experience. The ancient cultures from which the schemes arose had already recognised that at least two kinds of difference lead to variability in human ageing: firstly, no two individuals will age in exactly the same way, since their personal circumstances and experiences will affect their course through life; secondly, within

each person there are different sorts of ageing – chronological, physical, psychological and emotional, to name the main ones. Individuals who have lived the same number of years may be differently ‘aged’ in body, their state of mental development (or deterioration) may vary, and they may ‘feel’ or ‘picture’ themselves to be ages other than what their birthdate indicates.¹⁹⁶ Given this conspicuous lack of uniformity in the ageing experience, it is not surprising that people developed and adapted various methods of organising and describing age changes, depending upon which aspect of ageing they wished to highlight, or perhaps to express their own personal experience.

Three of the schemes presented have definite structures which govern the basic content of their depictions of ageing and old age. Because they were the most commonly known systems, their ideas had a considerable sphere of influence and warrant close consideration. The Physical and Physiological Fours explained the changes in man throughout his life in terms of the different combinations of humours and qualities incident to each age. Of the four seasons of man’s life, old age is winter, cold and dry¹⁹⁷, dominated by phlegm and therefore ‘sluggish, sleepy, and forgetful’.¹⁹⁸ Medical theory explained the numerous frailties and ailments of the old in terms of this humoral complexion. So, for example, they became easily drunk because they were dried out and the wine stayed longer in their stomachs, ‘even as water doth in a tronke

¹⁹⁶ In societies or communities in which chronological age was not known precisely, e.g., rural England for most of the early modern period (Thomas, ‘Age and Authority’ 205-7), these other gauges of age would have influenced how old individuals thought themselves to be and how old others perceived them to be.

¹⁹⁷ Although it should be cold and moist, observers could not reconcile this with the desiccated and withered skin of the elderly, and so made old age ‘accidentally’ (in the Aristotelian sense) moist, but essentially dry because the radical moisture which fuelled their heat was nearly all consumed. A more detailed explanation of these ideas can be found in Peter H. Niebyl’s ‘Old Age, Fever, and the Lamp Metaphor’.

¹⁹⁸ From Bede’s *De Temporum Ratione*, in Burrow 202.

of wood, drie and half putrified'¹⁹⁹ – recall Cornwall's order, preparatory to the torture of Gloucester in *King Lear* (3.7.27): 'Bind fast his corky arms'. Similarly, they 'doate' (i.e., are senile) because of 'the great cold that is in them', which makes them weak-minded, sometimes even mad.²⁰⁰

The seasonal metaphor defied attempts find something good to say of old age. No one liked winter, a time of frigid weather, scant victuals and relentless disease. The spring and summer of one's life were times of vitality and joy, whilst autumn heralded a 'ripening' of the fruits of knowledge and experience. But winter always stood at the end, threatening and inevitable, ready to freeze the blood with infirmity in one's body and mind. In Ovid's highly influential description of the seasons and ages, the grief brought by old age receives much more attention than all the other ages put together:

and when the years of middle life
Have given their service too, he [i.e., man] glides away
Down the last sunset slope of sad old age –
Old age that saps and mines and overthrows
The strength of earlier years. Milo, grown old,
Sheds tears to see how shrunk and flabby hang
Those arms on which the muscles used to swell,
Massive like Hercules; and, when her glass
Shows every time-worn wrinkle, Helen weeps
And wonders why she twice was stolen for love.²⁰¹

One of the more succinct expressions of these ideas in the poetry of the sixteenth century occurs in Spenser's 'December' eclogue. The entire poem demonstrates the misery of old age, as Colin is in the winter of his life and his whole outlook is consequently darkened by the gloom of the twilight years. Of all his 'haruest hope', he

¹⁹⁹ *Delectable Demaundes* 132.

²⁰⁰ *Delectable Demaundes* 102.

has 'nought reaped but a weedye crop of care':

So now my yeare drawes to his latter terme,
My spring is spent, my sommer burnt vp quite:
My harueste hasts to stirre vp winter sterne,
And bids him clayme with rigorous rage hys right.
So nowe he stormes with many a sturdy stoure,
So now his blustering blast eche cost doth scoure.

The carefull cold hath nypt my rugged rynde,
And in my face deepe furrowes eld hath pight:
My head besprent with hoary frost I fynd,
And by myne eie the Crow his clawe dooth wright.
Delight is layd abedde, and pleasure past,
No sonne now shines, cloudes han all ouercast.²⁰²

The Physical and Physiological Fours thus encouraged a thoroughly dismal view of old age, and it had the strength of 'science' to reinforce its tenor of inevitability.

Further, the fact that in the natural world spring follows winter was another reminder of humanity's miserable mortality – the earth renews itself, but humans die and old age becomes in this view even more of a threat because of its proximity to death. This grim outlook could be somewhat mitigated by viewing the next generation as 'seeds' for new springtimes to come.²⁰³ So, for example, a woodcut from Robert Farley's emblem book *Kalendarium Humanae Vitae* (1638) shows 'Winter' as an old man inclining towards a fire, with a small boy playing at his feet; the words with the image read 'I enjoy my fruits', probably meaning both rest and the comfort of his (grand)children. Even so, old age was not, when viewed as 'winter', generally represented as a happy time of life.

Equally deterministic was the astrologers' scheme, which considered planets to

²⁰¹ *Metamorphoses* 225-233.

²⁰² 'The Shepheardes Calender' 121-2, 127-138.

²⁰³ Farley 156.

be the major influences upon a man's general dispositions throughout his lifetime. However, unlike the Fours it could express some of the positive ideas which people had about old age, or at least about parts of it. This was possible because of the larger number of gradations, which resulted in the division of old age into two parts: an 'elderly age' and 'old age' proper. The distinction is an important one, for it occurs in other schemes and reflects a general social tendency which has a significant impact upon how ageing and old age is perceived and received. Anthropologists and sociologists term it the 'intact-decrepit' distinction. Societies in which this is found accord different treatment to individuals in the two categories, with the result that there is not a wholesale devaluation of the aged, but only of those who are functionally incapacitated by age.²⁰⁴ To illustrate, in Sir Walter Raleigh's description of the seven ages in his *History of the World*, he writes: 'the sixth age is ascribed to *Jupiter*, in which we begin to take account of our times, judge of ourselves, and grow to the perfection of our understanding'. He then dwells upon the grim Saturnine phase of old age in much greater detail:

our days are sad and overcast . . . our attendants are sicknesses, and variable infirmities; and by how much the more we are accompanied with plenty, by so much the more greedily is our end desired, whom when Time hath made unsociable to others, we become a burden to ourselves: being of no other use, than to hold the riches we have, from our successors.

Only in this final old age do we begin to prepare for the afterlife, where we go

with many sighs, groans, and sad thoughts, and in the end, by the workmanship of death, finish the sorrowful business of a wretched life,

²⁰⁴ Keith 234.

towards which we always travail both sleeping and waking.²⁰⁵

This tone is prevalent in the large majority of sources I have examined: a very powerful dread of the physical deterioration of the body, frequently accompanied by a concomitant belief in emotional and moral decline, especially if the person surveying old age wishes, like Raleigh, to emphasise the wretchedness and vanity of this world. In spite of his apparent interest in the seven-age astrological system, Raleigh actually took a fundamentally Aristotelian (i.e., three ages) perspective, but omitted the middle portion of *status*:

For if there were any baiting place, or rest, in the course or race of man's life, then, according to the doctrine of the Academics, the same might also perpetually be maintained; but . . . the life of man . . . is always either increasing towards ripeness and perfection, or declining and decreasing towards rottenness and dissolution.²⁰⁶

This is a rather strong expression of revulsion for the 'declining' years, but by no means uncharacteristic for the period.

The Oxford scholar Henry Cuffe²⁰⁷ in his treatise *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life* exemplifies a perspective somewhat less affected by didactic motives. Conflating the seasonal metaphor and the seven-age scheme (which was often done), he assigns winter to both parts of old age. From fifty to sixty-five, 'our strength and heat are evidently impaired, yet not so much, but that there remaineth a will and readinesse to bee doing', but in 'decrepit old age . . . not onely all abilitie is taken away, but euen all willingnesse, to the least strength and motion of our bodie: and this is the conclusion

²⁰⁵ Raleigh, *History of the World* 2.5, 2.155-6.

²⁰⁶ Raleigh 156

²⁰⁷ Cuffe is better known for his involvement in Essex's attempt coup in 1601.

and end of our life, resembling death it selfe, whose harbinger and fore-runner it is'.²⁰⁸

The Earl of Surrey's poem 'Laid in my quyett bedd' registers the gentler regret of a man poised on the threshold of life's final stage. There, the speaker muses upon the three ages of life and the discontent of each age with its lot.

I saw the lytle boye, in thought how ofte that he
Did wishe of Godd to scape the rodd, a tall yong man to be;
The yong man eke that feeles his bones with paynes opprest,
How he wold be a riche olde man, to lyve and lye att rest;
The ryche olde man, that sees his end draw on so sore,
How he wolde be a boy agayne, to lyve so moche the more.²⁰⁹

Old age is just beginning for him:

Thus thoughtfull as I laye, I saw my witheryd skynne,
How it doth shew my dynted jaws, the flesshe was worne so thynne.²¹⁰

His 'tothelesse chappes' frame his voice, which tells him that his grey and white hairs – 'messengers of age' – 'do wryte twoe ages past, the third now cumming in'²¹¹, and so he must set aside the pleasures of his boyhood and patiently accept senescence. While the atmosphere of gloom is not so strong as in the view epitomised by Raleigh, the conclusion is once again inescapable that old age is, after the pleasures and even the toil of earlier days, the worst time of life in all respects. Surrey's poem is valuable for its direct, personal quality. Although one is reading a poem, the speaker's reflections upon ageing have a simple authenticity of tone which invites one (rightly or wrongly) to regard them as genuine expressions, and overrides the conventionality of the theme.

In spite of the impression given by the preceding examples, some writers did

²⁰⁸ Cuffe 120.

²⁰⁹ Surrey 5-10.

²¹⁰ 15-16.

convey much brighter observations on old age using other age schemes. *Batman vppon Bartholome* contains a very useful summary of both the benefits and the drawbacks of advancing age. Once again, an intact-decrepit distinction is visible. Old men, Bateman writes, who have cold blood (i.e., are very old) 'be nice and fooles' and in 'great age olde men doate and are mad', becoming children again, while those with still (relatively) warm blood 'are wise and readye'.²¹² However, unlike the final ages in Raleigh's discussion, Bartholomaeus' *senecta* and *senium* are not necessarily clearly good and bad respectively. The author emphasises that individual experience differs:

This age bringeth with it manye domages, and also profits good and evill . . . Good for it delyuereth us out of the power of mightie men and tirants, and maketh an ende of bodilye lust, and breaketh the braydes of fleshly lyking, and hath wit and wisdom, and giueth good counsaile, as many olde men doe. It is the ende of wretchednesse and of woe, and beginning of wealth, and of ioye: It is the perfectnesse of meedfull deedes, and disposition to bee perfect.²¹³

Nonetheless, he concedes, certain truths cannot be denied:

And this age bringeth euilles with him . . . In these olde folke kinde heate is quenched, the vertue of gouernance and of ruling fayleth, and humour is dissolued and wasted, might and strength passeth and fayleth, flesh, fatnesse and fayrenesse is consumed and spent, the skinne riueleth, the sinewes shrinke, the bodye bendeth and crooketh, forme and shape is lost, and fairnesse of the body brought to nought . . . All men despise the olde person, and are heauy and weary of him. The olde man is trauailed and griued with coughing and spitting, and with other griefes, untill the ashes be resolued into the ashes, & powder into powder.²¹⁴

Clearly, such lists were meant to comprehend the wide range of possible experiences. Bateman and many other writers recognised that neither deterioration into

²¹¹ 17, 22.

²¹² Bateman 70v.

²¹³ 70v-71r.

²¹⁴ 71v.

senility nor achievement of ripe wisdom were certain attendants of whitening hair. Probably as a result of this recognition, there existed (in sociological terms) both 'supportive' and 'non-supportive' behaviours towards the old.²¹⁵ Thus, in *The French Academie* for example, old men are presented as uniformly praiseworthy, and their age is accorded respect and authority; in other texts, old men are 'doating fools' and old age is a time of patent misery. Bateman's work unites both views, allowing one to see that attitudes of both reverence and contempt towards the old could exist side by side at that time, even in the same person's mind.

Texts incorporating age schemes often included prescriptive as well as descriptive material. Prudence, gravity and a composed demeanour were all part of the ideal. Activities appropriate for younger persons were often deemed unbecoming to the elderly, whose time was to be spent in studies and the contemplation of death, as well as being exemplars and counsellors for younger people. Sport, fashion, leisure activities (such as dancing and games), amorous affairs and sex were all (officially) out of bounds. Popular admonitory stories circulated, like one of the old Lacedaemonian with the very long beard who, when asked why he allowed it to grow so much, answered, 'To the end . . . that by looking upon my white haire, I should be put in mind not to do any act unbecoming this hoarie whitenes'.²¹⁶ Thomas Tusser, in his immensely popular *Five hundreth points of good husbandrie*²¹⁷ gives a catchy set of verse prescriptions for

²¹⁵ 'Young-old' and 'old-old' categories in various societies 'may be the universal distinction that at least partially explains the coexistence of high status and bad treatment for old people in many traditional societies' (Keith 234); bad or 'non-supportive' treatment can include verbal denigration and prejudicial attitudes, as well as outright physical neglect or abuse.

²¹⁶ *The French Academie* 539.

²¹⁷ First published in 1573, with at least eighteen subsequent editions before 1640.

twelve seven-year ages, or 'prentiships' as he calls them. Despite the artificiality of the numerological device (which extends life to the unlikely age of eighty-four), he sums up a few typical directives:

The next [seven years] be staied, giue ouer thy lust,
The next, thinke houely whither thou must.
The next, get chaire and crotches to stay,
The next, to heauen God send us the way. (9-12)

With these standards of behaviour as the social ideal for the old man who retained his faculties, life would no doubt have been limited if he chose to follow such directions. The truth of people's lives probably deviated frequently from this ideal. Nonetheless, however, prevailing attitudes were not conducive to individuals planning for themselves, or condoning in others, a boisterous Falstaffian old age. Social disapproval of 'unseemly' behaviours was likely to have been a significant constraint upon a substantial portion of the healthy elderly; King Henry's conviction that 'How ill white hairs becomes a fool and jester!' seems generally to have prevailed in all levels of society.

Addendum: ages of women

In Tusser's work is one of the very few examples I have been able to find of an Ages of Woman scheme, and it merits a brief mention. As in his scheme for Man, he divides her life into apprenticeships, but for Woman he uses fourteen-year intervals, totalling only six ages.

Two first seuen yeeres, for a rod they doe whine,

Two next, as a perle in the world they doe shine,
Two next, trim beautie beginneth to swerue,
Two next, for matrones or drudges they serue,
Two next, doth craue a staffe for a stay,
Two next, a beere to fetch them away.

A Lesson Then purchase some pelfe,
 by fiftie and three:
 or buckle thy selfe,
 a drudge for to bee.

As I suggested earlier, the relative simplicity of women's lives (in social terms) made it not only unnecessary but also rather difficult to divide their lives into many stages.

Within the six ages delineated, Tusser's focus is limited to only two topics: marriage and the physical attractiveness needed to get a husband. One other English work which purported to contain an age-scheme for women turned out to be a false lead.²¹⁸ Despite the fact that its author was a woman and the work was written in memory of her mother, Rachel Speght's *Mortalities Memorandum* (1621) refers to schemes of three, four and six ages of *man*. Thus, although the poem is intended to be a memorial honouring a *woman*, Speght chose for whatever reason to impose upon her mother's life masculine models of the life course. The author is so true to her models – which are in this instance no more than rhetorical *topoi* – that she retains the masculine age-name 'Virilitie' in spite of the feminine sex of her subject.²¹⁹ This term confirms that Speght is not using the concept of 'the ages of *man*' in the gender-inclusive sense of man.

²¹⁸ I do not claim to have scoured English sixteenth-century literature; however there is general consensus on the 'overwhelmingly masculine character' of the age-schemes (Burrow 30). Mary Dove in *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* concurs in her brief chapter 'The ages of woman's life' (20-5).

²¹⁹ Speght 20.

IV. Conclusions

A survey of the age schemes thus reveals a very broad normative framework of the life course within which individuals were encouraged to follow basic prescribed paths of development, accept certain fundamental behavioural restrictions at different stages, fulfil distinct social roles and responsibilities and adopt certain attitudes towards themselves and others on the basis of age. Within such a system of social directives, ageing and old age could be variously interpreted and received. If asked to say whether 'negative' or 'positive' attitudes towards ageing and old age predominated in these life course perspectives, one would be compelled on the basis of the evidence to say 'negative', but with certain qualifications. Dread of physical deterioration seems to have provided the greatest impetus for gloomy and critical views. The unpleasant and frequently quite nasty character traits so often attributed to the old were probably at least partially a result of this dread. Hostility served to keep fear at a distance; other factors were likely in play as well, involving the distribution of resources and labour and balances in familial and community power structures. If physical well-being had been deemed of paramount importance in English attitudes towards old age, then the loss of strength inevitable to senescence would have boded ill for the elderly as a whole. However, in early modern England physical ability was not held to be the only measure of worth, and therefore there existed a counter-current of opinion which esteemed wisdom and experience, and recommended respect and authority for the old.

Neither view rigidly prevailed, but instead, both contributed to a pool of beliefs

from which individuals drew ideas which seemed to them most appropriate for their situation or purpose. This might be the deliberate act of writing a didactic work on the certain misery of this world and the certain bliss of the next, the creation of a character in a stage play, or the unconscious application of various acquired expectations of old age when trying to understand oneself or others. Whatever the circumstance, age schemes, were part of the fund of ideas with which people of the time conceptualised, responded to and structured their and others' experiences of being old. These 'patterns' located old age within larger interpretations of the life course, and they ascribed characteristics to, and *prescribed* behaviours for, the old. One must, however, bear in mind that most of this chapter applies predominantly to the lives of old *men*. Concepts of female old age seem to have been vague and diffuse by comparison and generally reducible to a few qualities: garrulity, gossiping, lasciviousness, sometimes greed and frequently a generalised malice towards others. Old women in plays are one of the few sources of information which survive to suggest what were the prevailing conceptions of and attitudes towards old women. Hence, in coming chapters the age schemes will be useful tools in understanding some of the old men of the drama, whereas the old women will in some ways reveal aspects of various unwritten 'ages of woman'.

CHAPTER 3: LITERARY CONVENTIONS AND STEREOTYPES

*the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound.*

(As You Like It 2.7.157-63)

We are now more prepared to turn an informed and focused gaze upon English play-texts. This chapter considers certain literary conventions and precursors which were likely to have had bearing upon the playwrights of the age when they set themselves to constructing elderly characters, as well as some of the plots in which such characters would be involved. The rationale for including such information in a separate chapter, rather than merely mentioning it *passim* whilst discussing plays, is partly to avoid repetition and partly to emphasise the highly conventional foundations of most Elizabethan and Jacobean elderly characters. This is not to draw the a priori conclusion that all of the characters yet to be discussed are *only* conventional and stereotypical; however, in assessing any given character – measuring the depth and originality of characterisation, discerning his or her moral status, gauging the level of sympathy or antipathy the playwright seeks to arouse in the audience, deciding on the character's 'function(s)' in the play – a modern scholar needs to understand the raw materials with which the author was working. Aside from specific ascertainable sources for plots or characters, this material included 'types' or 'stock characters'. As Madeleine

Doran explains in her survey of character in English Renaissance drama, the Renaissance concept of *verisimilitude* 'carried the implication not of naturalism but of ideal or universal truth', and hence 'the application of [this] principle exaggerated the typical in all theories of character-drawing'.²²⁰ Contemporary critical theorists also stipulated that the principle of *decorum* be applied to persons just as to other aspects of a poetical work and together, verisimilitude and decorum encouraged a high degree of rigidity in character creation. Teachers in the grammar schools required boys, as part of their training in rhetoric, to practise the writing of characters 'in such a way as to emphasise the typical' rather than the individual qualities of a person; the models drawn upon in schools were predominantly from the Roman comedies of Terence and Plautus.²²¹ In addition to these other factors, psychological theories based upon humoral theory favoured the classification of individuals by basic character types, which were determined in large measure by one of four fundamental humoral dispositions (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, or melancholic).

Fortunately, dramatists did not always bind themselves to these rules and formulae, and incorporated their own perceptions and daily experiences of human behaviour into their creations.²²² However, types did serve several functions.

To mark a character with the signs of some class to which he belongs . . . is a simple way to give him consistency and a certain kind of verisimilitude. Such emphasis on type makes for quick recognition on the part of reader or spectator, arouses expectations that can easily be satisfied, gives a

²²⁰ Doran 217.

²²¹ See Doran 220-8.

²²² Doran 218. 'The people of Elizabethan comedy more frequently [than in continental works] transcend their basic type or lose its outlines in vividly original speech and behaviour' (216).

coherent total impression.²²³

The shaping, directing and homogenising effects of using types can in turn be put to subversive ends – for instance, when a poet encourages the audience to anticipate a familiar type in order to heighten the *atypicality* of a character who, when he or she comes onstage, proceeds to contradict their expectations. Either way, a knowledge of the basic types available to playwrights is essential in attempting to assess and understand elderly characters in English Renaissance drama. In tracing the main sources upon which Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists could have drawn, I emphasise the background to *comic* drama, on the principle that in tragic drama stock characters are less present, primarily because the dramatic focus usually turns upon fluctuations of intense emotions within individually realised characters.²²⁴ However, the tragic potential of some of the material will be evident. First, I shall address the elderly characters of Roman comedy, then two Italian Renaissance developments of this Roman heritage: *commedia erudita* and *commedia dell'arte*. In section three, I consider the native dramatic traditions of the mystery and morality plays, as well as depictions of old age in English medieval religious lyrics. Finally, I shall briefly address a tradition only seriously revived in England from the late 1590s onward – the ‘Theophrastan Character’. Whilst this last body of materials may not have influenced Jacobean dramatists to any great extent (the great flood of character books only having commenced c.1614), it reinforces the elderly stereotypes visible in earlier art forms,

²²³ Doran 232.

²²⁴ See Doran 216, and 438, where she remarks that there is ‘a normal shift of emphasis from the study in comedy of fixed characters to the study in tragedy of states of passion’.

thereby providing further evidence of the strength and continuity of many traditional formulae.

I. Roman comedy

The importance of the plays of Terence and Plautus for English Renaissance drama has been well established and does not require extensive recapitulation here. From their grammar school days onward, educated men read Roman comedies and, if they were dramatists, frequently drew upon them for their own works; although 'Roman comedy is seldom the primary ingredient in mature English comedy . . . it is nearly always a modifying one'²²⁵, clay taken up time and again by successive creative wits. Essential to the mechanism of the comedies are stock characters, the three major ones being the *adulescens* (youthful lover), *servus* (clever slave) and *senex* (old man). Students of the plays studied these types, assisted by learned commentators. Most printed editions of Terence's plays, for example, also included a work by the fourth-century grammarian Donatus in which he identified and commented upon the character types in these plays. Appended to Erasmus's 1534 edition of Terence's *Works* was Philip Melanchthon's method for schoolmasters to teach the very popular *Andria*, and Melanchthon's method included a study of characters types like 'judicious old men, Davus grown old and clever, [and] the young Pamphilus honest and filial'.²²⁶

Despite the expected constraints of stock characteristics, the *senex* of Roman

²²⁵ Doran 151.

²²⁶ Quoted in Doran 225.

comedy embraces a variety of roles, attitudes and behaviours, far more than the *senex iratus* patriarch who tyrannises over his children in later European romantic dramas. George Duckworth stresses that while '[t]here are few Roman comedies which can properly be termed 'comedies of character' . . . the characters of Roman comedy are far richer and more varied' than any list of types would indicate. 'There are numerous variations within each type, and the characters display a wide range of human virtue and frailty'.²²⁷ This is certainly the case for the *senex*, a term which means not simply 'old man' but more specifically one of 'the older male members of the various households . . . presumably in their fifties or early sixties'. There may also be other old characters in the plays (merchants or moneylenders, for example) but these are very subordinate roles.²²⁸ Within the *senex* category, individual characters fall into three broad sub-types: parents, friends and lovers. The elderly *matronae* in Roman comedy are minor figures, usually wives complaining about their husbands' 'unjust criticism, indifference, infidelity, even the theft of their clothing'.²²⁹ Their prominence as elderly stereotypes is very limited, especially in comparison to the *senes*. Discussions of plays in subsequent chapters will indicate that the categories of parents and lovers underwent a certain amount of revision, and certainly extensive development, in English plays.

Elderly Roman fathers can be either harsh or lenient, unsympathetic or understanding; yet the majority fall into the second, kindlier, class, while even those who are *iratus*, *severus*, or *saevus* (angry, austere, harsh) are so because of their deep

²²⁷ George Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A study in popular entertainment*, 236.

²²⁸ Duckworth 243; the *senex* appears in Roman comedy with a frequency second only to the *adulescens*, and is more vividly realised than the latter (Duckworth 237).

concern for their sons' welfare, not out of cruelty. Excessive leniency is not praised, since youths generally prove to be in need of guidance and discipline. Instead, the best fathers take the middle way. Terence's *Adelphoe* (*The Brothers*) uses stock father figures of both extreme lenity and strictness, and demonstrates their respective flaws. Demea, the 'harsh' father, rants against one of his sons for wild youthful antics and is admonished by his brother Micio, who says, 'If you and I didn't do these things it was only because we hadn't the money'.²³⁰ But Micio in turn learns that his 'weakness, indulgence and extravagance' do not equate to genuine good parenting.²³¹ Terence's *Heauton Timorumenos* (*The Self-Tormentor*) depicts the agony of a father who repents of his excessive strictness only after his only son runs away from home.

As a rule, Terence's *senes* are confined to this one category of 'parents seriously wrapped up in the problems of their children', and he thus explores their dilemmas in greater depth than does Plautus.²³² However, in the latter's plays as well, the *senes* 'fundamentally . . . are not bad-tempered' – although they may experience fits of rage when finding they have been tricked by the clever slave.²³³ In this susceptibility to ruses they are dubbed *credulus*, easily taken in and often to an exaggerated degree which provides for greater humour. Yet they are not senile imbeciles, even though they can be rather obtuse at times. In the comedies of Terence, on the other hand, fathers are frequently undone as much by their own cleverness, as by clever slaves.

²²⁹ Duckworth 283.

²³⁰ Terence 343 (reference numbers refer to pages of the translation, not to lines).

²³¹ Terence 386.

²³² Duckworth 248.

²³³ Duckworth 245.

Even taking variations into considerations, the type of the credulous *senex* was well-enough established for Cicero to remark in *De amicitia*: ‘For even on the stage the silliest characters take the parts of old men lacking in foresight and easily deceived’.²³⁴ One further note on the father *senex* relates to money. Although later inheritors of the New Comedy *senex* types frequently made greed an attribute of elderly fathers and father-figures, this quality was not present in their classical antecedents. While elderly Romans are ‘interested in business ventures and in making money . . . the comic *senex* as a rule is honest, even if shrewd and thrifty’, but not selfish and mean.²³⁵

The good nature of parental *senes* is also found in those old men who are ‘helpful friends’. Although secondary characters, they provide advice and assistance to main characters in their schemes, and humour to the audience when their good will lands them in scrapes for their friends’ sakes. (Some of their progeny can be found transmuted in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays – Falstaff, Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*, Antonio in Fletcher’s *The Chances* and others.) Usually it is other *senes* whom they help, but a few, such as Periplectomenus in Plautus’s *Miles Gloriosus* (*The Braggart Soldier*), aid an *adulescens*. Periplectomenus is a jolly old man, happy in his bachelorhood but willing to bring a young man’s hopes of marriage to fruition. He flatly denies possessing any of the unpleasant characteristics of age:

. . . there’s some love in my own heart yet, and sap in my body; I’m not so dried up as to have said goodbye to all the delights and pleasures of life. Furthermore I can still be an agreeable table-companion and join in a witty argument without wanting to lay down the law or contradict my neighbours. I make a special point of not being a bore in company. . . . I

²³⁴ Cicero, *De amicitia*, trans. W.A. Falconer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1923) 26.100-1.

²³⁵ Duckworth 277.

never cough spit, or snuffle.²³⁶

These are qualities found more often in the old people of vituperative pieces like Juvenal's tenth *Satire* than in Roman comedy. Like the *senex credulus*, it is in Plautus, rather than Terence that one finds these helpful old men.

The same is true for the *senex amans*, the amorous old gallant who figures so largely in later dramas influenced by the New Comedy tradition. Terence appears to have eschewed this earthy category of elderly stereotypes, but Plautus left a few memorable examples for later playwrights to cultivate; the depiction of sexual desire in elderly men, discussed below in chapter six, became an important source of humour in Renaissance comedy. Many scholars react with rather dismissive disgust to the amorous old men of Plautus's plays, and while this is not a very useful approach to take, there is no doubt that the characters are strongly drawn and sometimes a bit unpleasant to contemplate. Some are lusting after the same girl as their own son, like Demaenetus in the *Asinaria* (*The Comedy of Asses*), who obligingly furthers his son's love affair but asks for 'an evening and a dinner' with the girl in return. At the appointed occasion the young man sits with doleful countenance, meekly protesting, 'Father! When is that embrace going to end?' – until Demaenetus's wife finds him and hauls her 'gallant' home by the ear, to everyone's amusement but his.²³⁷ Lysidamus in the *Casina* is even in direct competition with his son, sending him out of town to thwart the young man's efforts. Like Demaenetus, however, he is apprehended by his wife and defrauded of his desires. The *senex amans* spends a good deal of his stage-time bemoaning his love-

²³⁶ Plautus, *The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, page 178.

sickness, and Lysidamus dramatically declares that if he loses the girl, 'I'll take my sword for a pillow and lay me down upon it'.²³⁸ General Memnon in Fletcher's *The Mad Lover* has many of the characteristics of Lysidamus and his ilk.

Duckworth concludes that '[t]hese *senes* are stock types without individuality, and Plautus presents them as lecherous old reprobates whose amorous activities provide hilarious comedy', the more so because their physical elderliness is explicitly pointed out in the plays.²³⁹ Like many scholars who address depictions of aged sexuality, Duckworth and Doran are both extremely judgemental and dismissive of the elderly characters. Nor is this solely a product of 'old fashioned' critical sensibilities from the earlier decades of the last century – I have found the same responses in much recent scholarship as well. Yet one can learn far more by observing Plautus's amorous old men as they are – genuinely believing themselves to be 'in love', a bit silly at times, yet no more so than many other young despairing lovers in the comedies, and more carefully delineated and arguably more entertaining than many of the latter. It is doubtful that Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies and tragicomedies would have developed quite the range of elderly characters as they did, without the Plautine and Terentian influences.

II. Italian Renaissance comedy

i. Commedia erudita, the 'learned comedy'

Italian Renaissance comedies were, in part, a revival of this Roman New Comedy

²³⁷ Plautus, *Asinaria* 736, 882, 921.

heritage, and had a wide dispersal and influence in most European countries, including England. Two types of comedies were most popular – the *commedia erudita* (learned comedy) and the *commedia dell'arte* (professional comedy). The first of these to develop was the *commedia erudita*, which stemmed from Plautus, Terence (including the commentaries of Donatus), and fifteenth-century humanist Latin comedies. The plays were in the vernacular and usually in prose.²⁴⁰ Dates for the first such comedy vary²⁴¹, but certainly by the very early years of the sixteenth century these sorts of plays were being written and performed. As one would expect, the type characters from Plautus and Terence survived, though with alterations. In the case of elderly characters three basic changes occurred: old men were made to appear much more ridiculous, they had a greater prominence in the plays, and the 'elderly suitor' became a new focus for humour and contempt. Leo Salingar notes that

Plautus and Terence had shown old men blocking their sons' desires, or even rivals to their sons in love. In Italian comedy, such old men are even more prominent; miserly fathers, wealthy but decrepit suitors, superannuated husbands or interfering amorous dotards feature in at least half of the sixty or more examples of 'learned' comedy that Marvin T. Herrick outlines [in *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance*].²⁴²

The key elderly stereotypes in the *commedia erudita*, for English dramatists, can be found in the three learned comedies most widely known in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: *Il Suppositi* (Ludovico Ariosto, translated and published in 1566

²³⁸ Plautus, *Casina* 307-8.

²³⁹ Duckworth 246-7.

²⁴⁰ Herrick 60.

²⁴¹ Herrick chooses 1497 for the first published *commedia erudita* in verse, 1503 for the first performed in verse (65); Leo Salingar places its effective beginning at the 1508 performance of Ariosto's *Cassaria* (*Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* 176).

²⁴² Salingar 199.

by George Gascoigne as *Supposes*), *La Calandria* (Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena) and *Gl'Ingannati* ('The Deceived', anonymous).²⁴³ The general types are the miserly and/or interfering father, the amorous husband and the elderly suitor (the last two having some expected similarities). However, it must be stressed that there was a *constellation* of elderly characteristics which the Italian playwrights drew upon for all of these types, the standard attributes being greed and stinginess, understatement of age, vaunting of sexual prowess and cunning (usually more in intention than in reality, due to either innate or senile stupidity). The playwright would emphasise certain features and de-emphasise or exclude others, depending upon which sort of character he was creating.

Damon in *Supposes* provides a good instance of a greedy and interfering father, who is forcing his child to marry an old wealthy suitor. '[M]ore desirous of the dower, than mindfull of his . . . daughter', Damon 'hath greater respect to the abundance of goods than to his owne naturall childe'.²⁴⁴ He talks of his daughter as a 'pearle. A costly jewell'. Bemoaning the discovery that the girl has a lover of long standing and is pregnant, he reveals that he has turned down offers and kept her unmarried for five years while he waited for a richer and richer suitor.²⁴⁵ Damon is a selfish fellow whose greed engenders his own troubles, and whose faults are thrown into relief by the second father of the play, Philogano, who is quite devoted to his son.²⁴⁶

A gentler version than Damon of the interfering father is Virginio in *Gl'Ingannati*,

²⁴³ *Il Suppositi* was first performed in 1509, *La Calandria* in 1513, and *Gl'Ingannati* in 1531 (Salingar 176, 208, 211).

²⁴⁴ *Supposes* (in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough) 1:126; Bullough prints the 1575 edition in volume one, and all references are to page numbers of this volume, not to line numbers.

²⁴⁵ *Supposes* 133-4.

²⁴⁶ *Supposes* 138.

who again plans to marry his daughter to a decrepit but wealthy suitor. In his case, however, he is reluctant to force the girl to marry against her will, and his motive is not greed but financial necessity – he lost his wealth in the sack of Rome four years earlier and has almost no dowry for her. Damon is far more typical of the ‘tyrannical’ and greedy father of learned comedies.

In the category of amorous husband, Calandro is outstanding. Based on a character in Books eight and nine of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Calandro combines lechery with a stupidity so extreme that it verges on idiocy. His scornful servant maintains that ‘there is so much nonsense in him that a single speck of it, found in Solomon, Aristotle, or Seneca, would be sufficient to discredit all the wisdom of those men’, and he proceeds to demonstrate this by convincing Calandro of various extravagant impossibilities (such as that people travelling on ships are disassembled and packed into trunks).²⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, Calandro fails to hide his amorous schemes from his wife, but ends up looking an even greater fool for lusting after her own lover, who disguises himself as a girl to visit her. Most of the first half of the play is given over to Calandro’s displays of vanity and panting lust. In spite of his age, he ‘thinks himself so handsome and so charming that he imagines every woman who sees him falls in love with him’, and thus is the source (or butt) of most of the play’s humour.²⁴⁸

Characters in the ‘elderly suitor’ category (as distinct from the ‘amorous lovers’) do not share the stupidity of Calandro, although their antics in love are at least as

²⁴⁷ *La Calandria*, trans. Oliver Evans, in *The Genius of the Italian Theatre*, 44, 47-8, 59-61; all references are to page numbers of this translation.

²⁴⁸ *La Calandria* 44, 54.

entertaining. Both stereotypes share a stark incongruity between their bodies and their licentiousness. Gherardo in *Gl'Ingannati* fudges about his age (saying he is in his 'forties, perhaps more' when he is really over sixty), boasts that there are numerous women who seek to marry him for his sexual vigour, and cracks lewd jokes to reinforce his claims.²⁴⁹ He is a ridiculous slave to his desires, and his behaviour, reports a servant, is 'enough to make not only the dogs but the donkeys burst themselves with laughing'.

He's shaving himself bald, combing himself, mincing about like a woman.
He goes out at night to sword-parties, and he carols all day long in a
wheezy, raucous voice to a big lute more out of tune than himself.²⁵⁰

(Lysander in Middleton's *The Old Law* behaves in a similar fashion.)²⁵¹ Dressing in fine clothes, he sends to the perfumer for civet and receives itch-ointment instead, because the perfumer thinks there must be a mistake in the order. The father, Virginio, is reproved by his servant/mistress for betrothing his daughter to such a sexually unsuitable mate, a 'wheezy old man' and a miser, to boot.²⁵² Altogether, Gherardo is a wretched figure who spews out ridiculous love-epithets very much like Calandro, and generally encourages laughter and a certain disgust at elderly suitors.²⁵³

Cleander in *Supposes* is similar, although his saving grace is his motive: the desire to have an heir. Once his long-lost son is found to be alive and well, he gladly abandon his suit to a young girl. In the meantime, however, the play is enlivened by his courtship follies and insulting remarks about his age. His physical frailties and other

²⁴⁹ *Gl'Ingannati*, trans. Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* 2:288-9; all references are to page numbers of this translation.

²⁵⁰ *Gl'Ingannati* 300-9.

²⁵¹ See below, chapter eight.

²⁵² *Gl'Ingannati* 298, 314.

²⁵³ *Gl'Ingannati* 298.

failings are itemised to his face (as Polonius experiences from Hamlet):

[he said that] you are the miserablest and most nigardly man that ever was. . . . you are the testiest man, & moste divers to please in the whole worlde. . . . you cough continually and spit, so that a dogge cannot abide it. . . . your arme holes stincke, your feete worse than they, and your breathe worst of all. . . . And [he said] that you are bursten in the cods.²⁵⁴

He apparently is such a miser that he will observe a saint's day fast just to avoid inviting someone to dinner; serves (when he does dine) 'an harlotrie shotterell, a pennieworth of cheese, and halfe a score spurling' at a meal for three; and he keeps a mule that is skin and bones – 'if she had any flesh', he is told, 'I thinke you had eaten hir your selfe by this time'.²⁵⁵

These three comedies exhibit the essential features of important elderly stereotypes, with some clear alterations from Roman New Comedy. Old men are ridiculed rather than respected, they are also more prominent in plays, and a new figure has appeared – the elderly suitor. Just as striking as these types is the general pervasiveness of agedness as an object not only for humour, but for less pejorative comments as well. Certainly elderly men (again, old women are peripheral or absent in these plays) receive more ridicule and criticism than sympathy or praise, but milder responses are at times encouraged. As in New Comedy, in the *commedia erudita* the possibility for a consideration of old people *beyond* the constraints of stock characters remained open for future development.

ii. Commedia dell'arte

²⁵⁴ *Supposes* 129.

²⁵⁵ *Supposes* 118, 127.

In this art form, the stability of stock characters provided a foundation for improvised situational and knock-about comedy. Nonetheless, there still seems to have been a generous amount of variety in the two elderly characters, Pantalone and the Doctor, especially in Pantalone. The *commedia dell'arte* began about mid-sixteenth century and its popularity spread through most of Europe. '[S]ervants, old men, and lovers are the three mainstays of the Commedia dell'Arte' and '[t]he central theme [of scenarios] is always the loves of the young people, the jealousies and rivalries of the old ones and the intrigues of the *zanni* [i.e., male servants]'.²⁵⁶ Giacomo Oreglia describes Pantalone, an elderly Venetian merchant, as producing comedy out of the 'contradictions of senility: he is very avaricious yet a lover of pomp and splendour, wily yet rash; slanderous and quarrelsome, subject to sudden explosions of fury . . . he can even pose as a kindly and benevolent gruff old fellow'.²⁵⁷ Pantalone thus resembles in many respects the elderly men in both New Comedy and *commedia erudita*, both of which in part influenced the development of *commedia dell'arte*.²⁵⁸ He was vigorous and lusty, often playing a lute and singing serenades to his beloved, although violent acts of exertion brought on fits of asthmatic panting; if he was a father, he often played the tyrant, forcing his daughter to marry a wealthy old suitor – usually his friend the Doctor.²⁵⁹

This second old man of the *commedia dell'arte* was a stupid pedagogue, 'primarily a satire on learned men, on the pedantry and erudition of the Renaissance and of

²⁵⁶ Oreglia 1, 3, 18.

²⁵⁷ Oreglia 78.

²⁵⁸ Herrick 210-11.

Humanism'.²⁶⁰ He was loquacious without substance, sometimes (like Pantalone) a father, or a counsellor to a magistrate or prince; Polonius is a descendant of 'il dottore'. Also like Pantalone, he was 'madly eager for amorous adventure' but always ended up cuckolded, mocked, derided and gulled by the *zanni*.²⁶¹ Neither of the *commedia dell'arte*'s elderly stock characters gave a softer slant on the aged – Italian comedy in general tended to exaggerate and emphasise the characteristics of Roman *senes* and introduce other elements of farcical humour from popular literary traditions (such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*).

Elements of *commedia dell'arte* surface in dozens of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. However, Jonson's *Volpone* is perhaps the most interesting variation upon the stock characters and situations involving Pantalone and the Doctor. These stereotypes are divided up between three characters, Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino, while Volpone, although also an old man, is the *zanni*. David Brailow, commenting on Corbaccio, has aptly expressed Jonson's flair for depicting old men in this play: 'Jonson . . . is able to capture the clinging to life, the desperate feeding on self-delusion that lies behind this type'.²⁶² It is perhaps Jonson's crowning touch in the play that Volpone's ruse involves pretending to be what they expect of a very old man – sick, decrepit and senile – while they remain unaware that they are being both duped *and* parodied at the same time. Thus, Volpone tricks them by, in a sense, assuming two *commedia dell'arte* roles, the *zanni* and the Pantalone. His downfall begins when he slips from *playing*

²⁵⁹ Oreglia 78-81.

²⁶⁰ Oreglia 84.

²⁶¹ Oreglia 84.

Pantalone to *being* Pantalone, that is, when he tries to seduce Celia. Whilst the actual mechanism for his exposure is Mosca's betrayal, the stage is set for the servant's disloyalty when his master begins to prove fallible to one of the stereotyped Pantalonesque weaknesses of old age – lechery. Fittingly, Volpone's punishment is to be imprisoned until he is well and truly afflicted by the pains and illnesses which he counterfeited for profit; if he will *play* the old man, then he will be made into an old man.

England also had home-grown sources of stock elderly characters and characteristics for dramatists to draw upon besides the Roman and Italian traditions. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to these cultural reservoirs, specifically the mystery plays, morality plays, medieval and early Renaissance religious lyrics and the Theophrastan character piece.

III. Native traditions

i. The mystery plays

Although mystery plays were no longer performed in England by the mid-1570s, they had been a flourishing part of the dramatic tradition for over one hundred years. The imagery, themes and character types which they contained certainly exerted an influence upon those secular dramatists whose works began to fill the gap left by the receding sacred drama once Tudor religious reforms were underway. While the mystery plays themselves lapsed into silence, the literary elements of which they were

composed remained in the blood of the developing secular drama.

The surviving mystery-cycle plays contain several vivid portraits of elderly men, some of them comic and some serious, poignant and dignified. Two old men, Abraham and Symeon, were exemplars of both suffering and joy in old age. Abraham's situation is a powerful expression of both agony and faith; as an old man, he must prepare to offer up for sacrifice the beloved only child of his declining years. In the *Ludus Coventriae* he is rejoicing before he receives God's command:

Abraham, my name is kidde,
And patriarch of age full old.
And yet by the grace of God is bred
In my old age a child full bold.
Isaac, lo! here his name is told,
My sweet son that standeth me by.
Amongst all childeren that walken on wold
A lovelier child is none truly.
I thank God with heart well mild
Of his great mercy and of his high grace,
And principally for my sweet child
That shall to me do great solace.²⁶³ ²⁶⁴

In his submission to God's will, he shows 'reasoned obedience tempered by natural human feeling'²⁶⁵, and he exemplifies 1) the distress which may come unexpectedly even upon the old, 2) the piety expected of the old and 3) the joy which will be their eventual reward.

Symeon is another important old man from the mystery plays. Promised by a prophet that he would see the Christ-child before he died, he speaks explicitly of the tedium and pain of his prolonged days, his eagerness both to be rid of life and to see

²⁶³ *Ludus Coventriae* in *The Corpus Christi Play of the English Middle Ages* 101.

²⁶⁴ **kidde**: renowned; **wold**: earth (*Ludus Coventriae* 101).

Christ.²⁶⁶ In the *York* and *Towneley* plays, Symeon has a lengthy monologue on the physical ills of the aged, which was a well-established *topos*:

(*Towneley*) No wonder if I go on held:
The fevyrs, the flyx, make me unweld;
Myn armes, my lymmes, ar stark for eld,
And all gray is my berd.

Myn ees are woren both marke and blynd;
Myn and is short, I want wynd;
Thus has age dystroed my kynd,
And reft myghtis all.^{267 268}

Rosemary Woolf notes that 'The contents and form of this, though not the tone, recall such lyrics as "Le regret de Maximian". But of course these Symeons are not, like the old men of the lyrics, figures of derision: they have the physical weaknesses of the satiric tradition, but not the characteristic vices, such as avarice and irascibility. On the contrary they are firm and dignified'.²⁶⁹ Both Abraham and Symeon were thus mediums for conventional portraits of the suffering and the patient elderly, their catalogues of misery and the piety recommended to assuage the ills of age.

The comedy of old age has a greater presence than the pathetic in the mystery plays, with characters like Noah, Lamech and Joseph providing a good deal of humour at the expense of their ageing bodies or their ageing sexuality. When Noah receives God's commandment to build the ark, each play in the cycles stresses the burdensome nature of such a task for an old man. The Wakefield Master, suggests Woolf, was

²⁶⁵ Woolf, *Mystery Plays* 147.

²⁶⁶ Woolf, *Mystery Plays* 197.

²⁶⁷ Quoted in Woolf *Mystery Plays* 198.

²⁶⁸ **flyx**: excessive discharge of fluid or substance from the body (OED 'flux' I.1.a.); **unweld**: feeble, weak, impotent (OED 'unwield' a.1); **stark**: stiff; **marke**: dim (OED 'murk' 2.); **kynd**: nature.

²⁶⁹ Woolf, *Mystery Plays* 198. For further discussion of Maximian's lyrics and their antecedents, see below.

perhaps influenced by the descriptions of old age found in traditional satire. Noah exclaims:

Ah! my bak, I traw, will brast! this is a sory note!
Hit is wonder that I last sich an old dote
All dold,
To begyn sich a wark!
My bons ar so stark,
No wonder if thay wark,
ffor I am full old.

Similarly, in the *York* cycle he says pessimistically, 'I am full olde and oute of qwarte',²⁷⁰

In the *Ludus Coventriae*, elderly decrepitude seems flatly to forbid all such endeavours:

It is not for me this werk to undyr-take
ffor ffeynnesse of Age my leggys gyn folde.²⁷¹

As Woolf points out, these are 'plausible human reaction[s]' which reflect the physical reality of growing old and becoming unable to work.²⁷² Inevitably, Noah's (and Noah's body's) initial reluctance to attempt such a feat heighten the impression made by his faith and obedience when he does begin the ark, and emphasises the mightiness of God who with his divine love can compensate for the defects of human frailty in old age.

In the *Ludus Coventriae*, interwoven with the stories of Cain and Abel and of Noah is another tragically comic old man named Lamech. Arising from a scriptural obscurity in *Genesis* 4:23-4²⁷³, Lamech's scene presents the old man boasting of his prowess in physical activities. Led onstage by an adolescent, he first laments his poor eyesight ('Blindness does make me of wit for to rave') and recalls with pride that

²⁷⁰ Woolf *Mystery Plays* 134.

²⁷¹ *Ludus Coventriae* 96.

²⁷² Woolf *Mystery Plays* 134.

²⁷³ *Ludus Coventriae* 449.

While I had sight there might never man find
My peer of archery in all this world about

Lamech, the good archer, my name was over all,
For the best archer my name did ever spread.²⁷⁴

Carried away by pride, he tells the boy to spy out some beast for him to take down. The boy obeys and, seeing what he believes to be an animal in the bush, lines up the blind man to shoot his bow. True to his boast, Lamech hits it – but finds by the cries that he has in fact shot Cain through the heart. Enraged, blaming the boy, he beats him to death with the bow then, horrified at both his deeds, flees in shame and terror of God's vengeance. Lamech thus turns swiftly from being a foolish and humorous old man to a prideful, then brutal example of the sinfulness for which God is preparing to drown the world.

While Noah presented for later dramatists a sympathetically humorous figure of a man growing old in the sight of God, the character of Joseph provided a fuller and a more varied collection of characteristics and behaviours. In each of his appearances, the humour derives primarily from his being the typical old husband with a young wife – the January-May couple.²⁷⁵ In the 'Betrothal to Joseph' of the *Ludus Coventriae*, the reluctant bridegroom protests (like Noah) that his physical condition hardly encourages him to undertake marriage: 'I am old and also cold, walkyng doth me wo'.²⁷⁶ Worse, he knows the conventional wisdom which discourages such age-disparity between spouses:

²⁷⁴ *Ludus Coventriae* 97.

²⁷⁵ See below, chapter six.

²⁷⁶ Quoted in Woolf *Mystery Plays* 163.

An old man may never thrive
With a young wife, so God me save!
Nay! nay! sir, let been!
Should I now in age begin to dote?
If I her chide she would clout my coat,
Blear my eye and pick out a mote –
And thus often times it is seen.²⁷⁷

Joseph clearly fears that his young wife will tyrannise over him, even beat him should he ever criticise her. Although he is obviously persuaded by the bishop to marry her, his earlier doubts seem at first to be justified, for on coming home from a lengthy journey he finds Mary pregnant, and naturally concludes himself to be the typical old cuckold. He chides his wife for blasphemy when she claims that only an angel came to her, and says

Alas! alas! let be! do way!
It was some boy began this game
That clothed was clean and gay,
And you give him now an aungel name.²⁷⁸

In a sorrowful monologue Joseph mourns his old age and warns the audience:

Yea! yea! all old men to me take tent,
And weddeth no wife in no kindes wise
That is a young wench, by my assent,
For doubt and dread and such service.
Alas! alas! my name is shent.
All men may me now despise.^{279 280}

English medieval dramatists drew upon a large base of secular literature on the evils of marriage, including the supposed doom of the old husband who will inevitably be

²⁷⁷ *Ludus Coventriae* 122.

²⁷⁸ *Ludus Coventriae* 136-7.

²⁷⁹ *Ludus Coventriae* 136.

²⁸⁰ **take tent**: take heed; **doubt**: fear; **service**: treatment; **shent**: ruined (*Ludus Coventriae* 136).

cuckolded by his (inevitably) wanton young wife.²⁸¹ It was, moreover, natural for an old man's complaint of infidelity to be accompanied by observations on the miseries of old age in general; in terms of character depiction, these complaints were part of the typology of the querulous old man.

Finally, in the plays depicting the Flight into Egypt, Joseph is once more grumbling and fretting about the inordinate demands of a young wife. He complains that he is too old and weak for such a journey, and in the *York* play worries that he will die before they reach their destination; in the *Towneley* play he once more advises against unequal marriages.²⁸² While Joseph thus exemplifies the type of the grumpy, hesitant and disgruntled old man, and thereby arouses laughter, when he bows to God's will he also exemplifies a type of patient suffering of life's trials, which are the lot of all people, but especially of the old and infirm.

The mystery plays thus contained characters of both serious and comic old men, all suffering from the inevitable discomforts of physical decline. To those who witnessed the performances, Abraham, Symeon, Noah, Lamech and Joseph presented stock portraits of pious old men, prideful and sinful old men, and worry-ridden, sceptical, anxious, humorous old men. In the morality plays, however, comedy receded and elderly types became uniformly solemn.

ii. The morality plays

The morality play was a rugged survivor of the Reformation, and a form which

²⁸¹ Woolf *Mystery Plays* 170.

²⁸² Woolf *Mystery Plays* 201-2.

dramatists continued to develop throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Dramas of this sort had a direct influence upon Elizabethan playwrights; as Robert Potter explains, 'the morality play appeared to the Elizabethans as [amongst other things] a set of traditional stage conventions of plot and character that could be put to many useful and contemporary theatrical purposes in the emerging popular drama'.²⁸³ Central to the morality is 'the fall out of innocence into experience' which occurs as part of a man's sequential passage through life. Along this trajectory, mutability is viewed as inherent not only to man's physical body, but to his spiritual condition as well. In some morality plays both kinds of mutability are yoked together in a progress of the individual from birth to death – hence, their particular relevance as sources for characterisations of old age. Three works which adopt this approach are *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Mundus et Infans* and *Nature*.²⁸⁴ These plays include personifications of Old Age and its attendant qualities, and once again provide evidence of what stock characters of the aged were available and passed down within the native English tradition.

The picture of old age which emerges is marred by physical weakness, avarice, despair and penitence. In both *The Castle* and *Nature*, man is actively persuaded at birth to temporise, to leave piety and repentance until he is old, and in the meantime sink into worldly affairs and delights; in *Mundus* he proceeds in this course without any

²⁸³ Potter 105.

²⁸⁴ *The Castle of Perseverance* was probably written sometime between 1405 and 1425 (Potter 44). *Mundus et Infans* was first printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1522 (STC 25982), but its latest editor suggests a date of composition 'sometime before 1520' in the later medieval period (*Mundus et Infans* xv). The authors of both are unknown. *Nature* was written by Henry Medwall, once Archbishop of Canterbury, who died in 1500; the only extant copy of the play is undated, and the *Short Title Catalogue* conjectures that it was printed by William Rastell between 1530 and 1534 (STC 17779).

external persuasion. After man passes through various sinful phases, Age comes upon him, first in the form of physical decline. In *Mundus*, Man (named Age in his late years) laments the loss of his former strength:

but now, body and soul I have forlorn.
I cling as a clod in clay.

Where is my body so proud and prest?
I cough and rout; my body will brest,
Age doth follow me so.
I stare and stacker as I stand,
I groan grisly upon the ground.^{285 286}

Man's old age in *Nature* is rather less oppressive – to him it has brought a release from his 'lustys'. One such 'lust' that is a consistent companion of age is covetousness.

Seemingly secure in the Castle of Perseverance, Humanum Genus is assaulted by the rhetoric of Avaritia. In their dialogue, Humanum Genus asks what use covetousness is to him now that he is old, thereby articulating in advance the nature of his own folly and sin when he later yields to Avaritia's arguments. 'Coueytyse,' he asks,

To what place woldyst thou me sende?
I gynne to waxyn hory and olde.
My bake gynnyth to bowe and bende,
I crulle and crepe and wax al colde.
Age makyth man ful vnthende,
Body and bonys and al vnwolde;
My bonys are febyl and sore.
I am arayed in a sloppe,
As a onge man I may not hoppe,
My nose is colde and gynnyth to droppe,
Myn her waxit al hore.^{287 288}

²⁸⁵ *Mundus et Infans* in *Three Late Morality Plays* lines 785-6, 795-9.

²⁸⁶ **forlorn**: utterly lost; **I cling as a clod in clay**: I shrivel up like a corpse in the grave; **prest**: fit, active; **rout**: belch; **grisly**: horribly (*Mundus et Infans* 148-9).

²⁸⁷ *The Castle of Perseverance* 2481-91.

²⁸⁸ **vnthende**: weak, feeble (OED 2.b.); **sloppe**: a loose outer garment (OED sb.2.a)

This catalogue of physical ills is similar to the list in *Mundus* (and to lists in the mystery plays), and it makes avarice seem ridiculous in one so physically wretched.

Nonetheless, *Humanum Genus* chooses to spend his declining years with *Avaritia*, but when death comes, Mankind is carried away to perdition. In *Nature*, although Man is freed by Age from the attendants Gluttony and Lust, *Liberalitie* has some difficulty dissuading Man from his covetous attitudes. In *Mundus*, however, Age is so bent under physical affliction that he is renamed Shame, and nearly succumbs to despair and suicide before Perseverance instructs him and re-christens him Repentance.

Penitence and forgiveness are, not unexpectedly, present at the end of all three plays. Age in *Nature* experiences a spiritual regeneration. As the play's title suggests, this comes about as a natural result of ageing; repentance is a logical outcome of the contrariety between sensuality and old age. Age's lusts and appetites have died:

Whyche now by the course and law of nature
And not of my polycy/ or good endeuoure
Is taken fro me/ for euer more
And so can I deserue/ no mede therfore[.]²⁸⁹

Once Age has learned the seven remedies for the seven deadly sins, Reason hails him as 'fully the chyld of salvacyon' – Man has experienced a return to a state of spiritual childhood, innocence and purity. While *Nature* thus presents repentance as an organic outgrowth of old age, both *The Castle* and *Mundus* depict the individual's struggle for belated piety. In the former work, it is not until after *Humanum Genus* has died that Anima, his soul, cries to *Misericordia* for mercy as he repents his sinful life, whereupon

God himself speaks with Anima and pronounces his forgiveness and boundless love even for the aged sinner who repents so late. Age in *Mundus* struggles with his own despair before he learns properly to repent. Perseverance teaches him how to use his age to overcome the ills of body and soul which always come with advancing years. As Potter remarks,

In both *Perseverance* and *Mundus et Infans* the period of old age is shown to be crucial, in the sense that it brings the physical decline of man and thus converts the question of man's spiritual health from a theoretical to an immediate one.²⁹⁰

Audiences and readers of all three plays, and others like them, necessarily had their attention drawn to the final stage of life, the last earthly port before the storm of judgement. The portraits presented were full of physical suffering, moral stumbling, despair, but also renewed hope and joyful peace if the aged person accepted the renunciation of worldly interests and sensuality, and the commencement or intensification of self-examination, spiritual development, repentance and prayer.

iii. Medieval and early Renaissance religious lyrics

Although the medieval religious lyrics did not survive in their original forms for long beyond 1500, writers continued to use their themes in different literary creations. It is therefore worth looking at a few examples of such lyrics from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, as well as some early sixteenth-century successors.

Descriptions of senescence occurred nearly always in conjunction with the theme of death. Despite the modern tendency to think that because death could come very

²⁸⁹ Henry Medwall, *Nature* H3v.

suddenly upon the young and middle-aged it was therefore not associated with the old, this is not actually true; while contemporaries recognised that 'in the midst of life we are in death', old age and death were frequently associated in literature of all kinds in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century death lyrics, the old man was often 'a herald and warning of the grave' addressing dramatic monologues of lamentation and warning to the reader.²⁹¹ A traditional list of the Signs of Old Age usually figured in such laments. While the concept of this list was ancient in origin (reaching back in Christian tradition to Jerome at least, and much further in pagan cultures), other more modern works had upheld and expanded it. The most influential of these were 1) the *De duodecem abusivis saeculi* (*On the Twelve Secular Abuses*; written by a seventh-century Irish monk but attributed throughout the medieval period to St. Cyprian or St. Augustine), in which the second abuse contained a list of Signs of Old Age, 2) the 'Elegies' of the sixth-century writer Maximianus and 3) Pope Innocent III's treatise *De contemptu mundi*, written in the late twelfth century. The last two of these works were of considerable importance for Chaucer²⁹², and Innocent's treatise was translated and published twice in England in the sixteenth century, by H. Kirton and by George Gascoigne.²⁹³ In chapter eight of the first book, Innocent discusses 'the incommodities of old age and shortnesse of lyfe':

²⁹⁰ Potter 46.

²⁹¹ Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* 102.

²⁹² For a discussion of their influence upon Chaucer and other fourteenth-century writers, see Alicia K. Nitecki, 'Figures of Old Age in Fourteenth-Century English Literature'.

²⁹³ Kirton's translation was published in London, 1576, under the title *The Mirror of Mans lyfe*, and was printed twice in 1576, then again in 1577, 1580, and 1586 (STC 14092-14095). Gascoigne's appeared in his *The droomme of doomes*

. . . his hart is afflicted, his head is troubled, his spirites languishe, his breathe stincketh, his face is wrinckled, his body is bowed, his eyes are daseled, his feelinge fayleth, and his quickenesse quayleth, his teeth become rotten, and his eares are closed up.

An olde man is soone provoked, but hardly revoked, beleaving quickly, and mistrustinge laysurely: couetous, and greedy, heauy, and needy. Swyft to speake, and slowe to heare, praying things of antiquitie, and dispysinge what is used presently, blaminge the tyme present, and allowing the tyme past, he sigheth and is vexed, he waxeth weake and is astonied To conclude, neyther let olde men glory against yonge men, nor yet let younge men waxe insolent and disdayne olde men, for they have been as we are, and we shall one daye be as they now are.²⁹⁴

Innocent makes his moral purpose clear, but the list itself could easily be detached and used by anyone needing a particularly detailed assemblage of unpleasant qualities in an aged person – see, for example, Robert Burton’s similar list in *The Anatomy of*

Melancholy, 1.2.3.10: ‘the old are full of aches in their bones, cramps and convulsions, earthbent, dull of hearing, weak-sighted, hoary, wrinkled, harsh, so much altered that they cannot know their own face in a glass, a burden to themselves and others’.²⁹⁵

Innocent’s catalogue describes both physical and mental traits, and therefore was serviceable for a variety of writers wishing to create elderly characters. Maximianus’s inventory is much longer, most of his first elegy (292 lines in a modern English verse translation) being devoted to the aged narrator’s enumeration of virtually every conceivable physical, mental, emotional and social ill of the old. The six elegies together comprise the depressed reflections and reminiscences of one old man, focussing in elegies two to five on past love affairs and sexual encounters and on the onset of

day. wherein the frailties of man life, are portrayed, printed in London in 1576 and again in 1586 (STC 11641-2).

²⁹⁴ *The droomme of doomes day* A4r.

²⁹⁵ Quoted in Luke Demaitre, ‘The Care and Extension of Old Age in Medieval Medicine’ 10, footnote 30.

impotence.²⁹⁶ For vernacular writers in the later middle ages, Maximian's Elegies conveyed a 'series of contrasts between youth and age, which drove home the fearfulness of the latter. The elegies as a whole provide the foundation for the suggestion in the [mediaeval] poems . . . that an old man is not only a mortality warning but also in himself ludicrous and contemptible'.²⁹⁷

Both Innocent's and Maximianus's works were thus subsequently used by religious lyric poets to articulate a *contemptus mundi* approach to death. The humiliations of old age, its indignities and its vices, all testified to the worthlessness of earthly existence in comparison to the afterlife, the post-lapsarian situation of man and the constant need for repentance and divine grace. In fifteenth-century lyrics on death, the old continue to deliver warnings against sin, especially against postponing repentance until old age. The young speaker in a poem by Robert Henryson, 'Ressoning betwix Aige and yowth', describes himself and his carefree pleasure, while an admonishing Age itemises his own maladies to show the infirmity into which youth will soon decay.²⁹⁸ An old man in another lyric describes his afflictions and appeals to Christ for strength – a figure of the pious elder much like Symeon in the mystery plays:

Fore blyndness is a heve [th]yng,
And to be def [th]er-with only,
To lese my ly[gh]t and my heryng;
Passio Christi conforta me.

And to lese my tast and my smellyng,
And to be seke in my body,

²⁹⁶ For a translation of Maximianus's 'Elegies' see Gabriele Zerbi's *Gerontocomia: on the care of the aged; and Maximianus, Elegies on old age and love*, trans. L.R. Lind.

²⁹⁷ Woolf *Lyrics* 104.

²⁹⁸ Woolf *Lyrics* 333.

Here haue I lost al my lykyng;
*Passio Christi conforta me.*²⁹⁹

Sixteenth-century poets continued to employ these themes, and such portraits of elderly individuals thereby survived for use in other literary forms, including the drama.³⁰⁰ New poems were also written on these themes and were widely available to dramatists, particularly through popular collections of verse and prose. The Earl of Surrey's lyric 'Laid in my quyett bedd' and several of the poems of Thomas Lord Vaux feature ageing and aged characters who talk of their present stage of life in some detail, with the emphasis always upon the regret of past follies that is roused by contemplation of their ageing selves. Vaux tells of how the 'tract of time begins to weave/ Grey hairs upon my head'; he is losing his appetite for life, no longer delights much in poetry, sees the wrinkles which announce 'limping age' and feels the 'cough, the cold, the gasping breath' of impending death.

Lo, here the bared skull,
By whose bald sign I know
That stooping age away shall pull
That youthful years did sow.

For beauty with her band
These crooked cares hath wrought,
And shipped me into the land
From whence I first was brought.³⁰¹

This poem was printed in *Tottel's Miscellany* and also entered separately on the

²⁹⁹ Woolf *Lyric* 333.

³⁰⁰ As mentioned in sections II.(i) and (ii), the laments and complaints of old men in the mystery and morality plays drew upon such lyrics and their antecedents.

³⁰¹ *The New Oxford Book of Sixteenth-Century Verse*, ed. Emrys Jones (Oxford: OUP, 1992) 129.

Stationers' Register as a ballad³⁰², becoming popular enough to be sung in a somewhat mangled version by the gravedigger in *Hamlet*.³⁰³ Similar poems also were printed in *The Paradise of Dainty Devices* (first published 1570).³⁰⁴

The character of the afflicted and lamenting old man thus entered into sixteenth-century literature by this lyric channel as well. Evidently there were multiple descriptive textual sources available in the native literary tradition for dramatists wishing to characterise the elderly. Add to these the figures of old men and women of broadside ballads – who, although not particularly conspicuous in the genre, formed a perceptible and distinctive presence³⁰⁵ – and the richness of Roman and Italian comedies, and playwrights had ample literary materials with which to augment, enhance, or exaggerate personal experiences and observations. One further source may be considered briefly, one which made explicit an author's intention to construct elderly 'characters'.

iv. The Theophrastan character sketch

Not many character sketches of old men or women appear in character books published prior to 1626. However, what few there are merit looking at as potential sources of ideas for playwrights of the time, and also as further indicators of what common notions of the elderly were in popular circulation.

In 1592 and 1599, Isaac Casaubon published his edition and Latin translation of

³⁰² Rollins 2:285.

³⁰³ See the end of chapter one, above.

³⁰⁴ *The Paradise* has a fairly complicated printing history which need not be described here – see, however, the edition by Hyder E. Rollins: *The Paradise of Dainty Devices (1570-1606)*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1927).

³⁰⁵ See Alice Tobriner, 'Old Age in Tudor-Stuart Broadside Ballads'.

Theophrastus's *Characters*, thereby making available to those not educated in Greek a work well-known to the classical rhetoricians whose treatises they studied and emulated with such assiduity. It took until 1608 for the first set of English 'characters' to appear, penned by Joseph Hall and entitled *Characters of Vertues and Vices*. After this 'English baptism' the genre enjoyed enormous popularity throughout the seventeenth century. Six other such works were published in the interval between 1608 and 1625, while some other writers included one, or sometimes two or three 'characters' in the course of another piece of writing.³⁰⁶ J.W. Smeed, in his history of the Theophrastan character sketch, writes:

The 'character' obviously involves a typological approach to human personality: the subject, although presented to us as an individual person, must also stand for a social, moral, or psychological category. Thus 'characters' are not concerned with complex, many-sided personalities, they are always selective and exaggerated to a greater or lesser degree.³⁰⁷

This quality of typicality was not uncongenial to dramatists or other writers, but rather was an accepted and (up to a point) expected method of character creation and delineation. Clear advantages accrued to a writer using 'characters', including the rapidity with which such stock figures could be received and understood by his audience, as well as the greater ease with which a playwright could invent his dramatic personae, even if he then decided to complicate, modify, or slyly subvert the type itself.³⁰⁸

These sketches were usually written with wit in the forefront of other motives,

³⁰⁶ A chronological list of 'characters' published in England in the seventeenth century is given in Smeed 342-9.

³⁰⁷ Smeed 2.

³⁰⁸ Smeed suggests that the revival of the Theophrastan character 'in the early years of the seventeenth century was

even moral motives. This fact goes a long way towards explaining the predominance of nasty, even vicious, 'characters' of elderly people, both men and women. The qualities of a virtuous person are fairly fixed in number and nature, but the follies of humanity are legion, and hence have greater entertainment potential.

Even before the English character books appeared, Henry Peacham in *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593) had briefly set forth the character of an old man, as an example of rhetorical character description. Although Peacham's text is a raw description, not a 'character' in the Theophrastan vein, it contains the basic elements of most later 'characters' of old men:

[he may be described] in this manner, with crooked limmes; and trembling jointes, his head white, his eies hollow, his sight dimme, his hearing thicke, his handes shaking, his legges bowing, his colour pale, his skin wrinkled, weake of memory, childish, yet covetous, suspicious, testy, greedy of newes, credulous, misliking of the present world, and praising the former times.³⁰⁹

The best example of sharp, succinct elaboration upon such basic materials is 'An Old Man' in the Overburian character book. 'Old men,' proclaims the writer, 'are to bee known blindfolded':

for their talke is as terrible as their resemblance. They praise their owne times as vehemently, as if they would sell them. . . . They call the thombe under the girdle gravitie They count it an ornament of speech, to close the period with a cough; and it is venerable, they say, to spend time in wypping their driveled beards. Their discourse is unanswerable, by reason of their obstinacie: and their speech is much, though little to the purpose. Truthes and lyes passe with an equall affirmation They teach their servants their duties with as much scorne & tyrannie, as some people teach their dogs to fetch. . . . They take pride in halting and going stiffely,

one more manifestation of a perennial fascination with human types and the unceasing quest to find appropriate forms in which to portray these' (20).

³⁰⁹ *The Garden of Eloquence* 135, quoted in Smeed 8.

and therefore their staves are carved and tipped.³¹⁰

The sketch has a dramatic quality, combining physical action, visual, auditory and olfactory perceptions, indications of temperament, motivation, mental confusion – even underlying insecurities about physical appearance and smell and an egotism which tries to compensate for all shortcomings. The Overbury old man seems almost to have stepped off a stage and onto paper.

None of the other ‘old man’ characters prior to 1626 are as succinctly pungent as this, but their content generally boils down to the same traits. Nicholas Breton’s is a catalogue of abstract qualities, all quite annihilating save for a token gesture that old dotards ‘may’ have some experience and powers of reason left which deserve a certain respect. But Breton offers more to a performer of sermons than of plays.³¹¹ One of the only characters of ‘An old Woman’ which I was able to locate is similar to Overbury’s old man in some respects, but also presents unique glimpses of a figure rather difficult to find at all in literature of the period. She is, like her male counterpart, a great one for reminiscing to an audience. She also professes expertise in the art of ‘physic’, having an obsession with all things pestilent and obstetric. ‘[T]he common foe to all Physitions’, she applies her cures confidently, relying in times of doubt upon ‘her secrets of supersition’ and ‘Dragon-water, Holy-thistles, wormewood drinks, and Clisters’, together with an almanac to warn her of weather incommodious to her achy hips. Concern for her physical appearance makes her heavy-handed with cosmetics, and

³¹⁰ *The Overburian Characters: to which is added, A wife by Sir Thomas Overbury* 14.

³¹¹ Nicholas Breton, *The Good and The Badde, or Descriptions of the Worthies, and Vnworthies of this Age* (1616) 14, in *The Works in Verse and Prose of Nicholas Breton* 232-4.

‘[e]nvy is to her an inseparable twinne’, (especially, almost certainly, envy of pretty young girls).³¹²

The dark side of an old woman was occasionally described under the character of ‘A Witch’, as Stephens does – ‘for age is most incident to this corruption’.³¹³ One also finds in the Overburian collection the ‘character’ of ‘A Vertuous Widdow’, which provides a distinct contrast from the many not-so-virtuous widows in Jacobean dramas. Because of her chaste dedication to the memory of her husband and the pious works with which she fills her time,

God calles her not to heaven, till she bee very aged: and even then, though her naturall strength faile her, shee stands like an ancient *Piramid*; which the lesse it growes to mans eye, the nearer it reaches to heaven: this latter Chastity of Hers, is more grave and reverend, then that ere shee was married; for in it is neither hope, nor longing, nor fear, nor jealousy. Shee ought to bee a mirrour for our yongest Dames, to dresse themselves by, when shee is fullest of wrinkles.³¹⁴

Save for her declared intention to remarry, Jonson’s Dame Purecraft in *Bartholomew Fair* knew well how to pose as a pattern of virtuous widowhood. Livia in *Women Beware Women*, on the other hand, is the diametric opposite of such an ideal.

Whether, and if so to what degree, Jacobean dramatists drew upon character books is a matter to consider on the basis of individual authors.³¹⁵ Although the sketches offer some clever images and witty turns of phrase when describing elderly people, they do not contain anything substantially different from what could be found in the many other sources already considered. Indeed, given the vividness of some of their

³¹² John Stephens *Essayes and Characters, Ironically, and Instructive* (1615), in Haliwell, 232-4.

³¹³ Stephens 236.

³¹⁴ *The Overburian Characters* 70.

portraits (such as Overbury's 'Old Man') 'influence' could conceivably have flowed in the opposite direction, from plays to print. Nonetheless, a sketch like this could provide ideas for character design and creation, or for descriptions spoken in a play. Smeed asserts that,

once the 'character' had established itself in England, it provided the dramatists with a much-needed model for a more unified and sustained description of personality, in which the link between the individual and the generic, always important in character-comedy, could be made clear.³¹⁶

This may be putting a rather late date on the rise of 'unified and sustained' personalities in English dramas; character sketches are, in my opinion, better viewed as contributing, rather than giving rise, to these qualities. Historical conjectures aside, the neo-Theophrastan 'characters' of old men and women did reproduce many of the stock characteristics available from other classical, foreign and native literary sources, further demonstrating the circulation of these ideas in the period c.1580–1625.

³¹⁵ Smeed tries to address the question more generally, 199–211.

³¹⁶ Smeed 202.

CHAPTER 4: ELDERLY SOVEREIGNS

[Lear:] *Ay, every inch a king!*
When I do stare, see how the subject quakes.

[Gloucester:] O ruin'd piece of nature! This great world
Shall so wear out to nought.

(*King Lear* 4.6.107-8, 134-35)

The foregoing chapters suggest a scenario in which the old were accorded neither wholesale contempt nor unqualified respect and authority. This raises interesting questions about the dramatic portrayal of old people in positions of governance. Given the crucial role of a monarch at the head of his or her realm, the need for strength in mind and body and at the same time the obvious advantages to be derived from experience, the question arises: would the aged ruler be regarded as wise and protective – the patriarch (or matriarch) of the nation – or as a doddering, incapacitated and senile burden dragging the kingdom into a moribund state of stagnation and strife while the younger nobility languished or plotted rebellion? Dramatic representations of old rulers suggest that, in keeping with the mixed attitudes towards the elderly generally, perspectives on aged leadership were also varied. However, a broad sweep of extant plays makes it clear that the balance of dramatic portrayals did not favour the old as rulers. Advantages of experience, wisdom and stability notwithstanding, elderly leaders in play-texts were with few exceptions shown as being at best benign and at worst fatally weak in body, mind and morality.

The plays to be discussed in this chapter reflect that tendency. First to be explored are those depicting weakness in mind and body, followed by those dealing with moral weaknesses. In both types of situation a key feature in the dramas is the extent to which the physical and/or spiritual condition of the ruler correspondingly influences (or symbolically embodies) the condition of his or her realm. States with rulers who are enfeebled or corrupted by age are in grave danger of sinking into decay or spinning into chaos; this has some interesting implications for dramas written during the later years of Elizabeth's reign and after her death. In the third section are briefly examined a few instances in which elderly leaders are accorded a more positive treatment by playwrights. Finally, although very few elderly female rulers were depicted in this period, I will assess those few in the fourth and last section and discuss some of the possible reasons for the paucity of representations, as well as for the nature of those representations which have survived.

I. 'Our frosty cares': when mind and body begin to fail

In a very real sense, the health of a ruler was a critical determinant of the well-being of his or her realm. This made ageing a potential issue of concern, given that advancing years most often brought with them physical maladies and, not infrequently, varying degrees of mental deterioration. Any such weakening in the state's leadership threatened the possibility of political instability. A few plays of this period take up this theme, depicting the physical decline of an old king in conjunction with a loss of vitality

or order, or both, in the land over which he rules.

An early model for this idea was Thomas Sackville's and Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc or Ferrex and Porrex* (1561). The playwrights did not go to great lengths to emphasise Gorboduc's age; he is not extraordinarily enfeebled but rather, as he says, desirous of 'greater ease' in his last years (1.1.57). Nonetheless this wish, while understandable, is shown to be inappropriate, a mistake in judgement resulting from an old man's inevitable weariness. Gorboduc allows himself to shrug off the burdensome role before he ought rightly to do so, abandoning his divinely appointed post and, equally reprehensible, divides the kingdom³¹⁷. Wishing no longer to be king, but simply a man '[f]ree from the travail and the painful cares/ That hasten age upon the worthiest kings' (1.1.349-50), he plunges the state into disorder and murder, 'death and destruction'.³¹⁸ The result for him personally is of course the opposite of his original intention. Instead of peace and rest he has only 'grief/ And deepest sorrows to abridge our life,/ Most pining cares and deadly thoughts' (4.2.146-8). Worst of all, his original misjudgement leads ultimately to a violent death at the hands of his own people and to 'the woeful wreck/ And utter ruin of this noble realm' (5.2.181-2).

King Gorboduc's age is not heavily emphasised as the cause of ruin. Yet it definitely is the *sine qua non* of the play's action and therefore strongly suggests that such lapses in judgement are to be feared and watched for when a ruler advances in years. While an obvious later and much more sophisticated, dramatic exploration of this dilemma (and others) is Shakespeare's *King Lear*, I shall postpone discussion of that

play. Middleton, however, presents another instance of this theme in *The Phoenix* (1603-4), where he uses the old Duke's decline as a platform upon which to display the literal and figurative coming of age of the duke's young heir, Phoenix. For this reason, it seems, the old Duke himself is not developed as a character, but this fact is significant in its own right because playwrights did not usually make old rulers and leaders themselves the foci of dramatic development. Rather, the aged usually serve as pretexts for, or background to, the activities of younger characters.

So it is in *The Phoenix*³¹⁹, when the old Duke decides after forty-five years of rule that his life is nearing its close and his son and heir ought to take a trip abroad to prepare himself for kingship. The Duke is encouraged in this plan by a handful of self-serving noblemen who hope thereby to do away with the young prince and gain power. Once again, an elderly ruler exercises weak judgement, resulting in the destabilisation of the state. As soon as the disguised Phoenix embarks upon his secret inspection of the dukedom he begins to discover numerous tokens of the general decay into which the land and its people have fallen. Moral degeneracy is rife, from corrupt law courts and dishonest justices of the peace to adultery, incest, marital neglect and attempted murder. The unvoiced but inescapable implication is that all of this depravity has crept into the dukedom under the time-wearied gaze of the old Duke, who is no longer truly fit to govern. As Phoenix articulates, '[M]y father is near his setting and I upon the eastern hill to take my rise' (1.1.99-100) and not a moment too soon. Through his

³¹⁷ See Axton 31.

³¹⁸ *Gorboduc*, Dumb Show before Act 2, line 23.

³¹⁹ Thomas Middleton, *The Phoenix*, in *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. A.H. Bullen, vol. 1.

inquiries and adventures, he casts light upon the abuses that threaten to undermine his father's realm. The only cure for the dukedom is to have its aged leader replaced by a new one and it is with some relief that the Duke finally declares: 'To thee [Phoenix], then, power and dukedom we resign The rest of life we dedicate to heaven' (5.1.180-5).

Cymbeline (1609) is another candidate for inclusion in this discussion of decay, but with qualifications. King Cymbeline is certainly old, although his age is not heavily emphasised. Yet it does make his domination by the Queen (his second wife) more plausible because their relationship thereby fits easily into the familiar stereotype of the old man whose doting conjugal affection blinds him to the manipulation of an unscrupulous wife.³²⁰ Although a supreme sovereign, he relies heavily upon his wife and step-son to make decisions (see e.g., 3.1) and when both are absent in 4.3 he becomes distraught and panicked: 'Now for the counsel of my son and queen!/ I am amazed with matter' (4.3.27-8). Part of Cymbeline's weakness as a ruler is inherent rather than age-induced; he has evidently always been rather rash and prone to unsound judgement (as his banishment of Belarius indicates) and age has simply exacerbated the trait. Shakespeare arguably intended a comparison to be drawn between Cymbeline and Belarius as old men, which certainly would lessen the former as both a king and an individual. However once the Queen and Cloten are dead he undergoes a rapid conversion and acquisition of insight, becoming an acceptable monarch after having passed through the cleansing agonies of humiliation, loss and

grateful thankfulness. Overall, Shakespeare's representation of age in *Cymbeline* is an indeterminate piece of evidence in the question of elderly leadership, offering a model that is neither very bad, nor particularly commendable.

Thus, although one perspective on old age emphasises the wisdom and sound judgement of those who have lived many years, another observes that mental clarity may be compromised, leading at times to significant errors in judgement. In leaders, such errors may have dire consequences for those in their charge. *Cupid's Revenge*, which will be discussed later in this chapter, again uses an aged king's mental failings to initiate its action but then also goes on to make the monarch a major focus of the play, as Middleton in *The Phoenix* did not. Shakespeare's perspective on this issue cannot be reduced to a simple statement, however it is pertinent to note the reasons which Titus Andronicus gives for refusing the imperial title – that he is too old and that his death would simply lead to renewed instability in the realm. The potential for national insecurity which could result from the presence of an aged ruler is repeatedly broached in Shakespeare's plays.

Aged weakness could, of course, also take the form of actual physical illness and some playwrights drew a correspondence between the decline of a ruler's health and the decline of his kingdom. Shakespeare provides two notable examples of this perspective in *All's Well That Ends Well* (1602-3) and *King Henry IV, Part 2* (1598)³²¹. In *All's Well*, he did not make the king's illness as all-pervasive as in *Henry IV.2*, making it

³²⁰ Another instance of this occurs in *Cupid's Revenge*, by Fletcher (discussed below).

³²¹ Dates for Shakespeare's plays, unless otherwise indicated, are for first performance as given in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition.

desirable to discuss the comedy as two halves – the action prior to the king's cure and that which follows his recovery.³²²

Pertinent to the present discussion is the extent to which in the first half of the play, Shakespeare makes France and the French court a virtual extension of the ailing elderly monarch. The opening scene in which Bertram, the Countess, Helen and Lafew enter entirely in black mourning dress indicates the atmosphere of gloom and morbidity in which all are plunged, both by their private misfortunes and by the overarching fact of the king's imminent demise. Lafew's words of comfort to the Countess ('You shall find of the King a husband, madam' [1.1.6]) have no real substance since the king has 'abandoned his physicians', holds no hope of recovery and merely awaits death (1.1.13). In keeping with their monarch's illness, the gentry are described by one lord as 'sick/ For breathing and exploit' (1.2.16-17), as if the land is like a sickroom the stale and stifling air of which threatens to undermine their youthful health. Despite his continuing efforts to conduct business and engage in conversation, the depressed king is to his realm like the fistula, which is sapping his own vital strength. Nonetheless, Sheldon P. Zitner makes the excellent point that the kingdom is not yet mortally infected. When the king lapses into a sick old man's dark criticisms of the younger generation his words should not be accepted uncritically. '[D]espite Bertram, despite Parolles, this lament [1.2.33-48, 52-66] over social entropy is a characterisation of the King, not of his kingdom'.³²³ Certainly France and its court are overshadowed by his infirmity and his age, but Shakespeare creates this morbid atmosphere the better to

³²² The second half will be dealt with below in section III.

contrast it with the ensuing transformation which Helen's love and ambition effect.

In the first half of *All's Well*, then, Shakespeare does encourage the association of elderly rule with stagnation and decay in a realm. Once again, the prospect of having an old person holding the reins of power seems grim – but as shall be indicated in section III, Shakespeare qualifies such a conclusion with his characterisation of the King.

Henry IV.2 is, however, another matter, offering a much more clear-cut illustration of the undesirability of having an old man as head of state. This is not to say that Shakespeare makes King Henry's old age the *cause* of the rebellion and other troubles; rather, there is a direct correspondence between the king's aged and diseased condition and the deteriorating condition of the realm. This point is confirmed by the alterations, which Shakespeare made to Holinshed, one of his main sources. According to the *Chronicles* Henry IV was a healthy leader for a full ten years after the Battle of Shrewsbury, whereas Shakespeare has him not only begin to ail immediately after Shrewsbury, but even makes him already weakened at the time of the battle (see *Henry IV.1* 5.4, when he is nearly slain in the fray). A.R. Humphreys notes in his edition of the play that 'melancholy and wasting disease colour the whole period of the action' and the two themes of age and disease permeate the work, giving 'a symbolic rendering of the state of England'.³²⁴ Through such alterations and details, the king's old age with its attendant afflictions, gloom and weakness is made to seem like an abscess from which infection has spread throughout the body of the kingdom (a metaphor which Shakespeare employed later in *All's Well*, as we have seen). Further, this parallelism is

³²³ Zitner 144.

intensified by the substantial number of old people populating the play – the ailing and weak-willed Northumberland and his wife, the dignified but misguided Archbishop of York, Falstaff, Justices Shallow and Silence, Mistress Quickly and the Lord Chief Justice – making even the king's old age seem to be 'infectious'. The presence of the Lord Chief Justice, however, gives advance notice of the new, or at least revived, world which is promised at the play's closing. Although an old man, he does not share in the illness, confusion, corruption and decay of the other elderly individuals. He is staunch, brave, ethical and strong-minded, managing thereby to survive the depressed period of Henry IV's rule and engage his strength in the service of his new young master. The Lord Chief Justice is the king's public representative (see his speech in 5.2.73-101) and his rise after Henry IV's death can be viewed symbolically as the survival of what was healthy in the old king, that which could remain uncorrupted by time and therefore by old age: *the principle of kingship*. By transferring his loyalty and service to the new young monarch, the Lord Chief Justice affirms the continuity between on the one hand an old ruler and a declining state and on the other a healthy young heir who will remove from his moribund and depressed land the twin diseases of civil discord and disorder.

II. 'My hairs are white and yet my sins are green': the reign of lust

In addition to mental and physical deterioration, another stereotyped characteristic used in plays to denigrate elderly rulers was lasciviousness. Conventional social standards did not condone sexual appetite in the old and while reality may not

have conformed to these dictates, the depiction of elderly men and women as having not only sexual desires but (even worse) inordinate ones, was a technique frequently used to deny them respect, status and authority.

Aged monarchs on stage who could not control their sexuality, like mentally or physically degenerate rulers, were depicted as having a corrupting influence upon the whole kingdom and hence could also encourage and reinforce views against the advisability of elderly leadership generally. In some plays there is a correspondence rather than an explicit causal connection between the monarch's proclivities and a widespread immorality in the realm; in these cases the individual is generally incidental rather than central to the main plotline. Examples of this are the Earl in Dekker and Webster's *Westward Ho!* (1604) and the Duke in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (1620-27).³²⁵

In Dekker's and Webster's play, the Earl's iniquity seems to be merely one facet of a sexually lax society. While he is trying to seduce a citizen's wife through the medium of an old bawd, his young nephew similarly passes his time corrupting married women, three other citizens' wives are apparently planning to commit adultery as well, and their elderly husbands are all regular customers of the same prostitute. The licentious Earl is an utter fop who pleads his suit in style and terms appropriate to an infatuated lover of twenty. His age is pointed out with distaste and reproach by the object of his ardour ('I wonder,' she says, 'lust can hang at such white haire'; '[were I]

³²⁵ Dates of writing and of first performance are still conjectural; see Hunter, *English Drama* 572.

turn'd common Venturer,/ I could not love this old man'³²⁶). In addition, belittling and mocking remarks about old men and aged impotence run throughout the play, creating an undercurrent of censure. The Earl recognises his own wickedness – 'Whats bad I follow, yet I see whats good' – but feels powerless to check the tide of his lust.³²⁷ In a dramatic scene of disguise, reproach and repentance, the citizen-husband deceives and then exposes the Earl in the presence of the wife and the three other citizens. This not only induces a complete conversion in the old lecher, but also results in his figurative demotion to the level of his subjects. Stripped of the special status which both his age and his privileged position afford him, his hypocrisy unmasked, he is reduced to an empty cipher of authority, mouthing repentant platitudes as he exits. Hence, while it is perfectly acceptable in *Westward Ho!* for the three old citizens to have their whoring exposed and go unpunished, the same weakness is unpardonable in their ruler, who should set a better example. The entire fifth act is played without the Earl, emphasising the extent to which this weak-willed old man has been judged as superfluous to the lives of his people. Such tacit dismissal can be viewed as another means of ejecting the old from positions of leadership.

Westward Ho! nonetheless remains very much light-hearted in tone and spirit. The same is hardly true of *Women Beware Women*, in which the moderately old Duke (aged fifty-five) forces sexual corruption upon a pure-hearted young wife. Once again, the ruler's own corruption is not the *source* of 'infection', but rather one manifestation of an already well-established disease which afflicts the area and people under his

³²⁶ 2.2.83, 160-61.

jurisdiction. Yet his age becomes implicated by its association with sexual depravity and perversion. This connection is reinforced thematically by the more general manifestation of iniquity in other older figures surrounding both the young wife and another young girl who is misled into sexual misdemeanours. Bianca (the wife) is betrayed by the older woman (Livia) and inadvertently by her aged mother-in-law as well; Isabella (the other young girl) is the victim of her aunt Livia and her uncle. Youthful innocence finds only danger and ruination in its elders, including the prince, who should rightly be a haven for his threatened subjects. The criticism of older rulers is quite muted in *Women Beware Women* and certainly not a thematic focus; nonetheless it leaves an audience with the impression that leadership may not be safe in the hands of 'wicked elders'.³²⁸

The wish to push some moral questions aside and simply entertain, which is particularly evident in *Westward Ho!*, keeps the lesson of the Earl localised so as not to overshadow the frivolities of the main action. Such is also the case in another play, *The Humorous Lieutenant* by Fletcher (1619). This work downplays the corrupting influence of its ruler to such a degree that one is hard pressed to judge whether any of the clues which arise along the way should be interpreted as deliberate moral commentary.

The old king Antigonus has been a highly successful conqueror in his day and rules over a contented and prosperous realm. His one failing seems to be his sexual appetite, for the satisfaction of which he employs a professional bawd who literally runs a business, with employees and networks throughout the kingdom, to supply the court

³²⁷ 4.2.52.

with women. Not all are expressly for the king himself; hence it is evident that Antigonus's own moral weakness has infected his court and then spread to the population at large. While no one publicly discusses the matter with him, the king's habits are well-known and pass without censure. One scene (2.3), in which a poor old country woman sells her daughter for ten crowns and a wheel of cheese, may hint at deeper social criticism, but this thread is not pursued. The main source of reproach is the king's latest target, his own son's beloved. Through her determined resistance he is confronted with his own degeneracy and also forced to acknowledge his age (in a passage imitative of *Hamlet* 2.2):

I am reading sir [she tells him] of a short Treatise here,
Thats call'd the vanitie of lust: has your Grace seene it?
He sayes here, that an old mans loose desire
Is like the glow-wormes light, the Apes so wonder'd at:
Which when they gather'd sticks and laid upon't,
And blew and blew, turn'd taile and went out presently:
And in another place, he cal's their loves,
Faint smels of dying flowers, carry no comforts;
Their doatings stinking foggs, so thick and muddy,
Reason with al his beames cannot beat through 'em.³²⁹

Convinced by her arguments and her chastity, Antigonus nonetheless must also be further humbled by means of the play's subplot. Using the lieutenant of the play's title, Fletcher less explicitly (but more thoroughly) aims at and exposes the king's unseasonable lust. Prior to his 'conversion', Antigonus sends a goblet of enchanted wine to induce a passion in the incorruptible girl. But the drink is intercepted unwittingly by the thirsty lieutenant, who promptly becomes thoroughly besotted with

³²⁸ For further discussion of the theme of 'wicked elders', see below, chapter five, section II.

³²⁹ 4.5.28-37.

the king. The soldier's strange and intemperate desire, witnessed by the entire court, is a mortifying parody of the old king. As the recovered lieutenant later describes, 'I wish'd and wish'd . . . Ev'n, that I had been a wench of fifteene for ye,/ A handsome wench sir'³³⁰; this is roughly the age of the young girl whom Antigonus has been trying to seduce.

The king is, in the end, able to laugh off his humiliation and sincerely rejoice in his son's impending marriage. However, the question of his sexual habits remains open. He maintains to the very end the fiction that he was merely testing the girl's virtue and worthiness for his son (a tale which everyone knows to be false) and he makes no renunciation, not even privately, of his libertinism. The play thus leaves the king and his realm much as it was, but with the implication that Antigonus with his unquenchable sexual appetite will fortunately be followed by two young people with sounder morals.

If Fletcher's play keeps the king's negative influence at the level of suggestion, *Cupid's Revenge* (Beaumont and Fletcher, c.1607-12) and *The Revenger's Tragedy* (Tourneur? Middleton? 1606-7) offer two weighty condemnations of elderly rule using the device of aged lust. The approaches of these plays are diametrically opposite. *Cupid's Revenge* is a romantic tale (in the sense of the 'chivalric romance') in which the god Cupid is a real being who wreaks his vengeance, whereas *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a highly literal and stark presentation of thoroughly plausible crimes and vengeance in a sleazy world of stygian depravity and villainy. *Cupid's Revenge* is not complete in its

³³⁰ 5.2.20-22.

demolition of the aged ruler, but it falls short only in showing pity upon the individual king involved, not upon elderly kingship as a whole. Tourneur's play, on the other hand, leaves its audience gasping in horrified revulsion at both the figurative and the literal decay of the decrepit duke's realm, radiating from his tainted body and infecting seemingly the entire world of the play.

Leontius in *Cupid's Revenge* is initially flawed not by sexual incontinence but (like the rulers in section one above) by a weakening mind and sense of judgement. Chiefly, he dotes excessively upon his daughter and it is this aspect of his senility which initiates a chain reaction of misfortunes, the keystone being his passion for the evil Bacha.³³¹

Three courtiers appear throughout the play, providing commentary upon events and people. According to their conversation, the king's³³² fondness is 'an unfit thing'; he is so weak-willed that 'he can deny her nothing'.³³³ When with deplorably poor judgement he rashly grants his daughter's wish that the cult of Cupid be abolished, he incurs the god's unmitigated wrath. Being the ruler and therefore most responsible for the welfare of his realm, *and* an old man whose lifetime of experience should have induced more good sense and wisdom in him, Leontius must suffer most for his injudicious conduct.

Cupid's curse makes this explicit:

but it is all the fault
Of [the] ould Father, who believes his Age
Is colde enough to quench my burning Darts,
But hee shall know ere long, that my smart loose,
Can thawe Ice and inflame the witherd hart
Of *Nestor* . . .

³³¹ The symbolism of her name is obvious.

³³² Leontius is inconsistently referred to as both King and Duke throughout the play.

³³³ 1.1.10, 24-5.

. . . his madde love, shall publish that the rage
Of *Cupid*, has the power to conquer Age.³³⁴

Leontius becomes a grotesque figure of impotent passion and self-absorption, as he transfers his original immoderate adoration of his daughter to Bacha, whom he makes his wife.

The impact of this event upon his kingdom is enormous. Again, the three courtiers' exchanges provide important information and criticism of the king:

Dorialus. Wee live to knowe a fine time, Gentlemen.

Nisus. And a fine Duke, that through his doting age suffers him selfe to be a childe againe under his Wives tuition.

Agenor. All the Land holds in that tenor too: in womans service! sure we shall learne to spinne.³³⁵

The crowning blow against the old ruler comes when Bacha, to make her own daughter heir, plants the suspicion in Leontius's mind that his son plans to overthrow him. His doddering credulity plunges the land into political chaos. Patently unfit to rule, he becomes merely a tool of his wife. His health in rapid decline, he degenerates into an irrational, angry baby: 'the good old Duke she gives him pappe againe they say and dandles him and hangs a corral and bells about his necke and makes him beleeve his teeth will come agen'.³³⁶ By the end, Leontius has actually become a pitiable figure and the burden of blame and evil is shifted onto Bacha, who has achieved an almost fiendish status. Pity aside, Fletcher's play still delivers a sound stroke against elderly monarchy. Although he based the story upon a supernatural pretext, this is easily viewed as a

³³⁴ 2.1.7-13.

³³⁵ 3.3.1-6.

metaphorical device whereby it can be strongly inferred that in very real terms there are many possible problems to be feared from a ruler in his declining years. In this light, it is very interesting to note that the play 'seems . . . to have been one of the most prized properties of the Queen's Revels company' and was performed at court in 1612, 1613 (twice), 1624 and 1637.³³⁷

Fletcher sometimes uses Leontius's lust for comic effect in the earlier half of *Cupid's Revenge*. Such humour is entirely absent from the sinister *Revenger's Tragedy*. Along with *The Tragedy of Thierry and Theodoret*, which will be discussed in section four, *The Revenger's Tragedy* presents the most damning indictment of elderly leadership of any play in the period. Sexual incontinence makes its Duke not only unfit for rule but also positively demonic, and his age is a critical factor.

Decay is a key theme in the work – of corpses, of living men as they grow old, of morals, of family bonds, of social order. Although the 'royal lecher'³³⁸ has little stage time or dialogue in comparison with the 'hero' Vindice, he forms the putrefied core of a kingdom poisoned by his wickedness beyond hope of cure. The entire play, virtually every action and detail, offer multiple proofs of the devastation which he has wreaked upon his realm through his sexual incontinence. The court is a place where a married noblewoman can be gang-raped at a palace festival, where the judges of the rapist are mere ingratiating sycophants, where bastards conceived in the drunken heat of

³³⁶ 4.3.49-52.

³³⁷ Hunter, *English Drama* 499. See John H. Astington's 'The Popularity of *Cupid's Revenge*'.

³³⁸ 1.1.1.

debauched revelries, 'begot in impudent wine and lust'³³⁹, seem commonplace, where a mother can be bribed to persuade her daughter to become the duke's son's whore. As in *The Humorous Lieutenant*, disparaging references to sexually-obsessed old men and women are scattered amidst imagery and descriptions of corruption. The Duke himself recognises his own foulness but acknowledges it with frank acceptance, like a fact of nature:

It well becomes that judge to nod at crimes
That does commit greater himself and lives.
I may forgive a disobedient error
That expect pardon for adultery,
And in my old days am a youth in lust.
Many a beauty have I turned to poison
In the denial, covetous of all;
Age hot, is like a monster to be seen:
My hairs are white and yet my sins are green.³⁴⁰

Not even his fears of damnation (2.3.9-13) can stop him.

'Age has no fault,' croons the Duke through decaying gums, as he embraces the unsuspected means of his death³⁴¹. The statement is ludicrous in the light of his world and person; worst of all, there appears to be no hope of purification. No virtuous younger generation succeeds him. His sons are as evil as he and the play closes with the elderly husband of the raped noblewoman taking command. Any hope of his potential for good, to be if not a source of renewal then at least one of wisdom and stability, is mocked by his summary condemnation of the self-confessed revengers: 'Away with

³³⁹ 1.2.192.

³⁴⁰ 2.3.124-32.

³⁴¹ 3.5.141.

‘em! Such an old man as he!/ You that would murder him would murder me!’.³⁴² He is merely a shaken old man whose tremulous couplet gives him a puppet-like quality and makes him appear far less inspiring than the wryly defiant Vindice. His words provide a final, anticlimactic deathblow to any naïve belief in the virtues of elderly leadership.

III. Rare virtue

Very few positive portraits of elderly rulers exist to contrast with these numerous examples of weak, ineffective, corrupt or otherwise harmful ones. The overwhelmingly predominant viewpoint expressed in the theatres did not cast a favourable eye on the elderly in power. Two of the three stronger characters which will now be briefly discussed support this contention despite their other positive qualities, for their leadership is either too peripheral to the action to be significant (as in *The Honest Whore*, part 2), or too blended with fantasy for it to bear upon actual life (*The Double Marriage*).

The Duke of Milan in Dekker’s *The Honest Whore*, part 2 (1604-5), though not a major personage, is a competent and sound leader and the nominal centre of authority and stability. His elderly figure presides over the younger courtiers and other characters with calm dignity and he assists Orlando Friscobaldo, the primary elderly character in the play. Further, he aims at the play’s end to bring more order to the city and root out corruption, specifically prostitution. Dekker, it seems, intended to write a very morally instructive work and so it is not surprising that as part of this intention he bolsters the authority of the older generation. The most important person in the play,

³⁴² 5.3.106-7.

alongside the 'honest whore' herself, is her aged father (Orlando) who is also a long-time friend of the Duke. Because he receives such a positive representation in the play the image of the elderly in general is positive.³⁴³ Nonetheless, because the Duke remains a minor character he does not emerge as a noteworthy testimony to the virtues of elderly leadership. Weighed against the many negative portraits which have so far been examined, he is virtually insignificant.

A more developed and interesting example is the Duke of Sesse in Fletcher and Massinger's *The Double Marriage* (c.1621), the leader of a band of pirates and a rather remarkable leader at that. Forced unjustly into exile from the Neapolitan court many years previously (when he might have been made king), he and his daughter and their followers make their living on the high seas and wreak vengeance upon any ship of Naples that they capture. Most striking about Sesse is his almost preternatural vigour and strength. He is still an impressive and terrifying warrior, an inspiring leader and filled with the fiery conviction of the wrongs he suffered at the hands of his king. Unfortunately, it is the very extremity of his character which detracts from it as a credible testimony to competent elderly leadership. Sesse simply does not seem real; he inhabits a play world in which the melodrama of the romance genre pushes characters, situations and dialogue beyond the realm of the human. Ironically, the only qualities which make him less remote and fantastic are his flaws and these are very much those of an insecure old man. Despite his extraordinary vitality, Sesse is beginning to feel his age and sense his mortality, and he fights furiously against this. Wounded in battle, he

³⁴³The old bawd is a minor exception.

is enraged by the surgeon's advice and absurdly insists on denying fact: 'Thou liest, I am not old'.³⁴⁴ When back in Naples and plotting the demise of the King who exiled him, he chooses to disguise himself as a young man, in a continued attempt to reject the reality of his age.

Sesse is fuelled by his anger, by the bitter resentment he has nursed against Naples and its monarch for so many long years. He is able to perform such amazing feats of strength and leadership as he does because of this invisible driving force. Once it is removed, however – when he sees innocent Neapolitans suffering under a cruel king's tyranny and pities them – he begins to lose the extreme edge from his words and actions and gradually moves towards a more controlled, just attitude towards others. He remains strong until the achievement of victory, but as soon as this comes and he is offered the crown of Naples, his supernatural energies seem to vanish. With the tyrant of Naples dead and his own beloved but traitorous daughter lying slain at his feet, he becomes a sad and weary old man who has no interest in the burdens of rule:

I must be excus'd,
The burden is too heavy for my shoulder,
· · · · ·
... for me and mine³⁴⁵,
We wil again to Sea and never know,
The place, which in my birth first gave me woe.³⁴⁶

Hence, although it makes him an impressive leader Sesse's strength is on the one hand too far removed from reality to seem representative of actual elderly men in leadership

344 2.5.14.

³⁴⁵The phrase 'me and mine' is possibly an echo of Titus Andronicus, from whom Fletcher and Massinger may have drawn some of their ideas for the characterisation of Sesse (see *Titus Andronicus* 3.1.56, 5.2.109).

346 5.4.66-7, 74-6.

and on the other is counterbalanced by an irrational denial of his age which can only detract from, rather than add to, the impression he creates. Even he, it is evident, sees age as a serious blemish that is fundamentally incompatible with strong leadership.

Earlier, in section one, it was argued that the King in *All's Well* is an instance of a ruler whose infirm old age is portrayed as detrimental to his kingdom. However, this was qualified by saying that it describes the king only part of the time, specifically before he is cured. In actuality, he is really far more often a figure of strength, one of the only instances in the period's drama of such an old ruler.³⁴⁷ This is in part due to the courage with which he endures his condition, as well as to his depth of personality.

Undeniably, the French court is initially overcast with gloom due to his illness. Yet he is still attending to business, holding public audience, able still to be cheerful. Even when, in 1.2, he falls to criticising the young courtiers' habits this is neither an accurate reflection of the true condition of the realm, nor an indicator of the king's moribund nature. He is not fundamentally gloomy or pessimistic; Shakespeare simply had the skill to depict a man passing through emotional fluctuations as real people inevitably do. Elsewhere, the King declares that 'my heart/ Will not confess he owes the malady/ that doth my life besiege'³⁴⁸, and so he continues to hope and to pass weary days, still able to quip with the young nobles about 'those girls of Italy', or with Lafew over sexual innuendoes.³⁴⁹ Despite his illness and enervation, the King of France is no self-indulgent Lear to shirk the pains of hereditary office and 'unburdened crawl

³⁴⁷Lear, of course, will be another.

³⁴⁸ 2.1.8-10.

³⁴⁹ 2.1.19-22, 64-91.

toward death'. At the end of the play, although he clearly recognises that he is old and that the 'noiseless foot of time' will come to steal his power, the King is not the sort to say with Prospero that every third thought will be his last.³⁵⁰ This tenacity and lasting inner vigour makes him the figure of strong elderly leadership that he is from the time of his cure onwards. His court and kingdom correspondingly benefit from such a ruler, who has not only an inborn resilience of personality but the additional sense of energetic urgency which his near-fatal illness injects:

Let's take the instant by the forward top,
For we are old and on our quick'st decrees
Th'inaudible and noiseless foot of time
Steals ere we can effect them.³⁵¹

Although it is the young Helen who restores his health, it is the old king himself who helps to steer his subjects into a brighter future than any of them might have hoped to see. His support of Helen's choice, his disciplining of the foolish and immature Bertram, his persistence in penetrating the truth of the final scene's confusions, and also his willingness to forgive are all key to the healing process which takes place in France. The old people in *All's Well* uphold and foster a traditional set of values – not rigidly, but enough to provide guidance and direction to the sometimes floundering young people in their care. The king contributes his fair share in this regard and is in his old age a commendable monarch.

In the balance, however, such a ruler is highly exceptional, as the foregoing discussion indicates; the overall consensus to be drawn from dramatic representations

³⁵⁰See Zitner 67.

³⁵¹ 5.3.39-42.

was that old men are not sound rulers. Repeatedly, audiences received a clear message: leadership of states belongs to the young or the middle-aged, to those in the prime of life.

IV. The absence of elderly female sovereigns

i. Speaking absences

There are extremely few aged queens in play-texts between 1580 and 1625. One might speculate that this is because they were not regarded as having potential to generate interest in audiences. Yet one of the only extant instances, (former) Queen Margaret in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, indicates that this need not have been the case; Margaret is electrifying, a *grande dame* reduced by time and Fortune to a spectral termagant. Why did Shakespeare and his contemporaries not develop this vein, with its potential for association with witchcraft and sorcery? Lady Macbeth could conceivably have been fashioned as an older, rather than middle-aged, woman. The almost diabolical energy with which she pursues power, her summoning of 'thick night' and the 'spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts', her unexplained absence of offspring, would all seem to be aptly enhanced by making her, like Hecate and her minions, beyond middle age. This is not, of course, to argue that Shakespeare 'should have' fashioned Lady Macbeth in this way, but merely to observe that this was a feasible shape which he could have, but did not, give to the character. Again, the potential for elaboration of plots arising from elderly queens jealous of younger women, such as occurs in Fletcher's *Thierry and Theodoret* (discussed below) would also seem

considerable; yet Fletcher's Brunhalt is conspicuous for her singularity in contemporary play-texts.

One reason might be the relative scarcity of boy-actors in adult companies; the few boys would have been required for the younger female roles. However, this does not satisfactorily explain why no plays were written with an elderly queen as a key character, rather than younger ones.³⁵² Likewise, it does not explain why the boys' companies did not produce such plays. In any event, *Thierry and Theodoret* was first played by the King's Men, demonstrating that an adult company could indeed stage such a play with such a character, should it choose to. The absence of elderly queens would thus seem to require a more convincing explanation.

Very possibly, it was due largely to Queen Elizabeth. By the time of the plays under consideration (from the 1580s onward), Elizabeth was past child-bearing age and hence the succession was of even greater concern than ever before. There were rumours of illegitimate children, which intensified in the 80s and 90s.³⁵³ Carole Levin stresses that the Elizabethan government and Elizabeth herself had to deal with increasingly more, and harsher, criticism of the ageing queen. Historians know from surviving manuscripts and covertly printed pamphlets, as well as court records, that a certain amount of 'dissing'³⁵⁴ of the Queen was occurring throughout the realm, what Julia M. Walker has described as 'the dark side of the Cult of Elizabeth, a minority discourse

³⁵² Whilst there is not an abundance of queens in extant play-texts, there certainly are more young to middle-aged ones than elderly female monarchs.

³⁵³ Levin 88-9.

³⁵⁴ I borrow the term from the recent collection edited by Julia M. Walker, *Dissing Elizabeth: Negative representations of Gloriana*.

which, although its sources shift continually, was a constant element of the life, reign and memory of this powerful, successful and generally popular monarch'.³⁵⁵ Likewise, Carole Levin observes that 'when a woman actually ruled, though deeply loved and supported by many of her subjects, there was also much unrest over female sovereignty. The upset over Elizabeth's refusal to deal with problems of the succession manifested itself as criticism of Elizabeth as a *woman* ruler and a wish for a king'.³⁵⁶ Although such public criticism had to some extent been voiced throughout her reign, once Elizabeth was clearly too old to bear a successor, public anxiety increased—especially as the Queen experienced the increasing illnesses of advancing age. 'The last decade of Elizabeth's reign was difficult. Not only was Elizabeth elderly and still refusing to name an heir, but the conflict with Spain was not entirely resolved in 1588, and in the last decade of the sixteenth century there was inflation and misery caused by poor harvests'.³⁵⁷ Why, then, did playwrights (usually so responsive to the social and political climate) refrain from presenting critical or unflattering depictions of elderly queens – or, for that matter, *any* depictions of elderly queens? The answers to these two, related, questions require some digression.

A clear reason would be fear of punishment, perhaps grave punishment. In August of 1579, when Elizabeth was forty-six, Joseph Stubbs and William Page had their right hands publicly cut off, the one for writing and the other for distributing copies of *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf whereinto England is Like to be Swallowed by an*

³⁵⁵ Walker, 'Introduction' 3.

³⁵⁶ Levin 80

³⁵⁷ Levin 80, 90.

other French marriage.³⁵⁸ In Stubbs's pamphlet opposing the Queen's proposed marriage to the Duc d'Alençon, two of his arguments must have particularly galled Elizabeth at a very personal level: that Elizabeth was too old for the Duke (she was more than twenty years older than he) and that she was probably too old to bear a child, at least without seriously endangering her life and hence the security of the realm.³⁵⁹ Elizabeth hated to be reminded of her age³⁶⁰, but her anger at this indiscretion was magnified to colossal proportions by 'his implication that the courting and planning, the flattery and attention of suitors, which she had so much enjoyed in the past, could never be enjoyed again, his suggestion that the complimentary overtures of the Duke of Anjou must have been insincere', given the great difference in their ages.³⁶¹ Stubbs's punishment, as is well known, was greeted by an ominous silence from the watching crowd. It was an example that would stay in people's minds long thereafter, of the harsh punishment which could result from provoking Elizabeth's wrath (she herself had wanted Stubbs to be hanged³⁶²). Although these personal insults were by no means the only aspects of the pamphlet which infuriated her, the queen was deeply affected by the imputations of undesirability and infertility due to her age. As Conyers Read points out, Philip Sidney's criticism in his *Letter to Queen Elizabeth touching her marriage with Monsieur*³⁶³ 'was more discreet. He said nothing about the Queen's age', focusing mainly on

³⁵⁸ A critical edition of Stubbs's treatise has been published by Lloyd E. Berry, *John Stubbs' Gaping Gulf with Letters and Other Relevant Documents*.

³⁵⁹ See Ilona Bell, "'Souveraigne Lord or lordly Lady of this land': Elizabeth, Stubbs, and the *Gaping Gulf*" 101, 104-5.

³⁶⁰ Hibbert 251-52.

³⁶¹ Hibbert 196.

³⁶² Hibbert 197.

³⁶³ Sidney's letter, which circulated widely in manuscript, has been published in K. Duncan-Jones and J. van Dorsten eds., *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*.

disparaging Catholicism and the French.³⁶⁴ Stubbs may not have incurred such rage had he avoided touching upon sensitive issues of Elizabeth's ageing body.

Thus, although Elizabethan playwrights were not usually particularly inhibited by the system of official censorship, and were often rather daring and skilful in their defiance, they may well have recognised that in dealing with matters of direct personal relevance to their sovereign, they risked more than the censor's pen, a rebuke, or a fine. Given the Queen's sensitivity in such matters, it seems likely that all but the most flattering depiction of an elderly queen would be open to misconstruction – especially since the Queen did not like being reminded of her age for any reason. We would not expect the Queen [Elizabeth's] Men or, from 1594 to 1603, the Lord Chamberlain's Men to have even contemplated taking such risks and it is also unlikely that other company patrons were interested in such perils either. Instead, playwrights seem to have channelled criticism into unfavourable representations of male rulers, as already discussed. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* depicts a ruler who is not especially impressive, whose wife is barren (implying that it may actually be he who is impotent), who suffers from epilepsy, who can no longer swim across the rough Tiber but needs to be rescued by Cassius who carries him to shore 'as Aeneas, our great ancestor,/ Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder/ The old Anchises bear'.³⁶⁵ First performed in 1599, *Julius Caesar* reflects the political and social climate of a nation at the end of an era, ruled by an aged monarch and tensely awaiting the aftermath of her death.

Tangentially, it is interesting to note that when Essex staged his bungled

³⁶⁴ Conyers Read, *Lord Burghley and Queen Elizabeth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1960) 217, quoted in Bell 115.

rebellion and paid for several performances of *Richard II*, he had chosen not only a play showing a ruler deposed, but a weak and *effeminate* ruler – more like a woman than a king. Elizabeth's furious response to the performances is widely known. Less known is that just prior to the 'insurrection', after the Earl's unbidden return from Ireland, deprived of his income and awaiting further orders at Essex House, he was heard to exclaim that 'the Queen's conditions [i.e., regarding his confinement and income] were as crooked as her carcase'; when Elizabeth was told this, Sir Walter Raleigh thought that she would order Essex's execution then and there.³⁶⁶ It is also significant that Fulke Greville burnt his play *Antony and Cleopatra* 'in case it was held to have reference to Essex'.³⁶⁷

Thus, the hazards were great and the rewards insignificant by comparison, of presenting the character of an ageing female ruler in a play-text. Even John Fletcher, who aside from Shakespeare created more powerful, domineering female characters than any other contemporary playwright, avoided the topic. Yet there is a tantalising facet of Fletcher's life which adds the complexity of a suggestive, but unprovable, further motive for his silence (at least, until the performance of *Thierry and Theodoret* sometime between 1613 and 1622). John's father was Richard Fletcher, sometime bishop of Bristol, Worcester and London, as well as one of the preachers to the Queen. Fletcher was also the bishop appointed to stand on the scaffold with Mary Stuart in 1587,

³⁶⁵ 1.2.112-14.

³⁶⁶ Hibbert 241.

³⁶⁷ Hunter 343.

offering her a final chance to repent and be spared. In spite of an admonishing sermon³⁶⁸ that he delivered to Elizabeth shortly after the execution, urging the Queen not to indulge in misplaced pity for her traitorous cousin, the monarch did not take offence, and Fletcher's career flourished until an ill-advised second marriage to a rich widow in 1595. Elizabeth was angered, suspending him from his duties and banishing him from the court. When he died suddenly the next year – as a result, it was said, of the Queen's 'displeasure and indignation' – he left his widow with nine children and 'substantial debts'. The young John Fletcher, bereft of both birth-parents and in an atmosphere of financial hardship, thus experienced first-hand the consequences of his sovereign's displeasure, and one can speculate that the effects of this could have remained with him thenceforth. Certainly, it is fascinating that when he eventually produced one of the only representations of an elderly queen, he made her the most repugnant, debauched, vicious and vain individual imaginable. It is entertaining to speculate that Fletcher, after so many years, may have channelled some of his resentment of the old Queen into this otherwise anomalous play.

This brings us to the final question of why, even once the old Queen was dead and James on the throne, there were no characters of elderly queens, good or bad, in plays. I think it likely that this was a result of the 'mythologising' of Elizabeth and her reign which began a few years after the Scottish monarch and his family had arrived, and once the populace was becoming disillusioned by the excesses of James's court. As 'good Queen Bess' returned in her subjects' minds as the sovereign and wellspring of a

³⁶⁸ A handwritten copy of the sermon was recently rediscovered by Peter E. McCullough, from whose article the

bygone Golden Age, it is reasonable to conjecture that dramatists would have seen little marketability in plays criticising, ridiculing or otherwise demonising elderly female rulers. Likewise, the monarch of popular nostalgia was not the aged, wrinkled Elizabeth of the later years, but the young princess and triumphant queen of Heywood's *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (1603-5) and Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*. We would not expect that plays reminding the audience of the less-than-good-old 1590s would have been crowd pleasers.

Attesting to the lasting strength of Elizabeth's memory in the popular mind, Julia M. Walker asserts that the Queen remained a 'powerful political icon . . . even two decades after her death', supporting her argument with an analysis of the painting 'Elizabeth with Time and Death' (c.1622), attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts. In this work, the queen is looking older and worn out; her head is held wearily in her right hand, while an open book hangs idly from her left hand. In this image, 'the queen is no longer triumphant and powerful, but old, tired, indeed clearly dead'. Walker contends that the painting 'was commissioned . . . as a parody of the queen at her most powerful', satirically imitating the famous Armada portrait. 'Here,' she continues, 'we see the power of art furthering the agenda of the Stuarts and their supporters who needed, for a variety of pressing reasons, to erase the shadow of a generally popular queen by representing her as unnatural, alone, powerless, and ingloriously dead'.³⁶⁹ It is all the more surprising that such 'dissing' of the dead queen was not taken up by playwrights, which suggests that the 'agenda' of the common people – to preserve a somewhat

details about Richard Fletcher are drawn.

inaccurate but potent and powerfully resonant image of their former monarch – was more influential upon the subject matter of Jacobean playwrights than the agenda of the Stuart court.

ii. Shakespeare's Queen Margaret, Fletcher's Rosellia and Brunhalt

The few women discussed in this section have intrinsic interest as characters in their own right, particularly Rosellia in *The Sea Voyage* and Brunhalt in *Thierry and Theodoret*, but they certainly form no base from which to infer attitudes towards the real prospect of elderly female rulers. Shakespeare early in his career turned his hand to this unusual sort of character when he created the old Queen Margaret in *Richard III* (?1591-4). Although appearing only twice (1.3, 4.4) she is a startling and disturbing woman; indeed, she tries very hard to be in effect an incarnation of a fearsome ancient prophetess than the ordinary victim of fortune that she is. Antony Hammond aptly observes that Margaret's world is built upon fantasy of this sort into a 'crude play of vengeful retribution Margaret believes she is acting in'.³⁷⁰ The histrionic quality of her entrances and exits and her exaggerated rhetoric underscore this effect; when Margaret is in the company of others she wants the floor to herself, to itemise her woes, prophecy doom to her enemies and try misguidedly to regain the centrality she had as England's queen. But she is, despite her tremendous efforts, no prophetess, merely a woman reduced by Fate to hurling impotent curses. Some of Margaret's curses come true not because she utters them, but because in the circumstances their fulfilment is entirely

³⁶⁹ Walker, 'Bones of Contention' 252, 269, 270.

³⁷⁰ Antony Hammond, ed., *Richard III* 108.

probable. Further, many things happen in the play which are not foretold by her (she has no inkling of Richmond's importance) and some things which she foretells do not come true (Elizabeth is not left childless, for instance).³⁷¹

The old (both 'aged' and 'former') queen is obsessed with her past status, harping incessantly upon her claim to be the rightful queen. In a bout of wishful thinking, she imagines in 1.3 that she actually frightens her auditors: 'Which of you trembles not that looks on me?/ If not that I am Queen, you bow like subjects;/ Yet that by you deposed, you quake like rebels' (1.3.160-2). Although she has the satisfaction in 4.4 of seeing her replacement Elizabeth lose in her turn children and her crown, Margaret remains no more than a vituperative, maddened old woman; she has retained a certain grandeur which is enhanced by her conscious role-playing, but she is largely just a spectre of powerlessness. Although Richard calls her a hag, he is the only one of the company who is not disturbed by her maledictions; the rest seem partly to fear that she really is a hag, a witch, with power to effect her curses. Yet she bears no resemblance to either popular or elite conceptions of witches, and when Queen Elizabeth in 4.4 attributes agency to Margaret in the fulfilment of her 'prophecies', and asks the old woman to 'teach me how to curse mine enemies'³⁷², Margaret offers her not magical spells but simply advice in the nurturing of resentment. The lasting impression of the old former queen is of viciousness and rage 'full of words' but void of outcome.

As a passing comparison, it is notable how different is Queen Katherine's reaction to her expulsion in *King Henry VIII* (1613). Historically forty-eight years old

³⁷¹Hammond, 110.

when the divorce was granted, she may not have been played as elderly; yet as she nears her death she seems overcome by age, as though the process of grief has hastened her prematurely into old age:

Alas, 'has banished me his bed already,
His love, too long ago! I am old, my lords.³⁷³

Katherine's age is exaggerated to deepen the pathos of her situation and also to express her weariness with a world³⁷⁴ and a husband who have wronged her unjustly. In clear contrast to the Old Lady³⁷⁵ who appears in the play, Queen Katherine is modest, generous, self-effacing and pious. However, she still remains a figure of powerlessness, displaced by a young woman and discarded by her husband.

Although Queen Margaret's rhetorical finesse makes her rather compelling as a character, a far more interesting and developed older ruler is Rosellia in Fletcher and Massinger's *The Sea Voyage* (1622).³⁷⁶ Rosellia is the eldest and the leader of a group of women shipwrecked on an island, where they strive to have a successful all-female society. While she is not a 'ruler' in the conventional sense of 'head of state', she is the ruler of the small island realm and its inhabitants, and has plans to sustain the population through selective breeding with shipwrecked men. She is not *very* elderly – her age is not made explicit but she is considered by the younger women to be past having an interest in sex and is certainly post-menopausal. Precision is irrelevant

³⁷² 4.4.117.

³⁷³ 3.1.119-20.

³⁷⁴ Compare Lady Capulet's similar 'accelerated ageing' in 5.3.206-7: 'O me, this sight of death is as a bell/ That warns my old age to a sepulchre'.

³⁷⁵ In scenes 2.3 and 5.1.

³⁷⁶ Date of first performance, taken from *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, gen. ed. Fredson Bowers.

because throughout the play her elderliness is made clear beyond doubt. The play has attracted few critics, but a recent one gives an unfortunately shallow assessment of Rosellia which completely misses the care devoted to constructing her character. According to Sandra Clark, she is merely 'a comic harridan'³⁷⁷, but this is far from accurate. Rosellia nurses a deep hatred for men and censures her women for desiring them. But her obduracy and extremism spring from sorrow. She despises men because it was a band of pirates who not only caused them to be stranded but also (as she believes) killed her beloved husband in the same skirmish. Her intolerance is thus paradoxically founded upon love and it becomes rapidly clear that hatred, cruelty and leadership itself do not come 'naturally' to her. Rosellia is not Amazonian. She has a warm, humorous and compassionate side which has been eclipsed by circumstances, but reveals itself nonetheless throughout the play and re-emerges at its end when she is reunited with her husband. At this point Rosellia can divest herself of the unnatural role of leader and become her former self. Speaking of herself to her husband, she declares: 'She do's give up her selfe,/ Her power and joyes and all, to you,/ To be discharged of 'em as to[o] burthensome' (5.4.97-9).³⁷⁸ Relieved of the hardships of an alien role and its responsibilities, she gladly becomes wife and mother once more.

While a leader, however, Rosellia is competent in spite of being extreme. She conducts herself with dignity, in no way like a 'harridan'. In fact, the excessive cruelty

³⁷⁷*The Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher: Sexual Themes and Dramatic Representation* 73.

³⁷⁸Her 'abdication' obviously ties into the issue of gender roles in this play, but this subject is tangential to the present focus.

which her daughter blames upon her age³⁷⁹ is then adopted by the daughter when she finds herself crossed in love. It is clearly Rosellia's strength of character, intelligence and perspicacity which have enabled these women to survive and, under the circumstances, flourish. Her age, far from being a drawback or cause for mockery, has been critical in preserving order and stability amongst the group of adolescent girls and young women. Her grief and its resultant anger, which are in no way tied to her age, are the sole causes of her few mistakes in judgement. Nevertheless, the play is at pains to make very clear that leadership is not the natural place for even an intelligent older woman.

Absence of sexual desire is the women's erroneous explanation for her harsh and unyielding stance. But in another of Fletcher's creations and the last play for discussion in this chapter, resides a striking and monstrous version of the 'rapacious aged female'. Brunhalt in *The Tragedy of Thierry and Theodoret* (Fletcher 1613-21³⁸⁰) is a nightmarish incarnation of three negative qualities frequently yoked together in this period: old age, the feminine and sexual appetite. Old women were frequently stereotyped as especially lecherous, and this could expose them to ridicule, persecution or both.³⁸¹

Although no longer a ruling queen, Brunhalt's sons are the Prince of Austrachia and the King of France, and she continues to enjoy considerable influence and status in both their realms. Besides her lust, this is her other great appetite – an insatiable need for power and attention. From these two vices spring all of the destruction which ensues in the play. Like some of the male rulers already discussed, Brunhalt has an

³⁷⁹'You are angry, mother and ye are old too,/ Forgetting what men are' (4.2.29-30).

³⁸⁰ G.K. Hunter recognises only Fletcher as the author; collaboration with Beaumont, followed by later revisions by Massinger, have also been postulated.

utterly poisonous effect upon both of her sons' courts and countries. She is, in her old age, the very embodiment of disease, decay, corruption and sterility and she spreads these like a miasma everywhere. Her house is described as

an Academ,
In which all principles of lust were practis'd,)
.
At whose most blessed intercession
All office in the state, were charitably
Confer'd on panders, o're-worne chamber wrastlers,
And such phisitions as knew how to kill
With safety under the pretence of saving,
And such like children of a monstrous peace.³⁸²

In the opening scene from which cascades the entire tragedy of the title, Thierry Prince of Austrachia is rebuking her for the terrible example which her abominations set for his people. 'You may imagine,' he says, 'The name of greatnesse glorifies your actions. . . .'

[but] The sinnes we doe, people behold through opticks,
Which shewes um ten times more then common vices,
And often multiples um: then what justice
Dare we inflict upon the weake offenders
When we are theeves our selves?³⁸³

He is articulating the very real concerns which surfaced in contemporary political thought concerning the rule of women. G.K. Hunter has noted that 'Renaissance dramatists are liable to present women in power, whatever the circumstances, as symptoms of a degenerate culture; their mode of achieving power must rule out any grasp on impersonal truth; their rule is hopelessly contaminated by their personal

³⁸¹ This negative association of old women with sexual desire, and the sex trade, is discussed in chapter six.

³⁸² 1.2.89-98.

³⁸³ 1.1.17-27.

lives'.³⁸⁴

Brunhalt is enraged by any attempts to curb her appetites and personal activities, and as a result she eventually brings about the destruction of her family, herself and very nearly both kingdoms. In this respect, her age is of key significance as a vector of sterility. Not only are her passionate exchanges with her parasite-lover revolting to contemplate (in Hunter's opinion, 'Disgust seems to be the appropriate emotion'³⁸⁵), but because she is far beyond child-bearing age the effeteness of her sexual disports both adds to the reprehensibility of her behaviour and (the play implies) leaks its contaminating influence into the lives of those around her.

The greatest threat to her continued fulfilment lies in her other son's impending marriage. With horror she contemplates the loss of all her power, all of the attention she feeds upon daily:

for me now,
That hitherto have kept the first, to know
A second place, or yeeld the least precedence
To any others, death; to have my sleepes
Lesse inquirde after, or my rising up
Saluted with lesse reverence, or my gates
Empty of suitors; or the Kings great favours
To passe through any hand but mine, or hee
Himselfe to be directed by another . . .³⁸⁶

Appropriate to her preoccupation with sex and her own sterility, she tries to thwart the marriage by poisoning her son with a potion that renders him impotent. But this attempt to 'infect' others with infertility backfires when the newlyweds contentedly

³⁸⁴ Hunter 466.

³⁸⁵ Hunter 437.

³⁸⁶ 2.1.278-86.

agree that a life of chastity is infinitely to be preferred. Brunhalt is driven by her megalomania and sexual obsession to greater and greater lengths, finally to the murder of both her sons³⁸⁷, until she ends up strangling herself in frustration and despair. In her death she thus becomes an emblem of Envy, which is entirely appropriate. She has been devoted to living in ways no longer acceptable in a woman her age, has clung to sex and power well beyond the limits of decency and desert, refusing to concede mastery to those to whom it rightly belongs. Motivated thus by envy, she is transfigured into its very personification.

As with several of the plays discussed earlier, the polluting effects of this old woman's crimes can only be overcome by the promise of a new and moral order issuing from an untainted younger generation – in this case her nephew Martell and his new bride-to-be, the daughter of Thierry. But the debauched queen's ferocious grasp upon her world has only been broken at great cost and leaves an overwhelming impression of revulsion at such a horrifying spectacle of aged female power. As one of only a scant half dozen representations of aged female rulers in extant play-texts, Brunhalt is a powerfully negative – and negating – judgement against the prospect of elderly women in power.



Overall, plays of this period do not offer a good prognosis for societies governed by elderly rulers. Whether debilitated by physical or mental weakness, or by moral

³⁸⁷Thereby, as it happens, obliterating the living evidence of her past fertility.

deterioration, most prove inadequate to the task and consequently either allow (through ineptitude or neglect) or actively cause significant harm to come to their people. Thus, in one of their most conspicuous venues for expression, writers who contemplated the possible consequences of elderly leadership gave little indication of confidence.

CHAPTER 5: MAGISTRATES

*This same staro'd justice hath done nothing but
prate to me of the wildness of his youth, and the feats
he hath done about Turnbull Street, and every third
word a lie. . . . And now is this Vice's dagger become
a squire, and talks as familiarly of John a' Gaunt as if
he had been sworn brother to him. . .*

(The Second Part of Henry IV 3.2.304-7, 319-21)

At the turn of the sixteenth century, significant changes were taking place in state organisation and authority structures. Henry VIII and Edward VI had begun concerted efforts to create a network of officials through which monarchical and parliamentary authority could be exercised effectively from London, and Elizabeth and James continued to develop these policies. The popularity of the 'mirror for princes' genre came to have a counterpart in the many 'mirrors for magistrates' which described in great detail the duties, responsibilities and qualities of governors. It is therefore not surprising that counsellors and magistrates figure frequently in play-texts, nor that many of these characters were old men, since such positions were usually held by elderly males.

A common present-day assumption is that England was a 'gerontocratic' society and that consequently, old men had a distinctive edge over their juniors in acquiring public appointments. The term gerontocracy is, however potentially misleading as it suggests a vision of old men possessing overarching and decisive power in their communities. This does not seem to have been the case; historical evidence conveys a more complex and fluid state of affairs. On the one hand, there is ample evidence

suggesting that age carried with it the potential for privileged status and authority, especially for men. Yet it is essential to identify the price attached to special status, in order to understand both the nature of elderly authority in the public sphere, and the ways in which dramatists chose to represent old men as important adjuncts to, and channels for, royal authority.

The most obvious asset of the old was their experience. Although longevity brought illness and debilitation, the man who lived into his 50s or 60s had knowledge of life to offer others. Wisdom and prudence, two key qualities in the cultural picture of the old man, were attributed in humoral theory to older men being cold and dry, and therefore more predisposed to prudence than younger men, who were hot and moist and therefore more impulsive. Notably, men were considered more prudent than women, regardless of age.³⁸⁸ Their life experience equipped old men for positions of authority. Status in craft fellowships and guilds, for example, was determined not only by wealth but also by age – in the London companies, for instance, men elected to be masters were usually at least in their mid-fifties.³⁸⁹ Surveying the ages of privy councillors between 1542 and 1642, Keith Thomas found their average age ranged between fifty-one and sixty-one, and although he concludes from this that '[i]mportant offices were normally assumed by the solidly *middle-aged*', these figures reinforce the impression that those involved in the upper reaches of government were by

³⁸⁸ Maclean 49.

³⁹⁰ Rappaport 359; in early sixteenth-century Coventry the craft fellowships, guilds and councils were organised along gerontocratic principles, but by the late sixteenth century this structure was cracking under the town's economic problems (Phythian-Adams 114-15, 122, 273-74).

contemporary standards very often elderly.³⁹⁰ Urban historians have likewise found that in urban oligarchies over a life-cycle period, wealth was certainly important but 'power at the top of urban government was the end of a *cursus honorum*' not completed until later life.³⁹¹ At the level of smaller towns and villages, the number of positions of authority and the lower absolute numbers of old men of the appropriate social level may have dictated a greater mix of ages in local government.

In sum, in England the old were not oligarchic, but their involvement in community ruling structures was considered highly desirable, in some cases essential, and was usually quite significant. Physical and mental competence were important qualifying factors, as were the behavioural requirements pertaining to appropriate deportment and dress. This negotiated balance of respect and power was a part of the social framework, without which the attitudes towards the old which can be teased out of dramatic portrayals of elderly counsellors, judges, magistrates and similar figures seem a confusing hotchpotch of esteem, mockery and ambivalence. However three quite distinct approaches to non-monarchical power figures are discernible when one delves into the extra-theatrical realms of their real-world counterparts.

I. Idealisation: wise counsellors

To a certain extent, status and power were conferred on the basis of age *per se*,

³⁹¹ Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 211-12 (my emphasis). Thomas's main point, However is that greater age was regarded as a prerequisite for these positions. His article remains, after more than 20 years, the best discussion of the presence (and absence) of status and authority for the old in early modern England.

³⁹² Barry 25.

rather than competence. This arbitrariness did not pass without censure, and subsequent sections of this chapter indicate how drama contributed to the critique and containment of age-biased appointments. Nevertheless, belief in the practical virtues of aged men received frequent and emphatic reinforcement in the theatres, in the form of sagacious men tending to the good of public and monarch. In such plays a two-fold thrust is discernable: affirmation of the social consensus that old men were generally better suited than younger men for higher public positions of power and influence; and fortification of this principle against the threat posed on the one hand by elderly incompetence, and on the other by the discontent of subordinated youth.³⁹²

Although the old counsellor typifies this class of idealised old men, it includes other characters also. Rather than an exact role as such, certain qualities were being invoked. Wisdom, prudence, perspicacity, discretion, fortitude, loyalty, long-suffering, and an unwavering Christian morality formed the core of the ideal. Some real-life examples might well have lent credence to such depictions. William Cecil Lord Burghley (1520-1598) for example, Elizabeth's second-in-command for so many decades, was a model of the aged man in his sovereign's service. Burghley never retired. He was afflicted with gout from his thirties, but even in his later years had an excellent attendance record at the House of Lords, despite describing himself there as 'an old man, beside his years decayed in his spirits'; in the 1590s (then in his seventies) his gout attacks occurred more frequently but he continued to attend parliament until

³⁹²'Thrust' should be understood as including the possibility but *not the necessity* of conscious authorial intention; the characters in these plays can be interpreted as serving this purpose whether one ascribes this effect to a playwright's purposeful planning or to the unconscious expression of elements in his social environment.

the year before his death, and was then still 'a member of 19 of the 33 recorded committees and joint conferences on all manner of subjects'.³⁹³ A second such public figure was father of the most notable idealised courtier of the time, Sir Philip Sidney. Sir Henry Sidney (1529-86), crown servant under Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth, struggled continually in the latter's reign with insuperable financial troubles, caused primarily by costs incurred for the crown as Lord Chief Justice, and then Lord Deputy, of Ireland, and Lord President of the Welsh Marches. In 1583 he wrote to Sir Francis Walsingham:

I have three sons. . . . If I die tomorrow next, I should leave them worse than my father left me by £20,000, and I am now fifty-four years of age, toothless and trembling, being five thousand pounds in debt, yea, and £30,000 worse than I was at the death of my most dear King and master, King Edward the Sixth.³⁹⁴

Sir Henry died suddenly in 1586 at the age of fifty-six, still in her majesty's service.

Less well-known men filled the important offices of aldermen to the City of London. The post of alderman was held for life; declining a nomination meant incurring a hefty fine, avoidable if an acceptable reason (such as age or illness) were offered by the nominee. Of the many who pleaded senescence in Jacobean London, their ages were often in the sixties, seventies and eighties (one octogenarian interestingly felt bound to plead insufficiency of estate rather than old age).³⁹⁵ Understandably, not all old men who were offered the opportunity for public office wished to assume the potentially onerous duties which it might incur, and some of the drama pays a muted tribute to

³⁹³Graves 137.

³⁹⁴Cited in Duncan-Jones 225.

³⁹⁵Lang 43-4.

instances of elderly stamina and dedication to public, rather than private, interests. In such ways, play-texts depicting virtuous elderly advisors, judges and deputy ministers emerge from and merge with the conditions of everyday English life. The Lord Chief Justice in *Henry IV.2*, discussed further below, is an obvious and prominent example.

Several of Shakespeare's plays are notable for their virtuous elders, the most substantial and unequivocal example occurring near the end of his plays, in the character of Lord Gonzalo. Prior to this, Shakespeare had fashioned some rudimentary precursors: Helicanus in *Pericles*, and Escalus in *Measure For Measure* (as well as the fully-developed Camillo of *The Winter's Tale*, discussed below). Helicanus is limited by his typicality, and he makes no significant dramatic or thematic impact upon the play; this very quality of background stability is, however what makes him essential to *Pericles*. By faithfully and competently governing Tyre during his lord's long absence, in spite of the burden of old age,³⁹⁶ Helicanus offers strong support for elderly men's claim to wisdom and the other qualities necessary for good public service, and he thereby ratifies a system which confers status and authority upon age.

Escalus in *Measure for Measure* is more developed than Helicanus, and his role as an elderly man in public power intersects with the play's issues of authority, honesty and justice. All of these qualities he possesses in good measure, yet at the play's opening the Duke confers power not upon this elder of proven judgement and ability (1.1.3-13), but upon the younger Angelo. What occurs in the course of the play is not simplistically reducible to the conclusion that the older man would not have made a

mess of things the way that Angelo very nearly does. However Escalus does repeatedly serve to emphasise what is lacking in austere and arrogant Angelo, and most often his long experience with life and people is explicitly, causally connected to his superior morals and professional conduct. Various scenes repeatedly contrast the two men's magisterial skills; the most felicitous and instructive of these occurs when Escalus appeals to Angelo to have some shared understanding for the mistakes committed by a raw youth (2.1.1-40). Ultimately, it is the middle-aged Duke, in the prime of life, whose governance is affirmed, but in the process the staunch Escalus also serves to substantiate the important place of intelligent elderly men in the preservation of public order and moral stability.

The Tempest is not so literally constructed around the everyday affairs of running a state, yet in Lord Gonzalo Shakespeare delivers a potentially powerful validation of aged authority. Elder statesman and counsellor to the usurper Antonio, Gonzalo has had an ethically troubled career in a turbulent state, somehow maintaining his sense of integrity while nonetheless accepting the switch of loyalty necessitated by Prospero's deposition. The audience is not encouraged to scrutinise this fact, but to accept it as compatible with admiration for the old lord. Gonzalo *seems* to fit into the ideal counsellor stereotype, a part of which is a pragmatism that blends seamlessly into experienced wisdom while remaining untainted by implications of self-interest and moral flaccidity. However the text is ambiguous, allowing quite different interpretations of Gonzalo. On the one hand, he may be viewed as a pure spirit who

³⁹⁶See *Pericles* scene 8, line 48.

sees the beauties of the tropical island while the young Machiavellis perceive only the decay which resides in their corrupted souls. Set against their 'worldly wisdom', the old counsellor seems not to have aged; he retains an almost naïve sense of wonder and optimism, to which he gives expression in his speech describing the perfect island commonwealth. Yet on the other hand, the same evidence may show him to be somewhat of a simpleton, or at least rather shallow and foolishly affable. When Gonzalo imagines himself as a Golden Age governor (2.1.144-69) he might be interpreted as doing so primarily in an effort to divert his grief-stricken sovereign. Or, he may be exercising his rhetorical abilities somewhat in the manner of Polonius, reciting fairly generic Utopian ideas with no sense that he is more laughable than laudable.

Gonzalo's apparent ability to see the true shapes of things, both material and (more importantly) moral and spiritual, is clearly connected to his age in the text. In the above mentioned scene, the weaknesses of senescence are the object of rude and unimaginative persecution by the young lords, and in 3.3 his age is emphasised by him entering weary and footsore. Further, when Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio hear Ariel's speech Gonzalo – although hearing nothing – rightly diagnoses the true cause of their dismay: 'their great guilt'.³⁹⁷ Still, if he is wholly free of blame, if he is intended to be an explicit example of an ideal elderly counsellor, why does Prospero allow him to be subjected to imprisonment by Ariel along with the other villains, until '[h]is tears runs down his beard like winter's drop/ From eaves of reeds'?³⁹⁸ Is Prospero perhaps inflicting a certain amount of punishment upon the old man for having been too

‘politic’, for shifting his loyalties instead of remaining staunchly with the rightful ruler?

In the concluding scene comes Prospero’s apparently unequivocal praise for his old friend, turning to Gonzalo before anyone else:

First, noble friend,
Let me embrace thine age, whose honour cannot
Be measured or confined.³⁹⁹

A model of restraint, the old counsellor refrains from a reply until he has his emotions under firm control, then delivers his lines encapsulating their experiences and providing a moralistic commentary upon them:

O rejoice
Beyond a common joy! And set it down
With gold on lasting pillars: in one voyage
Did Claribel her husband find at Tunis,
And Ferdinand her brother found a wife
Where he himself was lost; Prospero his dukedom
In a poor isle; and all of us ourselves,
When no man was his own.⁴⁰⁰

However Gonzalo still remains ignorant of the true nature of the ‘transformations’ he has witnessed. He knows nothing of Prospero’s manipulation of events, and it is debatable whether Sebastian and Antonio have actually ‘found themselves’; on the contrary, they seem already to know themselves quite well – they have simply been ‘found out’. Further, he has no knowledge (as the audience does) that much of the wonders were performed by spirits and other beings acting under compulsion, enslaved to Prospero. A quiet reminder is given to the audience at 5.1.241, when

³⁹⁷ 3.3.104.

³⁹⁸ 5.1.16-7.

³⁹⁹ 5.1.120-22.

⁴⁰⁰ 5.1.206-13.

Prospero assures Ariel, 'Thou shalt be free'.

In short, Shakespeare appears to, but in reality does not, give unambiguous instruction in the social value of elderly counsellors. Whilst a sentimental reading of the character may gloss over the abovementioned difficulties, it may be more fruitful to consider that amidst the overt praise of Gonzalo, by Prospero particularly, are also embedded deeper criticisms and jests at the expense of age – especially, perhaps, at the ability of elderly counsellors to forget, with the passage of time, their ethically questionable past actions.⁴⁰¹

Shakespeare created a more developed and less equivocal representation of the elderly counsellor in *The Winter's Tale*, a drama interpenetrated by reflections upon the experiences of old age in many spheres. Camillo and Paulina act as formal and informal advisors to their monarch. Although their ages are not made explicit, there is ample indirect evidence that they are both elderly.⁴⁰² Camillo is cast in the mould of the virtuous elder counsellor, and Paulina is in many respects his female counterpart, balancing a masculine forwardness and intelligence with feminine maternal tenderness and an impulsiveness considered at that time characteristic of females. Paulina is a convincing portrait of elderly female counsel and influence, and although women were not eligible for public office, her competency poses an implicit challenge to the prevailing social norms of exclusively male counsellors. This is only suggested,

⁴⁰¹At least, However Gonzalo has some depth of character. Comparison with the tribune Mark Anthony in Thomas Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War* shows just how lifeless such figures could be. Lodge's lack of subtlety and finesse results in a clearer reinforcement of the principle of respect for elderly experience and wisdom, and the role of old men in the running of the state. Not possessing the *realpolitik* pragmatism of Gonzalo, the old tribune dies for his loyalty and truthfulness.

⁴⁰²See 1.2.460-2; 2.3.76, 107; 2.3.161; 5.3.132.

however and Shakespeare does not develop the challenge.

Shakespeare bestowed considerable care upon conveying dimensionality of character in Camillo, while at the same time preserving the impression of unswerving reliability and wisdom. Functionally, he is elder counsellor to three younger men in the course of the play – Leontes, Polixenes and Florizel. Qualitatively, he is a valuable counterpoise to the impetuosity and wilfulness so often displayed by these younger men. Capable of great feeling, he is nonetheless not prone to exaggeration, and has a realistic perspective on life (see 1.1, especially 37-44). Although loyal, Camillo is capable of insubordination, a difference between him and Gonzalo who bowed to the circumstances of Prospero's deposition. Accused by Leontes of being dishonest, 'negligent, foolish, and fearful'⁴⁰³, he eloquently contains his indignation at the personal affront, but when his mistress' honesty is questioned, he for a brief moment loses his self-restraint and addresses Leontes with the exasperated familiarity that Kent unleashes upon Lear⁴⁰⁴:

I would not be a stander-by to hear
My sovereign mistress clouded so without
My present vengeance taken. 'Shrew my heart,
You never spoke what did become you less
Than this, which to reiterate were sin
As deep as that, though true.⁴⁰⁵

Greater disobedience follows, when Camillo judiciously humours his master's murderous inclinations, then flees with Polixenes. He is forced to make a difficult decision in leaving the falsely accused queen, but is presented as making the best of a

⁴⁰³ 1.2.244, 250.

⁴⁰⁴See *King Lear* 1.1.144-154.

bad situation. Camillo's judgement is pivotal for the well-being of everyone, and his calm, mature behaviour under such critical circumstances is a feature of his age.

Camillo disappears from the action until the last two acts, and in his place steps Paulina, as informal counsellor for the deranged Leontes. Her bold tongue is more tolerated than it would be in a man (since women were considered to be less able to control their emotions), and she takes full advantage of this. However she also makes explicit the necessity for plain speaking in *any* truly effective counsellor. "Tis such as you,' she reproves the other lords,

That creep like shadows by him, and do sigh
At each his needless heavings, such as you
Nourish the cause of his awaking. I
Do come with words as medicinal as true,
Honest as either, to purge him of that humour
That presses him from sleep.

You that are thus so tender o'er his follies
Will never do him good, not one of you.⁴⁰⁶

The King does not like Paulina's 'medicine', and in angrily lashing out, Leontes targets the old age of both Paulina and her husband Antigonus, calling her 'gross hag' and 'crone' and him a 'dotard'.⁴⁰⁷

When Camillo reappears after sixteen years, he is still as unswervingly kind, perspicacious and politic as ever with his second master, Polixenes. Once again, he is being forced to deal with the wilfulness and irrationality of a younger superior, and he does so with impeccable resourcefulness and integrity, managing in one move to

⁴⁰⁵ 1.2.281-86.

⁴⁰⁶ 2.3.33-9, 128-9.

⁴⁰⁷ 2.3.108 (gross hag), 77 (crone), and 75 (dotard).

serve my turn,
Save him from danger, do him love and honour,
Purchase the sight again of dear Sicilia
And that unhappy king, my master, whom
I so much thirst to see.⁴⁰⁸

The young prince Florizel, Camillo's third master, has an impulsive courage which finds its foil in Camillo's older, wiser, steady good sense, and in advising this young man Camillo extends his skilful ministrations to a new generation.

With fairy-tale symmetry, Camillo and Paulina are poised for matrimony in the final scene. From one perspective, they are two of the heroes of the play, and certainly they encourage virtually unqualified assent to the value of age in those with positions of public influence. Fashioned with a fine attention to humanising detail, they are also virtually flawless portraits of elderly counsellors.

A number of other characters could be included here for discussion, however it is instructive to jump forward in time to Massinger and Field's *The Fatal Dowry* (1617-19), in order to explore how idealisation could incorporate elements of tragedy and ambiguity. While supporting, *The Fatal Dowry* introduces doubts about the principle of the elderly's value in the public sphere. That such a shift is perceptible in this later play is interesting, and may suggest increasing generational tensions in England in the years preceding the Civil War. The doubts surface through the contrast between Rochfort the retiring judge and his appointed replacement, Novall Senior. Simultaneously with their glorification of one man's virtue, the playwrights introduce a vein of qualification augmented by emerging flaws in Rochfort, who begins as a model of the perfect public

elderly magistrate.

Rochfort is cut from the same cloth as the old men already discussed. He is withdrawing from active public service in 1.1, but his continued informal involvement in the judicial system propels the play, in which his failings as well as his virtues are unfolded. Initially, however, he is praised as 'this reverent man Grave *Rochfort*', whose 'life transcends all fair examples'.⁴⁰⁹ Rochfort himself stresses the burden of old age, claiming he no longer has 'the strength I had to governe well', and so is taking the responsible course of resigning his position before incompetence begins to tarnish his accomplishments.⁴¹⁰ He is willing to stand aside for new men to rise, and plans a pious end to a noble career. That he is less than perfect in his judgement is shown by his poor choice of successor. Novall Senior is a heartless, cruel and corrupt man who accepts bribes⁴¹¹ and passes harsh, peremptory sentences. Early in the play, a young soldier reminds Novall of the contingent nature of his power:

Why Ile tell you,
Thou purple-colour'd man, I am one to whom
Thou owest the meanes thou hast of sitting there
A corrupt Elder.⁴¹²

- but Novall is unimpressed. Although displaying poor judgement in this one instance, Rochfort nonetheless impresses the audience with his general good sense. However the imperfect judgement revealed by his choice of successor slowly affects his other actions. Although he is reputed to have been an excellent judge, and he is shown to be so in his

⁴⁰⁸ 4.4.509-513.

⁴⁰⁹ 1.2.6, 11.

⁴¹⁰ 1.2.25, 34-45.

⁴¹¹ 1.1.125-165.

early assessments of Charalois and his friend, Rochmont allows personal considerations to cloud his judgement, first when he disbelieves a reliable (and true) report that his daughter is an adulteress⁴¹³, and then (more profoundly) when he acts as impromptu judge upon her. The latter situation presents the central paradox of Rochfort's actions: while on the one hand he seems the perfect magistrate because he can with apparent impartiality condemn his child to death, he is actually acting upon passion rather than reason. Ironically, when he appears most dispassionate – as he sentences her – he is actually enflamed with anger and shame.

A significant mitigating factor is the manipulation of Rochmont by Charalois, the vengeful cuckolded husband. Once Rochfort's wrath has cooled and he sees his daughter's corpse before him, he reels from the horrifying issue of his conflicting roles:

[to Charalois:] I pronounc'd it
As a Judge onely, and friend to justice,
And zealous in defence of your wrong'd honour,
Broke all the tyes of nature: and cast off
The love and soft affection of a father.
I in your cause, put on a Scarlet robe
Of red died cruelty, but in returne,
You have advanc'd for me no flag of mercy:
I look'd on you, as a wrong'd husband, but
You clos'd your eyes against me, as a father.⁴¹⁴

From his position of honour at the play's opening, Rochfort is reduced through his own good but conflicting intentions to a state of bewildered misery, as the public office in which he excelled has led him down an agonising path to disillusionment and despair:

. . . I rays'd

⁴¹² 1.2.124-7.

⁴¹³ 3.1.339-43.

⁴¹⁴ 4.4.183-92.

The building of my life for seventy yeeres
Upon so sure a ground . . .
Vertue that was my patronesse, betrayd me.⁴¹⁵

Ultimately, the play does not condemn Rochmont or pose a serious challenge to the authority of elderly magistrates. However it does suggest (among other things⁴¹⁶) that old men are still susceptible to the dictates of emotion, and should know when to step aside and let others act in their stead. After his resignation in 1.1, Rochmont should not even have been acting as a judge; instead, he overestimates his capacity for impartiality and self-control. He is undermined not by his age, but by an irreconcilable conflict of roles which he does not recognise until it is too late. *The Fatal Dowry* complicates the idealisation of the magistrate with the recognition that the judicial is one, but not the only, sphere of a magistrate's life.

Novall Senior, on the other hand, is a rudimentary example of the type of character which served to subvert rather than reinforce the claims of age. Villainous old magistrates were not a particularly well-developed vein in the drama of this time, however a few examples illustrate the existence of a counter-trend to the idealisation of elders.

II. Vilification: aged ambition in office

The soldier Romont, his honesty affronted by Novall Senior's corruption,

⁴¹⁵ 5.2.164-7.

⁴¹⁶ Huston Diehl, for instance, makes the interesting suggestion that the 'iconographic' quality of Rochfort being blindfolded before he is presented with his daughter's case 'associates [him] with the idea of impartial justice and thus enables the audience to see his condemnation of his daughter in terms other than the personal or psychological' ('Iconography and Characterization in English Tragedy, 1585-1642' 17.

reminds him that he owes a debt of gratitude to men such as Romont who fight to preserve their countrymen's safety.

Why Ile tell you,
Thou purple-colour'd man, I am one to whom
Thou owest the meanes thou hast of sitting there
A corrupt Elder.⁴¹⁷

The biblical reference in the final line is to the Book of Susanna in the Apocrypha in which the beautiful and chaste young wife of Joachim is desired by two elder judges, who plan to blackmail her into submission. Slipping into her garden when she is alone to bathe, they demand her compliance, threatening to raise a hue and cry that they have caught her there in the embraces of a young lover. She refuses, they carry out their promise, and she is put on public trial for adultery; the penalty is death. All the judges and the jury believe the elders, but the young man Daniel stands up and declares her innocence, then proves it by a simple cross-examination of the old men. Caught in their own snare, the corrupt elders are stoned to death.

The book was widely-known in this period, and contemporary references to 'wicked', 'corrupt', 'lustful' elders frequently assume knowledge of it. Sometime prior to 1569, Thomas Garter wrote a moral comedy of the story, entitled *The Most Virtuous and Godly Susanna*, and his work provides valuable insight into the way this simple story reflected and magnified social desires to qualify claims for status and respect on the basis of age *per se*. The prevalence of the theme is significant in the context of this discussion, as it indicates some of the qualifications which adhered to elderly

⁴¹⁷ 1.2.124-7

magistrates.⁴¹⁸ The references were not limited to criticising lust, but generalised to include other forms of iniquity, as in *The Fatal Dowry*.

Ambition was a fault heavily censured in the old. Involvement in public affairs was deemed an honour, not a right, of elderly men, granted under the implicit understanding of two points: that they serve the public good; and that in due course they yield place to younger, abler men. Elders who refused to meet these terms were viewed with strong disapproval, and could be forcibly removed. *The Tragedy of Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt* (Fletcher and Massinger, 1619) is illustrative of precisely this set of dynamics. The play survives only in manuscript and is an excellent instance of vilification being used to dramatise social control of elderly magistrates who have disregarded the terms of their power.

The play's topicality caused the play to be 'written, acted, censored, written again, within six weeks of [Barnavelt's] execution', after which a contemporary reported that 'our players have found the means to go through with the play of Barnavelt, and it hath had many spectators and received applause'.⁴¹⁹ Johan van Oldenbarnevelt was a 'lawyer, statesman, and, after William I the Silent, the second founding father of an independent Netherlands'⁴²⁰ – one of the most significant political figures in the Low Countries (and Europe generally) from the 1570s to his execution on 13 May, 1619. The politics of the play's historical circumstances are not of key importance here, however. While choosing to write a play on current international events, Fletcher and Massinger

⁴¹⁸It also connects to a social preoccupation with suppressing sexual desire in the old (see below, chapter six).

⁴¹⁹ *The Revels History of Drama in English*, iv. 1613-1660, ed. Lois Potter (London, 1981) 170, quoted in Hunter 489; G.E. Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, iii. 415.

still concentrated a great deal of effort in the character of Barnavelt. Essentially, he is not a wicked man, simply an aged statesman, unwilling to cede his public position to younger men. Consequently, his ambition drives him into arrogance, deceit, impiety and ignobility. Whereas Rochfort in *The Fatal Dowry* possessed a proper sense of his time to withdraw⁴²¹, Barnavelt resists, clinging to power with an insatiable desire for glory.

Throughout the play, Fletcher and Massinger signpost Barnavelt's deviation from accepted norms, sometimes in the form of other men's criticisms, at other times in his own declarations which often express a self-pitying focus upon his age, betraying an underlying recognition that he is breaking the terms upon which his society has already granted him extraordinary power and privilege. Barnavelt is jealous of the young Maurice, Prince of Orange:

and shall I then
Now in the sun-set of my daie of honour
Sitt downe, & with a boorish patience suffer
The Harvest that I labourd for, to be
Anothers spoile?

Must all theis glories vanish into darknes?
And Barnavelt passe with 'em, & glide away
Like a spent Exhalation?⁴²²

Modesbargen, Barnavelt's supporter, is the most acute analyst of his friend's fall into pride, paranoia and childishness (see 1.1.50-69). Nor is it difficult to understand why

⁴²⁰Oldenbarnevelt, Johan van', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1996).

⁴²¹Rochfort: 'old age, when one foot's in the grave,/ In many, when all humors else are spent/ Feeds no affection in them, but desire/ To adde height to the mountaine of their riches' (*Fatal Dowry* 1.2.34-7).

⁴²²1.1.32-8, 4.3.20-22. Because this is a little-studied play, I have chosen to quote more liberally from it rather than

Barnavelt's fall into wickedness is so swift and unerring, since he articulates but utterly rejects the criticisms which may legitimately be levelled at him.

The fire of honour, which is dead in you
Burnes hotly in me . . .
. . . you shall find that the desire of glory
Was the last frailety wisemen ere putt of[f].⁴²³

When other colleagues try to warn him from his destructive course, they too stress the unacceptability of an old man refusing to recede gracefully from politics. But Barnavelt replies by indulging in a litany of disingenuous self-pity:

Taynted, & torne in honour must I perish
And must theis silver curles, o you unthanckfull,
Theis emblemes of my frostie care, & travells,
For you, & for the state, fall with disgraces?
.
Bury my memory, raze out my name,
My forty yeares endeavors, wryte indurst,
That your great Prince, may blow 'em into nothing.⁴²⁴

Trying to assume the role of spurned and unappreciated elder, he instead manages only to become a distasteful old man who feels sorry for himself because he is no longer the centre of attention and praise.⁴²⁵ Barnavelt's outdated ambition becomes a sink that drains away from him all honour and respect. In his place steps the Prince of Orange, whose calm competence has been dramatically contrasted all along with the old man's rashness and irrationality. Ironically, each behaves in a manner conventionally attributed to the other's age group, and in this way Barnavelt's replacement becomes in part simply a matter of logical necessity:

summarise, as its verse is often very effective.

⁴²³ 1.2.124-7.

⁴²⁴ 3.1.86-96.

all that plot against the generall good
Learne from this mans example, great in age,
Greater in wealth, & in authoritie,
But matchles in his worldly pollicie,
That there is one above, that do's deride
The wisest counsailes, that are misaplide.⁴²⁶

Barnavelt remains defiant to the end and hence does not become a figure of pathos. His demise is unsoftened by social forgiveness, making it quite clear that in the society of Fletcher and Massinger's play world and, arguably, the world outside of the playhouse, old men behaving like Barnavelt and refusing to cede power to subsequent generations when appropriate could be forcibly expelled from power.

The vilification of old men as exemplified in *Barnavelt*, which can be interpreted as one form of social response to the arbitrary granting of public power and influence by virtue of age alone, occurs elsewhere in the drama, one example being Cardinal Wolsey in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. Wolsey's age is not made a point of *special* focus until his fall and final illness. Then, unlike in *Barnavelt*, vilification turns to pathos, as well as a measure of forgiveness.⁴²⁷ The most instructive other example to consider is in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, which does not expel its two ambitious elders, but instead by showing their involvement in the destruction of its young hero conveys a more bitter sense of the dreadful results which may ensue when such men cling stubbornly to government at all cost.

'Was ever man so proud as this Martius?' asks Sicinius Velutus.⁴²⁸ Caius

⁴²⁵See also 3.1.178-190, 4.3.162-4, 4.5.9-12.

⁴²⁶ 5.1.214-19.

⁴²⁷ See *Henry VIII* 4.2.48-68.

⁴²⁸ 1.1.252.

Martius's pride can hardly be denied, but it is a consistent feature of Sicinius and his ally Junius Brutus that they possess in double measure the faults they attribute to the object of their envy. ('Tell me,' says Menenius to them, 'In what enormity is Martius poor in that you two have not in abundance?'⁴²⁹) While Coriolanus strides with uncompromising integrity and stubbornness to his own destruction, these two craven tribunes creep wraith-like in his shadow, plotting his demise in spiteful whispers like schoolyard children. They are cowards whose age has borne rotten fruit, overripe in ambition but 'infant-like' in mentality.⁴³⁰

Caius Martius's victories do not interest the tribunes, who (like Barnavelt) are concerned not for the public good but for their own status. Ironically, although they profess to be protecting the plebeians from patrician scorn and oppression, Sicinius and Brutus share his low opinion of the people, whom they view as mindless slaves to every passing fancy.⁴³¹ In the heated clash of 3.1, Coriolanus himself speaks for the people's interests as he bluntly scorns their 'representatives':

What should the people do with these bald tribunes,
On whom depending, their obedience fails
To th' greater bench?⁴³²

Sicinius tries to seize him, a ludicrous gesture that indicates how far he has forgotten himself. By extension, it also visually emphasises the enormous difference between their strength of personality and will. Further, it encapsulates the struggle of old men to retain their power over a world in which they are no longer pre-eminent.

⁴²⁹ 2.1.13-17.

⁴³⁰ 2.1.35-45. There is definite proof that Sicinius is elderly, in 3.1.175-79; 2.1.11-13 also suggests that they both are.

⁴³¹ See e.g., 2.1.213-15, 226-29.

The tribunes experience a short-lived triumph in Coriolanus's banishment. However when he returns with the intention to raze the city, all that these greybeards do is plead with Menenius to intercede and save their skins; the people begin to turn upon them, and it is only through Coriolanus's self-sacrifice that they survive to celebrate the preservation of Rome. By the time that the play ends, the older generation seems to deserve very little respect. It may be significant that one of Coriolanus's last, defiant, words is at once a rejection and an embracing of his (relative) youthfulness – 'Alone I did it. "Boy!"'.⁴³³ The dynamic between Coriolanus and the tribunes forms part of a larger structure in the play, one with Coriolanus at the centre of a cluster of older people (Sicinius, Brutus, Menenius and Volumnia) all of whom practise the unscrupulous pragmatism and dishonesty, and opportunistic hypocrisy which he so loathes. At the play's end, it is they who survive to carry on their power games, while Coriolanus's mangled body lies onstage, an indictment of their decayed ambitions.

⁴³² 3.1.164-66.

⁴³³ 5.6.116.

III. Circumscription: the comedy of incompetence

Menenius⁴³⁴ is another candidate for inclusion in the previous section, although ‘vilification’ is too extreme for Shakespeare’s critique. However his behaviour towards the plebeians is at best ambiguous. He does not have a high opinion of their intelligence; on the other hand, he does strive to be a moderate voice when others are being rash or extreme. Yet his very intransigence diminishes his admirability, and as a figure of elderly public authority he fails to inspire confidence. Part of what encourages an ambivalent audience response towards Menenius is his incomprehension of Coriolanus; despite their long association, the old man thinks Coriolanus is the sort of man to be swayed by a good meal⁴³⁵ – that is, he measures Coriolanus by his own inclinations and values. This folly connects him with another, popular, character type; Menenius is a kindred spirit to Polonius, the classic satirical stereotype of the aged counsellor. Polonius too resists categorisation, since he is certainly not idealised, but at the same time is not entirely condemned nor made ridiculous to the degree more typical of his kind.

In many other plays of the time, however there is a much stronger vein of laughter and scorn directed at one type of character in particular – the old Justice of the Peace. The social attitudes which emerge from considering these characters reveal a ‘method’ – not systematically constructed, but developed through generations of social

⁴³⁴ That an actor can choose to play him as old may be inferred from the fact that he is regarded as a father-figure to Coriolanus. See also 5.3.8-10.

⁴³⁵ 5.1.50-58.

interactions – by which English society could balance a belief in the value of elderly authority with an equally strong recognition of its practical limitations. ‘Comic circumscription’ is not simply a diluted version of vilification. The elders who are subjected to ridicule in these instances still remain within the pale of their society (hence ‘*circum*-scription’); they are disciplined, corrected, acknowledge their errors or weaknesses, and are permitted therefore to continue their social participation, in a reduced capacity. This final section will illustrate two points: first, that the dramatic representations of Justices of the Peace functioned as part of the containment and control of elderly authority, and second, that these representations were affirmations of the social authority structure more generally. By depicting some officials as incompetent old men whose authority could be scrutinised and revoked, playwrights gave expression to the contingency understood to underlie Elizabethan and Stuart social order as a whole. Those in positions of authority, whatever their age, were reminded of their obligations to the governed, who could in turn experience a level of satisfaction at seeing their own informal powers confirmed onstage. An introduction to justices of the peace is a prerequisite for an appreciation of features of the office and its incumbents that playwrights drew upon and distorted, and for an understanding of how the ridicule of aged magistrates in the drama may have contributed to the maintenance of social order.

One of the major successes of the Tudors was to extend the powers of central government into the provinces, achieving a level of political organisation and control previously unattained. Intensification of local government was crucial for this process,

and in this context, the already well-established office of JP was expanded so greatly that it was 'allowed to engross virtually all of local government'.⁴³⁶ These men headed local law enforcement, as well as being responsible for a rapidly increasing number of administrative duties. Very importantly, they became middle men between the crown and local communities. As a result, they were particularly likely to become foci for ordinary people's frustration and resentment at the intrusions of central government into their everyday lives. JPs operated within a highly contingent authority structure at this time:

The realities of what perhaps hardly deserves the name of a system involved a vast network of altogether informal relationships and arrangements because it was recognised that the locality had its own social structure upon which action would have to rely: social superiors naturally exercised rule over their inferiors, even if both remained ultimately responsible to king and Council. The carrying out of policy and even the enforcement of the law were liable to depend far more on the normal hierarchies of this society than on any bureaucratic channels of command. This is a theme . . . [whose] overriding importance should be remembered.⁴³⁷

The task of the JP was to steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of crown and people.

Considerable social prestige increasingly accompanied the position. Despite the work involved for a conscientious JP, the post attracted no shortage of candidates, for it was the prime demonstration of a gentleman's membership of the county's elite.

Furthermore, it also brought local power, the ability to protect friends and strike at enemies in innumerable petty ways.⁴³⁸ Apparently, the rising number of JPs during the sixteenth century was not due simply to greater government initiatives in the provinces,

⁴³⁶ Elton 464.

⁴³⁷ Elton 462.

but to a growing demand among the gentry, who constituted the majority of incumbents. JPs thus were usually men of relative wealth in their community, landed; they also tended to be somewhat better educated than the gentry as a whole. In sum, they 'constituted an economic, social and educational elite in each county'.⁴³⁹

They were not, however necessarily or even predominantly old. As Jaques describes, 'the justice,/ In fair round belly with good capon lin'd' was usually a middle-aged man⁴⁴⁰. Although exact figures on ages do not survive, on the basis of what information remains the office does not appear to have been reserved in any way for elderly men. This makes all the more interesting the phenomenon of the old JP in the drama, and supports a view of such characters from the perspective of England's public authority structure and the place of old men within it.

A point of departure is *Ram Alley* (Lording Barry, 1608-10). Possessing many features of 'city comedies', it contains amidst scheming young men and women, and ageing parents, an old JP named Tutchim. He is a satisfying example with which to start because Barry struck a balance, making the old magistrate neither entirely incompetent nor particularly clever or corrupt, so he remains within the acceptable bounds of his society while still exposing his office and age to mild ridicule. He acts primarily as a friend to the other old man in the play, Sir Oliver Smallshanks, father to the conniving young hero William, and the two frequently function as a comic pair. Chief among Tutchim's qualities is a discrepancy between word and action; specifically, he is a

⁴³⁸ Hirst 43; see also Elton 465, 470.

⁴³⁹ Graves and Silcock 200-201.

⁴⁴⁰ *As You Like It*, 2.7.153-55.

coward. He swaggers shamelessly, only to scurry away when confronted. Not surprisingly, therefore, he and his officers are for the most part ineffectual at maintaining order. His other notable foible is a fondness for drink, and at one point he enters thoroughly besotted.⁴⁴¹ When he is actually exercising his duties his inebriation makes him loquacious; at these points, not just old age but the whole system of law enforcement receives a light reproof, as the JP makes himself ridiculous by peppering his talk with Latin phrases and silly figures of speech.⁴⁴² In the end, though, he presides over the informal hearing by which the play's tensions are resolved. Like the rest of the characters, he rides the waves of intrigue and mishap and arrives intact to restore the circle of social harmony with which the play ends. In the course of the play, his age and position are mocked but not overthrown – and the foundations of authority are rattled but not fractured in the process.

Both the magistracy generally and elderly magistrates specifically undergo a more thorough and severe examination in Middleton's *The Phoenix*. In this play, the system of law enforcement, and the law as a whole, is questioned, through the character of Justice Falso, a cleverer man than Tutchim, who possesses a level of moral corruption which seriously qualifies the power he wields by right of age. In tandem with his presentation of an old king whose judgement is weak, Middleton seeks in this play not to dismiss the aged entirely from a role in the power structure, but certainly to check and control their access. It is important to note that Middleton does not construct a

⁴⁴¹ {4.2} ll.1424-30; numbers in parentheses refer to the act and scene numbers in Peter Corbin's and Douglas Sedge's edition, which also numbers the lines continuously without reference to act and scene divisions.

⁴⁴² e.g., {4.4} ll.1953-8.

black and white dichotomy of good and bad, young and old, in *The Phoenix*; rather, his intent seems consistently to be directed toward containment and balance, assertion of the young without indiscriminate rejection of the elder generation – and punishment of dishonesty across the board.

Falso, as his name implies, uses his age and position to cloak a variety of iniquities, chiefly greed and lechery. These merge in his attempt to force his niece to marry him, an act of incestuous desire, avarice and betrayal of trust (since he is guardian of her and her 5000-crown dowry). Although Falso has a relaxed attitude towards incest, Middleton takes pains not to let this moral transgression overshadow the character entirely. In the context of this play, with its ‘puritanical’ young hero Phoenix, this is no mean feat. Middleton achieves this partly by making Falso clever and permitting him to develop a rapport with the audience, through asides. In Falso’s first appearance, for example, he confides that the way to please him is by offering bribes through a third party.⁴⁴³ As he makes clear, not only does he cheat – he enjoys the very charades by which he does so. Acting is one of his pleasures – the role of august magistrate, or of loving uncle, for example.⁴⁴⁴ Still, the audience knows his real nature, and when Falso presents the girl’s true case to her, he reaches an unacceptable degree of moral indifference. However by following their encounter immediately with a comical meeting between Falso and a deranged old scrivener named Tangle, Middleton diverts the audience’s attention away from their potential ambivalence. The two men’s lengthy

⁴⁴³ 1.6.50-6.

⁴⁴⁴ e.g., 1.6.91-3.

exchange⁴⁴⁵ at the same time develops the critique of the legal system which runs alongside and intersects with the issue of Falso's hypocrisy as an elderly Justice of the Peace.

Middleton continues to develop these currents in the next scene (3.1), which brings together the corrupt JP and the virtuous prince-in-disguise. Falso's servingmen have been caught robbing Phoenix and his servant on the roadway, and Falso must play the role of JP whilst also extricating them from the situation. He reminisces happily such adventures in his youth:

I have been a youth myself: I ha' seen the day I could have told money out of other men's purses. . . . But those days are past with me; and, a' my troth, I think I am a greater thief now, and in no danger. I can take my ease, sit in my chair, look in your faces now, and rob you; make you bring your money by authority, put off your hat, and thank me for robbing of you.⁴⁴⁶

This speech delivers a challenge to respect for elderly authority and for Justices of the Peace. Yet both social institutions will still remain unshaken at the play's end, despite the strain inflicted by Falso's wickedness.

Even the perspicuous Phoenix is initially deceived by Falso's age. He soon realises his mistake, however and when it comes Falso's turn to be on the wrong side of the bench, he is dealt a mixture of discipline and mercy which would be surprising had not Middleton all along been careful to make him a fundamentally appealing, even compelling, character. His grey-haired misdemeanours are a very salutary counterpoise to Phoenix, whose gravity and lack of humour threaten at times to overburden the play.

⁴⁴⁵ 2.3.101-278.

⁴⁴⁶ 3.1.59-75.

Despite Falso's flair for role-playing, there is also no reason to disbelieve him when he says of his niece, 'Sh'as left her dowry with me, but she's gone:/ I'd rather have had her love than her money'.⁴⁴⁷ Primarily, it is his engaging personality which lightens the seriousness of his injuries to the authority of old age and the law. That there is no intention to use him as a vehicle for general rejection of the elderly, or for radical criticism of the authority structure, is clear from both the form and content of the final scene. Power is transferred, not wrested, from old to young, and the magistracy is purged but in no way is its value or that of the justice system ultimately called into question, in spite of hints during the course of the play. Yet the urgency with which Middleton seems to be critiquing the law should not be underestimated. The law is 'foul', being practiced by corrupt charlatans who must be removed (like cancers). As Hunter puts it, 'The Justice of the Peace, the attorney, and the scrivener are shown as an unholy trinity of tricksters who betray the wife, protect and profit from the thief, and decline to save the innocent from the powerful'.⁴⁴⁸ The JP, being the most powerful (and thereby most harmful) of the three, receives the greatest punishment. To his chagrin, the old man is pardoned but stripped of his office and of the dowry, and he faces an uncertain future. However his situation is not as grim as he makes it out to be, and there is little doubt that he remains within the pale of his society – but 'under reformation'.⁴⁴⁹

A similar character occurs in Fletcher's *The Elder Brother* (1625)⁴⁵⁰, a play which

⁴⁴⁷ 5.1.109-10.

⁴⁴⁸ Hunter 312.

⁴⁴⁹ 5.1.203.

⁴⁵⁰ Date of first performance, as given in *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, ed. Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson. Gurr is more tentative in his Appendix, giving (?1625).

underscores and develops more fully the contractual basis of elderly authority and of the formal system of social regulation. Primarily through the JP Brisac, Fletcher poses a serious challenge to an age-based hierarchy of power, using the weaknesses and vices of old age as both metaphorical and literal manifestations of faults in the social order. Further, Fletcher strengthens the critique by making the chief vehicle of criticism another old man, Brisac's elder brother Miramont. Brisac has more facets and depths to his corruption than Falso, his actions have farther-reaching and more unpleasant effects upon the community, and his failings are clearly identified as outgrowths of his age. Unlike Falso, too, he does not invite indulgent amusement from an audience. Brisac is ignorant, lecherous, greedy, proud and ambitious, and devoid of compensatory virtues, which certainly discourages audience sympathy and complicity.

The legal and judicial systems are criticised not only through Brisac's abuse of power – corruption, cruelty to his servants – but also by his use of law to violate primogeniture, which in this play is given the force of *natural* law, sacrosanct even if legally subject to being overruled. His attempt to disinherit his eldest son has the effect of exposing the legal system's fallibility and potential for abuse. Social disorder is an inevitable result: brothers turn upon brothers, fathers upon sons, children defy parents. On top of this, servants and tenants are being molested by a hypocritical master who disrupts the household unit with attempted adultery.

All of Brisac's faults emerge in 1.2. Uneducated himself, Brisac scorns his elder son's studiousness as impractical and unprofitable, the only yardstick of worth being worldly gain. Brisac's shortcoming is highlighted by his brother's response; Miramont,

though no better educated, has 'a learned faith' – a belief in the value of his nephew's knowledge in spite of not understanding it himself.⁴⁵¹ Miramont's criticism of Brisac is given weight by the former's age and deportment; thus, the play's scrutiny of age-based magistracy is itself authorised by the critic being an old man – but one who adheres to social and moral codes. Miramont becomes a mouthpiece for scathing reproofs of JPs.

True learning, he says,

is not to be a Justice of Peace, as you are,
And palter out your time ith' penall Statutes,
To heare the curious Tenets controverted
Betweene a Protestant Constable, and a Jesuit Cobler,
To picke naturall Philosophie out of bawdry
When your Worship's pleas'd to correctifie a Lady,
Nor 'tis not the maine morall of blinde Justice
(Which is deepe learning) when your worships Tenants
Bring a light cause, and heavie Hennes before yee,
Both fat and feesible, a Goose or Pig,
And then you sit like equity with both hands
Weighing indifferently the state oth' question.⁴⁵²

As his further observations indicate, Miramont objects to a system which grants power and privilege according to age regardless of ability. In his eyes, Brisac is no more than a 'monstrous peece of ignorance in office . . . that hast no more knowledge than thy Clerke infuses'.⁴⁵³ The exchange in 2.1 initiates this play's inquiry into what it is that constitutes wisdom or folly, ability or weakness, in elderly magistrates. By using Miramont as the primary voice of criticism Fletcher ensures a tone of correction rather than rejection of the old. He maintains a constant dynamic between critique of age's foibles and critique of the judiciary, which is rife with wickedness. Everything that is

⁴⁵¹ 2.1.51-63.

⁴⁵² 2.1.36-47.

wrong with the justice system is identified with the vices of age. Fletcher distils a host of faults in the character of Brisac the JP, so that when the old man is finally punished, both the elderly and the justice system are checked in one sweep.

Fletcher uses some of the stock comic devices already discussed, to undermine the authority of Brisac's age. Wielding his double power of JP and master, he forces a tenant's wife to be his mistress, but needs strong aphrodisiacs to overcome impotency.⁴⁵⁴ Once Miramont begins to oppose his brother, the aggrieved wife and her husband have a means of escape – and revenge upon this 'old lecherous Goat in authority'.⁴⁵⁵ The wife arranges a rendezvous with Brisac, while Miramont and the husband observe in hiding. What the two men relish more than anything is the thought of the JP's hypocritical exterior being stripped away like a flayed skin:

O th'infinite fright that will assaile this Gentleman!
The quarterns, tertians, and quotidians
That will hang like Sergeants on his worships shouldiers!
The humiliation of the flesh of this man!
This grave austere man will be wondred at.
How will those solemne lookes appeare to me,
And that severe face, that spake chaines and shackles?⁴⁵⁶

First Andrew steps forward, and his threats of public exposure ('Ile . . . have [a] Ballad made of't', printed and then 'pasted upon all the posts in *Paris*') set Brisac into a flutter of fear. Miramont emphasises the unholy alliance of aged and judicial corruption:

Who may this be? sure this is some mistake:
Let me see his face, weares he not a false beard? [probably tweaking
Brisac's chin hairs]

⁴⁵³ 2.1.102-3.

⁴⁵⁴ 4.1.80-6.

⁴⁵⁵ 4.4.9.

⁴⁵⁶ 4.4.28-34.

It cannot be *Brisac* that worthy Gentleman,
The pillar and patron of his Country;
He is the punisher and not the doer,
This is not judicious *Brisac*.⁴⁵⁷

The Justice's greatest fear – to have 'The vizard of his hypocrisie pull'd off', be 'put out of Commision with disgrace,/ And held incapable of bearing Office/ Ever hereafter'⁴⁵⁸ – is the means of his final undoing. Having abused the privileges of age, he receives his comeuppance from an alliance of young and old which stresses the general unacceptability of his conduct. Age itself is not rebuked, for Miramont takes the role of peacemaker, and the last word.

Middleton's play *The Widow* (1616)⁴⁵⁹ is another which could be discussed in this context, as an instance in which law and authority are emphatically questioned and tested, and their contingent nature heavily stressed through the ridicule of an aged JP. Middleton, however is equally concerned in *The Widow* to explore and criticise stereotypes of old men, particularly old husbands (this is discussed further in chapter six). *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) by Ben Jonson, master of acerbic irreverence, is a far more interesting and rewarding work with which to close this discussion of circumscription.

The demolition of Justice Overdo as a figure of authority in *Bartholomew Fair* is part of an overall movement in the play questioning the hierarchies of power upon which virtually all forms of social order rest. Jonson produces three old men whose power and influence in their respective spheres rely heavily upon their age, and he

⁴⁵⁷ 4.4.109-16.

⁴⁵⁸ 4.4.121-5.

reveals their fallibility by making all three fall as a result of a common fault: an inflated sense of their own importance. Wasp, Busy and Overdo each come to accept their share in the collective heritage of human folly and error, finding that neither wisdom nor authority are necessary endowments of old age. Wasp and Busy demonstrate this in comparatively limited paternalistic and religious contexts. Overdo, however is a weak spoke in the wheel of public authority; he prompts scrutiny of the weaknesses in an age-biased system, and channels some of the play's energy towards suggesting amendments to that system. Once more, neither aged authority nor the system in which it has a place are ultimately rejected. They are corrected, but by the end of the play they cement even more firmly the bonds of mutual interest and respect which make human society the only viable alternative to chaos.

Justice Overdo, prominent member of his community, 'lately of the Quorum'⁴⁶⁰ and currently performing his duty as judge in the Court of Piepowders for the St. Bartholomew's Day Fair, first enters in 2.1 disguised as a village idiot/madman. Immediately, his loud self-praise, his ridiculous declarations of duty 'in justice's name, and the King's, and for the commonwealth'⁴⁶¹ and his self-conscious aim to be the form of the 'wise magistrate'⁴⁶² all distinguish him as a genuine old fool and coxcomb. Proud of his classical education, smugly self-righteous, he blames his inferiors (the constables and watchmen) for his own acts of incompetence⁴⁶³ and refuses to allow that gentlemen

⁴⁵⁹ Date of first performance given by A.H. Bullen in *The Works of Thomas Middleton*.

⁴⁶⁰ 2.1.6.

⁴⁶¹ 2.1.41-2.

⁴⁶² See above, section I of this chapter.

⁴⁶³ 2.1.29-31.

are capable of criminal activity. This will be one factor undermining his ability to be a good magistrate – he is one of those who ‘live in high places’⁴⁶⁴ and from there administer condescension, as well as a bias-laden version of justice, to his social inferiors.

The reverential regard in which he is held by members of the lower order contrasts strongly with both his evident incompetence, and the opinions of family, friends and social peers. This discrepancy emphasises that ineptitude in authority has the potential for significant negative effects upon its subjects (Trouble-All stands as an extreme emblem of this idea). Overdo’s pride in his position is just petty tyranny and egotism: ‘I am glad to hear my name is their terror yet this is doing of justice’.⁴⁶⁵ He learns that this is really a perversion of justice, that holding others in awe by virtue of prestige and age rather than genuine wisdom and virtue is wrong. The schooling of Overdo in turn licenses the audience, if they so choose, to examine the qualities of those men, old and young alike, who wield power and influence over them.

In his earnest desire to realise his self-image of flawless elderly wisdom, Overdo embarks upon a quest to rescue young Edgeworth from falling into evil company. The joke is that Edgeworth is not a naive youth, like Bartholomew Cokes, but a practised cutpurse, good at heart but in no way in need of Overdo’s attentions. Overdo is a classic old windbag when he launches into a moral oration for Edgeworth’s benefit – though he is really most of all in love with the sound of his own voice and his self-appointed role as elderly mentor: ‘Stay, young man’. he exhorts, ‘and despise not the wisdom of

⁴⁶⁴ 2.1.32.

these few hairs, that are grown grey in care of thee'.⁴⁶⁶ From the Justice's inflated sense of his reverend mission arises the first disruption of peace at the fair, as Wasp accuses Overdo of being '[t]he patriarch of the cutpurses' and falls to beating him⁴⁶⁷; ironically, it is two old men who initiate disorder while their juniors attempt to subdue them.

This first setback gives Overdo brief pause and he initially resolves to 'make no more orations'⁴⁶⁸, but then with an astoundingly resilient self-confidence he recovers his spirit within thirty-five lines of smug, self-congratulatory soliloquy. However it is in the ballad scene of 3.5 that Jonson's satire upon pompous elderly authority reaches its high-water mark. The ballad itself adopts the voice of elderly authority warning young men from becoming cutpurses: 'Youth, youth, thou hadst better been starved by thy nurse,/ Than live to be hanged for cutting a purse'.⁴⁶⁹ Predictably, gullible Overdo finds the song entirely to his satisfaction. But this time, as he is once again accused of taking a purse, his own words are 'turned upon me, like swords' as his wife calls him 'a lewd and pernicious enormity (as Master Overdo calls him)'.⁴⁷⁰ Carried to the stocks, he still persists in his delusions of self-importance, anticipating with what heightened admiration he will be regarded once '[t]he world' knows 'how I can bear adversity':

and it will beget a kind of reverence toward me hereafter, even from mine enemies, when they shall see I carry my calamity nobly, and that it doth neither break me, nor bend me.⁴⁷¹

Trouble-All seems to him to be further proof of his own worthiness, but the old man's

⁴⁶⁵ 2.2.25-6.

⁴⁶⁶ 2.6.2-3.

⁴⁶⁷ 2.6.134-5.

⁴⁶⁸ 3.3.1.

⁴⁶⁹ 3.5.71-2.

⁴⁷⁰ 3.5.196-7.

self-righteous gratification is swiftly deflated when he learns the truth – that the man was driven mad by Overdo’s unnecessary severity in the previous year’s Court of Piepowders. Trouble-All embodies the extension to absurdity of an unthinking obedience to authority; he will not eat, drink, or even relieve himself without a warrant from Justice Overdo. However the irony lies emerges that it need not be a genuine warrant at all. Anyone can sign ‘Adam Overdo’ and satisfy the madman with this name scrawled on paper. This farce represents the potential for the system of order and authority to be emptied of all meaning and force if it loses the willing consent of the governed on the one hand, or the responsible conduct of the governing on the other. The power of magistrates and their colleagues rests in a social agreement that their names and titles *do* mean something. Trouble-All’s illness points out that this implicit contract between the people and their officers can only be maintained through either mad, blind obedience *or* a mutual exchange of duties and respect.

Immediately after this first unpleasant surprise, Overdo overhears two officers commenting upon his reputation, and a light begins to dawn in his dim consciousness:

Justice Overdo is a very parantory [i.e. peremptory] person . . . and a severe justicer . . . and he will be angry too, when him list, that’s more: and when he is angry, be it right or wrong; he has the law on’s side, ever.⁴⁷²

Yet it nearly proves impossible to teach this old dog new tricks. It seems as though Overdo feels, as Kent expresses when he too is put in the stocks under rather different

⁴⁷¹ 4.1.25-8.

⁴⁷² 4.1.60-70.

circumstances, that 'I am too old to learn'.⁴⁷³ Despite all that he has seen and heard, he must play out his self-appointed role as 'the example of Justice, and Mirror of Magistrates: the true top of formality, and scourge of enormity'.⁴⁷⁴ Only when he finds that his solicitude for Edgeworth has been spent upon a criminal, his compensation to Trouble-All actually paid to another young man in disguise, and finds his wife drunk and dressed as a prostitute, does he fall into a humbled silence. As Wasp succinctly confesses after his own comeuppance, 'the date of my authority is out; I must think no longer to reign, my government is at an end. He that will correct another, must want fault in himself'⁴⁷⁵ – and so too for Overdo, although he retains his official position as JP.

To the young gentleman Quarlous falls the pleasure of shattering the old fool's illusions and reminding him that 'you are but Adam, flesh and blood!'.⁴⁷⁶ Overdo, in a gesture of conciliation, invites everyone to his house for supper. Once again the authority of both age and state has been tested, exposed to deserved censure and ridicule, and deemed still to furnish a valid foundation upon which to base a system of social order. The intentions to which Overdo pledges himself are also those of the play itself: 'Ad correctionem, non ad destructionem; Ad aedificandum, non ad diruendum' – For correction, not destruction; for building up, not tearing down.⁴⁷⁷

Before concluding, it should be made clear that I do not intend to suggest that these play-texts ought to be taken strictly (or even primarily) as serious comments upon

⁴⁷³ *King Lear* 2.2.127.

⁴⁷⁴ 5.6.20-1.

⁴⁷⁵ 5.4.85-7.

⁴⁷⁶ 5.6.89.

⁴⁷⁷ 5.6.101-2.

the structures of authority, law enforcement and justice in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Rather, I am pointing to aspects of these plays which offer critical commentary on these structures and, in some cases, suggestions for improvement. *Bartholomew Fair*, for instance, is overall an uproarious farcical comedy which satirises and pokes fun at numerous other social elements and persons. This play, and the others discussed here, are not being viewed as dramatic equivalents of social treatises; had their authors been primarily interested in the didactic aspect of their undertaking, they probably would have chosen a less 'entertaining' medium. Still, there is a measure of 'pleasant instruction' in the plays, open to a fair degree of interpretation. Playwrights in general did have an axe to grind with the prevailing authority structures which sought to limit their activities (or eliminate, in the case of the London aldermen). Subtle criticism of, and artful attacks upon, the elderly hierarchs of their society were one means for playwrights to express their discontents, and to thumb their noses at the City Fathers and their ilk.

Coda: majesty and magistracy in *The Second Part of Henry IV*

The foregoing plays in this chapter trace a spectrum of attitudes and responses to the authority of old men in public office; some of these also extend their critiques to reflect upon systems of public control more generally. Shakespeare's *Second Part of Henry the Fourth* is a fine play for summation because it contains instances of all three modes of response to elderly authority, and uses them to advance the ideal of an

alliance between old and young in the exercise of public office. The key characters in this regard are the Lord Chief Justice (idealised), Falstaff (vilified), and Justice Shallow (circumscribed);⁴⁷⁸ representing youth, is the Prince/King Hal. (The relationship between the Prince and the King will be dealt with later, in chapter seven.) The way that these four characters interrelate can be described as follows. The Lord Chief Justice and Falstaff are in implicit competition for the allegiance of Hal. The first officially holds office, the second confidently aspires to assume this position – and more – once the Prince becomes King; while the Lord Chief Justice is the pinnacle of elderly magistracy and dignity, Falstaff is its nadir. Bridging these two extremes is Shallow, who holds a position below that of the Lord Chief Justice but above Falstaff's; has no direct contact with the prince but as a JP he is one of the crown's representatives and exercises duties in this capacity; and who is neither a 'mirror for magistrates' nor a catalogue of degeneracy. In his position as bridge, he is often associated both directly and structurally (e.g., through parallel scenes) with Falstaff and the Lord Chief Justice. The ultimate effect of this entire dynamic is the ratification of certain old men's proximity to the upper reaches of power, the confirmation of other elders' more limited role in lower levels of authority, and the expulsion of those who mistake the terms for social acceptance and try to force their participation without possessing any qualities to justify their demands.

The antagonists cross paths in the second scene of the play, which prefigures and structurally balances the final scene. In 1.2 it is the Lord Chief Justice who censures

⁴⁷⁸ Justice Silence, while not undeserving of appreciation, is not developed enough for inclusion in this respect.

Falstaff for his abdication of responsible behaviour in old age, while in 5.5. it is Hal with (notably) the Lord Chief Justice at his side. In 1.2, Falstaff first uses his customary tactic of pretending to be youthful, while simultaneously projecting the frailties of senescence upon his rival:

I heard say your lordship was sick. I hope your lordship goes abroad by advice. Your lordship, though not clean past your youth, have yet some smack of age in you, some relish of the saltiness of time in you; and I most humbly beseech your lordship to have a reverent care of your health.⁴⁷⁹

However this tactic is turned against him because the Lord Chief Justice – unlike Falstaff – is not insecure about his age.

Do you set down your name in the scroll of youth, that are written down old with all the characters of age? Have you not a moist eye, a dry hand, a yellow cheek, a white beard, a decreasing leg, an increasing belly? Is not your voice broken, your wind short, your chin double, your wit single, and every part about you blasted with antiquity? And will you yet call yourself young? Fie, fie, fie, sir John!⁴⁸⁰

As yet Falstaff is not unsettled by such a confrontation, and still has the effrontery to ask for a loan.⁴⁸¹ This thousand pounds becomes one of the links between the Lord Chief Justice and Shallow, from whom Falstaff successfully extracts the sum. At first glance, this seems to indicate Shallow's dim-wittedness in trusting Sir John; however as it turns out, he is not less perspicacious about Falstaff than is the Lord Chief Justice, but as a friend is simply in a better position to tolerate his indecencies. When the subject of the loan comes up in 5.5. (again, a significant parallel with 1.2), Shallow easily discerns the

⁴⁷⁹ 1.2.95-100.

⁴⁸⁰ 1.2.178-86. The Lord Chief Justice's description of Falstaff's voice is interesting; Falstaff is usually played with a deep, hearty voice, yet apparently it was supposed to be 'broken', i.e. rather weak and possibly quavering. This idea was suggested in a brief article which I came upon during research but I did not make a written note of its title or author.

⁴⁸¹ 1.2.123-4.

permanence of Falstaff's severance from the new king, and is the one to articulate that the old knight's credit has finally run out.⁴⁸²

At Falstaff's next encounter with his opponent in 2.1 there is again a bald contrast between their respective conduct as elderly men. As the former scrambles to avoid legitimate arrest, the latter enters the fray with a resounding command befitting his office: 'Keep the peace here, ho!'.⁴⁸³ This time, Falstaff tries to snub the Lord Chief Justice by donning an air of haughty and stubborn pride, but again his feeble effort at self-aggrandisement is instantly extinguished. 'You speak as having power to do wrong'. replies his rival, with evident immunity to the old knight's blustering, and Falstaff pettishly stoops to the childishness of 'tap for tap'.⁴⁸⁴ The indifference of the Lord Chief Justice is, more than anything, what exhausts Falstaff's resilience in the eyes of an audience. He steadily deteriorates into more and more of a tiresome swaggerer, and an envious, spiteful old man. The meeting between him and the Prince at the inn is a weak shadow of the revels in *Part 1*, darkened by Hal's regretful words and abrupt departure.⁴⁸⁵

Having thus established early in the play the trajectory of Falstaff's decline and the Lord Chief Justice's stability, Shakespeare introduces his bridge character, Justice Shallow, in 3.2. This enrolment scene resembles many of those in plays discussed above in section three, by getting substantial mileage out of the foibles of old age; it also depicts elderly corruption at work in a public post, but significantly, it is not Shallow

⁴⁸² 5.5.87.

⁴⁸³ 2.1.61.

⁴⁸⁴ 2.1.193.

but Sir John who is guilty. The effect of inducing laughter at Shallow's old age is never strong enough to alienate him from an audience's interest or sympathies, and this scene continues to increase the distance between audience and Falstaff in two ways: first, by interposing Shallow as an entertaining and likeable old man whose comical qualities permit a beneficial release of frustration at age and authority; and second, by showing Falstaff to be envious of, and spiteful and condescending towards a long-time friend, who (through his own honest efforts) enjoys greater material success and status in his twilight years than does the lazy, profligate knight.

Shallow possesses features from the typical old man's repertoire of weaknesses – garrulousness, repetitive speech, a tendency to reminisce and to boast (especially of his past adventures). Falstaff, in soliloquy, expounds contemptuously upon these faults, but instead of diminishing Shallow his words rebound upon himself, since he possesses in spades all those features which he derides in his good-natured friend, in addition to several of which Shallow is innocent. Sir John reminisces, lies, boasts, exaggerates, and appears to be bursting with bitter envy:

Lord, Lord, how subject we old men are to this vice of lying! [excepting himself,] . . . And now is this Vice's dagger become a squire, and talks as familiarly of John of Gaunt as if he had been sworn brother to him
The case of a treble hautboy was a mansion for him, a court. And now has he land and beefs.⁴⁸⁶

These 'lands and beefs' are precisely what Falstaff lacks, along with the authentic status and respect that would accompany them; his position and authority (as Hal's friend) are a delusion or worse (as captain of troops), a travesty. Falstaff's bribe-taking in 3.2

⁴⁸⁵ 2.4.361-66.

contrasts with Shallow's minor misuse of his office when the latter next appears in 5.1; he is willing to favour his servant's friend in an upcoming court case, but doesn't do so for money. While he is thus a little tarnished, he still remains untainted by greed and this distances him from Falstaff's decay. It is also important to note that Shallow's willingness to countenance a rascal has its parallel again in the Lord Chief Justice, who in 1.2 generously overlooks both Falstaff's knavery in the Gad's Hill robbery (a felony) and his insubordination. Shallow's leniency is hardly grounds for serious criticism and actually draws him closer to the Lord Chief Justice's sphere.

Falstaff further vents his jealous spleen in another vicious soliloquy⁴⁸⁷, which simply continues the process of his alienation because Shallow appears essentially undeserving of such scorn. Thinking the justice to be a dim-witted old fool, Falstaff fails to appreciate both his generosity and his acuity. Shallow has no reason to doubt the truth of his belief in Sir John's influence at court, hence his courtesies are also performed with a canny eye towards possible benefits: 'I will use him well, a friend i' th' court is better than a penny in purse'.⁴⁸⁸

Immediately after Falstaff's sneering reflections upon Shallow comes the Lord Chief Justice's elevation to the position of the new king's advisor. With ingenuous eloquence he defends himself and his office, manifesting a selfless dedication to ethical action which leaves Falstaff sullied by implicit comparison. The heart of his defence is the principle of representative authority – that is, his position as one of the king's agents

⁴⁸⁶ 3.2.303, 319-28.

⁴⁸⁷ 5.1.62-85.

⁴⁸⁸ 5.1.30-1.

and voices in the commonwealth:

I then [when he jailed Hal] did use the person of your father.
The image of his power lay then in me;
And in th'administration of his law,
While I was busy for the commonwealth,
Your highness pleased to forget my place,
The majesty and power of law and justice,
The image of the King whom I presented,
And struck me in my very seat of judgement;
Whereon, as an offender to your father,
I gave bold way to my authority
And did commit you. If the deed were ill,
Be you contented, wearing now the garland,
To have a son set your decrees at naught –
To pluck down justice from your awe-full bench,
To trip the course of law, and blunt the sword
That guards the peace and safety of your person,
Nay, more, to spurn at your most royal image,
And mock your workings in a second body?⁴⁸⁹

The new king ratifies the Lord Chief Justice's position, authority, and the principles he articulates, by personifying him as 'right Justice'⁴⁹⁰, and so reaffirming the coherence of the authority structure which maintains order in the realm. Shallow is clearly included in this whole system through the continuous associations made between himself and the Lord Chief Justice. The laughter which his quirks have roused along the way is ultimately not destructive of but revitalising to the authority structure, because he acts not only as a valve for mild hostility but also as a humanising link between the higher, more austere authority of the Lord Chief Justice and the ordinary majority of people (of the sort comprising most of the play's audience).

By 5.2, the bucolic atmosphere of the orchard scene cannot but be suffused with

⁴⁸⁹ 5.2.73-90.

⁴⁹⁰ 5.2.102.

heavy irony. Justice Silence's outbreak into song gives him a greater prominence than hitherto, and he inadvertently acquires an air of prophecy; he sings of Shrovetide – which is followed by Lent⁴⁹¹, and the reference is thus premonitory of Hal's rejection of Falstaff. Silence's burst of song is like an omen, a prodigy.⁴⁹² That Falstaff pays particular heed to Silence's good mood emphasises its specific and ominous relevance to him. With Pistol's appearance comes another reminder of Shallow's connection with the Lord Chief Justice and Hal, as Shallow declares with dignity, 'I am, sir, under the king in some authority'.⁴⁹³ By representing that overarching authority structure which will crush Falstaff, Shallow's presence and small statement overshadow the knight's cry of victory – 'Woe to my Lord Chief Justice!'⁴⁹⁴

The king's rejection of this white-haired jester is well-known. As the ultimate embodiment of earthly authority, he sheds his majesty upon all those in his favour, which includes very importantly the magistrates of his realm. The Lord Chief Justice fulfils all the requirements of the ideal, while Shallow is a comforting reassurance that there are less intimidating, more accessible (and fallible) members of that body of men; Falstaff's exclusion marks the limits of human imperfection beyond which tolerance will not extend. Together, the dynamics which Shakespeare creates between these three old men are a very useful way to draw together the main strands in Elizabethan and Stuart drama's representations of aged public authority figures, as they have been traced in this chapter. The single consistent viewpoint which can be teased out of each

⁴⁹¹ 5.3.32-6.

⁴⁹² C.f. those preceding the old king's death, 4.4.125-8.

⁴⁹³ 5.3.11-12.

of these plays is that old men who aspired to participate in the governing of a commonwealth were warmly welcomed, provided that they accepted full responsibility for meeting certain clearly defined and rigorously upheld standards of morality and conduct. Whether or not the plays actually reflected, distorted, or helped to shape attitudes towards the elderly in English society at that time is more debatable; however play-texts certainly should be regarded as a pertinent and valuable body of evidence when social historians come to consider these attitudes.

CHAPTER 6: SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

*Not so young, sir, to love a woman for singing,
nor so old to dote on her for any thing.*

(King Lear 1.4.37-8)

Rather than being exhaustive but diffuse, I have chosen to examine the proverbial 'January-May' marriage of old with young, whilst my discussion of sex and sexuality focuses on the representation of such activities outside the bonds of wedlock. The most commonly represented combination of the January-May stereotype was the old man with a young wife, which may reflect the greater frequency of such marriages (compared with their inverse) in the actual populace. Old women with young husbands only occasionally appear.⁴⁹⁵ Common wisdom, as expressed in the 'advice literature' of the day, warned against the hazards of such 'unequal unions' but the degree to which such proscription was enforced or heeded is debatable, considering the historical evidence that has been recovered to date.

I. Historical perspectives on elderly sexuality and marriage

i. 'When tender youth doth wed with stooping age...'

In prescriptive documents of the time, discussions of elderly marriage frequently expressed opposition to elderly sexuality.⁴⁹⁶ The primary argument against the old marrying at all was that since procreation was the chief aim of marriage, partners who

⁴⁹⁵Couples in which both partners are old seem to have drawn virtually no interest from playwrights, but see below and chapter eight on *The Old Law* for an exception.

⁴⁹⁶ See e.g., Burton 3.283-84, 3.319-22.

could no longer reproduce were guilty of lust.⁴⁹⁷ Other writers felt that marriage between the elderly for companionship was acceptable, *as long as sexual activity was excluded*. In this spirit, even Robert Burton concedes that if they

wed for mutuall society, helpe & comfort one of another . . . without question old folkes may well marry. . . . Otherwise it is most odious, when an old *Acheronticke* dizard, that hath one foot in his grave . . . shall flicker after a lusty young wench that is blithe and bonny. . . . What can be more detestable?⁴⁹⁸

Evidently, however, the reasoning based on procreation did not apply to men, who were potentially fertile well into old age. Some writers contended that sexual capacity was impaired in old men, and that they should therefore be as chaste as old women.

Another line of argument, however, made allowances for men. According to Laevinus Lemnius,

[old women] do contrary to the law of Nature that marry young men, or men that for greedinesse of mony wo[o]le and marry such old women. For the labour is lost on both sides, just as if a man should cast good seed into dry hungry lean ground. It is more tolerable for a full bodied lively old man, that he should marry a very young Mayd in her green and tender years; For from that society they may hope for some benefit for posterity; because a man is never thought to be so old, and barren, and exhausted, but that he may get a child.⁴⁹⁹

These accounts effectively endorsed a different attitude to sexual activity in men rather than women, which finds some expression in the contemporary drama, as shall be discussed in section II.ii. However, didactic writings provide only one viewpoint, and an idealised and theoretical one at that.

Using other available evidence such as parish records and personal accounts,

⁴⁹⁷ See Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 243 for a list of some critics' works.

⁴⁹⁸ Burton 3.321; *acheronticke*: 'waiting to cross the river of death, tottering on the brink of the grave, moribund'

social historians have uncovered marriage patterns that suggest a greater tolerance of such 'unequal' marriages. Their work also adds some complexity and depth to reconstructions of such unions. It appears that the majority of elderly men and women who married someone much younger than themselves had already been married before, perhaps more than once. In a time of higher adult mortality rates – particularly for women in childbirth – many spouses lost their partners in youth or middle age. Unlike most other aspects of their lives, those below the rank of gentry and those of the gentry and above had roughly similar experiences in this aspect of marriage. Sanitation and medical knowledge were not sufficiently different at the upper end of the social scale to reduce female mortality in childbirth significantly – Lawrence Stone established that one-quarter of the deaths of married aristocratic women under the age of forty-five were *directly* due to childbirth.⁵⁰⁰ More wives tended to die early in a marriage than did husbands, which may be one reason why surviving evidence indicates that more elderly men married women much younger than themselves, than elderly women married men much younger than themselves. However, data from several local studies suggests that the experience of widowhood was different for men and women generally, and particularly so when the bereaved was elderly.

For most men and women, especially below the rank of gentry, remarriage was the natural response to widowhood, although women in particular did not necessarily achieve this. Economic necessity usually dictated that after what was considered a

(OED). See Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 243 for further examples.

⁴⁹⁹ Lemnius 308.

⁵⁰⁰ Stone, *Crisis* 283. Stone is not explicit, but presumably this includes deaths from puerperal fever in the weeks

‘decent’ interval of mourning⁵⁰¹ (or, not infrequently, before) another partner be found in order to keep the family solvent – land had to be worked, or a business to be run, or both, and children to be provided for. In the seventeenth century, the national median interval for remarriage after the spouse’s death was for men 12.6 months and for women 19.4 months, although these median figures disguise variations dependent upon the ages of the widowed partner, and their locale.⁵⁰² Widowers also tended to have a higher incidence of remarriage than widows and continued to marry much later in life. In late Elizabethan London, for example, only 17% of widows over fifty married, whereas widowers continued to marry to the age of seventy – 36% of widowers were aged fifty to sixty-nine.⁵⁰³ Remarriage became increasingly less likely for women as they aged, particularly after they reached forty-five to fifty. Vivien Brodsky suggests that ‘cultural imperatives’ were responsible for this trend – middle-aged and old widows (unless wealthy) were not as attractive as a young bride was.⁵⁰⁴ The coincidence with the age of menopause is also relevant, for contemporary opinion (learned and unlearned alike) tended to discourage marriage for those past procreative ability. For women, this boundary was clearly defined, but not for men. Yet higher rates of remarriage at higher ages for men may reflect not only their greater chances of attracting a new spouse, but

subsequent to parturition.

⁵⁰¹ It is not yet clear whether the length of the accepted mourning period was uniform throughout the country or varied locally.

⁵⁰² Brodsky 122. Brodsky’s figures for London show a much shorter interval for widows and widowers in the crafts and trades – only nine months (134). Local studies are missing for much of the country; the figures are a combination of statistics from regional studies and the family-reconstitution work done by historians in the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure. See Coward 34-8 for a concise and non-technical introduction to this work.

⁵⁰³ Brodsky 130-2.

⁵⁰⁴ Brodsky 132. Compare similar findings by Barbara J. Todd in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Abingdon, in ‘The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered’.

also their greater dependence on female care in old age. Boulton found from his reconstructions of the lives of parishioners in St. Saviour, Southwark that '[l]oss of a wife . . . might threaten the very independence of the husband when the man was old, sick and past work.⁵⁰⁵

Thus, although women and men frequently remarried someone from a few years to a few decades younger, the largest discrepancies in age were usually between an old widower and his bride.⁵⁰⁶ For women, Brodsky found that in London younger widows (aged twenty-five to thirty-five) preferred to marry bachelors, but that this tendency was eroded by a widow's age, so that widows aged forty to forty-four were remarrying widowers and bachelors in equal proportion, and widows aged forty-five to forty-nine were marrying mostly widowers. Hence, this suggests that while widows twenty-five to forty preferred remarriage to a man the same age or slightly younger than themselves, those forty to sixty-five (one-fifth of all widows) were increasingly confined to widowers of their own age or older.⁵⁰⁷ She notes that Londoners generally displayed 'an unusual flexibility in marriage practices' and 'accommodated many styles.⁵⁰⁸ B.A. Holderness asserts more generally that 'well-endowed widows, young and old, were in great demand at all levels of north-west European society by suitors anxious to combine companionship with material advantage'.⁵⁰⁹ Older widows did occasionally marry much younger men; this seems to have been particularly common in London amongst

⁵⁰⁵ Boulton 131, and see below for some examples.

⁵⁰⁶ Pelling in 'Old Age, Poverty, and Disability' gives many examples from sixteenth-century Norwich, and discusses the potential economic benefits of 'unequal' marriages for the poor in particular.

⁵⁰⁷ Brodsky 126-7.

⁵⁰⁸ Brodsky 132.

⁵⁰⁹ 'Widows in Pre-Industrial Society: An Essay Upon Their Economic Functions' 428.

those widows with capital and property, which gives some historical basis for the contemporary satires in non-dramatic literature featuring young men who marry rich old widows for their money.⁵¹⁰ However, most widows below gentry level hadn't enough wealth to be attractive financial prospects for potential spouses; or, they risked losing what little property they had (either through restrictive wills or because it would pass to their new spouse), causing some to choose not to remarry.⁵¹¹

Hence, despite the long-standing popularity of ridiculing marriages between old and young in literature of all types and levels (recall that even Sidney does so with Basilius and his wife Gynecia in *The Old Arcadia*), the practice was fairly common for men and not rare for women. Moralists, ballad-writers, satirists, playwrights and clergymen may have advised or inveighed against it with various motives, but this seems neither to reflect English practice, nor to have particularly inhibited people. An entertaining example from slightly later is that of Richard Baxter (1615-91), 'the late seventeenth-century scourge of matrimony and banner of Nonconformity' who at the age of forty-seven fell in love with and married his eighteen-year-old pupil, '[a]midst the mockery of his enemies and against all his principles'; they enjoyed nineteen years of devoted marriage before she died.⁵¹² The popular custom of rough ridings, or charivari, which was widely used in Europe as an expression of community disapproval for deviant behaviours (particularly marital), seems never to have been

⁵¹⁰ Brodsky 127.

⁵¹¹ Erickson 196-200.

⁵¹² Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love* 173, 200-1.

used against such marriages in England.⁵¹³ Below the level of gentry, marriage to a vigorous younger spouse in good health was both economically attractive and prudent for older members of both sexes, and '[s]uch a strategy . . . was particularly important for the poor, heavily dependent as they were on physical strength and manual dexterity'.⁵¹⁴

ii. 'A vile unnaturalness'

As briefly indicated above, sexual activity in the elderly was a subject for vehement censure and nearly relentless ridicule in this period. According to prevailing moral codes for both men and women, the old were to abandon interest in sex and assume a celibate life-style, not 'recreat themselves . . . with a remembrance of their former pleasures, [and] against nature . . . stirre up their dead flesh'.⁵¹⁵ Countless moral tracts, sermons and other advice literature reiterated the same view, that sex was 'unnatural' in the old, repugnant, that the elderly lover was a ridiculous figure deserving scorn and reproach. Sir Oliver Smallshanks in Lording Barry's *Ram Alley* is a capital illustration of the type. If this was the standard attitude towards men and women in marriage, the stance regarding sexual interests and relations *outside* of wedlock was even more denunciatory. That this was a long-standing and consequential social view is witnessed by Alicia K. Nitecki's examinations of figures of old age in fourteenth-century literature; her comments apply equally well to literature of the

⁵¹³ Martin Ingram, 'Ridings, Rough Music and the 'Reform of Popular Culture' in Early Modern England' and Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640 140-1. Charivaris were used to punish other 'deviants' such as scolds, unfaithful wives and cuckolds.

⁵¹⁴ Houlbrooke, *English Family* 212.

⁵¹⁵ Burton 3.320-1, translating Plutarch. B. A. Holderness has felicitously termed the somewhat gentler mockery of

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: 'of all the ills of old age, impotence is the most explored . . . [in many works,] impotence becomes a metaphor for the death of the active life and the beginning of the meditative one. Old men who refuse to let go of their sexuality . . . [e.g., Chaucer's *Januarie*] become figures of scorn if not of vice'.⁵¹⁶

Judgements of elderly female sexuality were also negative, but took rather different and more virulent forms. Nitecki found that 'it is either her sexuality or her knowledge of sexual secrets that makes the old woman threatening and powerful. By contrast, the old man's impotence causes him to be socially shunned and vulnerable'.⁵¹⁷ And so it continued into the period presently under consideration. The picture of aged female sexuality gleaned from a full range of literary sources is uniformly derogatory and suggests a deep-seated fear and distrust. For Lemnius, Burton and all other commentators, old women were utterly, damnably lecherous if they retained any interest at all in sex. Hazardous at the best of times, the sexual female was seen to become an even greater danger with the onset of noisome old age. Ironically, although she had lost the capacity to reproduce and so became in one sense 'nonsexual' the post-menopausal woman was depicted as more involved and preoccupied than ever with sexual matters. She became either obsessed, rapacious in her appetite for intercourse (particularly with young men), or she partook of it vicariously, becoming a corrupter of young men and women through prostitution, in the familiar literary figure of the old bawd.

aged sexuality in popular drama and literature the 'folklore of irreverence' (Holderness 423).

⁵¹⁶ Nitecki 112.

⁵¹⁷ Nitecki 112.

Unlike their male counterparts, elderly women trying to remarry young men only occasionally appear in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature; the real vogue for this stereotype came in the Restoration period. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries old nurses and bawds – widowed, lecherous, but not on the lookout for new husbands – were more popular figures of fun. It is of particular interest that these harsh attitudes nonetheless did not lead, as on the Continent, to elderly ‘witches’ being accused of sexually motivated crimes, or of engaging in acts of sexual perversion such as copulation with devils and familiars.⁵¹⁸

The scant evidence which survives of actual sexual practices among the old, married or unmarried, suggests that reality was more flexible than precepts, but that men found it much easier to remain sexually active than did women in their later years. Unfortunately, the evidence is somewhat easier to find for men, because they sometimes appear in records as husbands with young children, whereas elderly women were infertile, making it impossible to trace their activities. Likewise, the sexual relations of elderly couples are a closed book. It seems unlikely that many of the elderly of either sex felt entirely free to ignore the strenuous and pervasive injunctions against being sexually active; or conversely that all remained chaste after, say, fifty. Evidence of procreative marriages between old and young, as discussed above, indicates the continuation of sexual activity among at least some of the elderly populace. Further, the persistence of literature, didactic as well as imaginative, which ridiculed or discouraged sex in the elderly does suggest that some of the old chose privately to disregard

⁵¹⁸ See Macfarlane, *Witchcraft* 159-61 and Thomas, *Religion* 678-9.

informal social prescripts.

Play-texts, however, do not proffer a broad-ranging and representative body of representations of sexually inclined elderly people, either in or out of wedlock. In general keeping with the tendencies noted above, playwrights do display a somewhat wider assortment of men than of women; while not all old men who betray sexual interest are unequivocally reduced to shame, the women are. This seems most likely to be a result of the much greater social anxiety that surrounded female sexuality generally. With respect to men, the overall tenor of these dramatic representations – particularly those written by young and middle-aged dramatists, is one of chagrin assuaged by smugness: ‘You may have the money, power, authority and prestige, but your pens will cast no ink’.

With the foregoing in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that January-May marriages had been popular plot devices at least since Chaucer, and remained so in plays – conventional moralistic wisdom (and eligible bachelors) opposed them, popular practice seems to have endorsed them, leaving much room for exploiting conflict for entertaining purposes. In play-texts, the topic is a rich source of intrigues, humour and occasionally tragedy. The following discussion examines some representative plays which exhibit the major themes and variations that were the stock-in-trade of dramatists. Judging from extant works, playwrights generally were more concerned to extract the entertainment value from such scenarios than to reflect or address the social reality around them, although I shall indicate in section three some nuances within this generalisation, focussing upon several plays by Middleton, who showed considerable

experimentation with the January-May motif. This latter examination suggests a progressive modification in his plays of the stance taken toward such marriages, which seems to indicate a movement towards a genuine, although qualified, endorsement of their viability. Sections five and six delve into specific representations of sexually active elders outside of marriage, rounding out the otherwise male-weighted discussion with a consideration of the 'unnatural hags' and 'rank bawds' of play worlds.

II. A recipe for cuckoldry

'The younger rises when the old doth fall.'

King Lear 3.3.25

Being grafted with the cuckold's horns was a misfortune every husband was supposed to fear and the old man who tied his future to a young wife was seen to be tempting fate. First, it was assumed that her family or 'friends' had probably coerced her into the match for their financial gain. Hence, she would have ample grounds for initial discontent. Second, it was also assumed that her old husband would be sexually unsatisfying and riddled with infirmities. Third, being aware of his inadequacies, he was likely to be jealous and hence suspicious and watchful of her. She in turn, being young, easily sexually aroused, discontent, constrained by his mistrust and assailed by unscrupulous young men, was in this scenario easily tempted to play him false and humiliate him.

While playhouse audiences would have been well familiar with these basic ingredients for disastrous January-May unions, plays of the time less frequently

involved actual cuckolding, portraying instead old husbands plagued by such worries, which never fully materialised. However, a few instances give a taste of the very different trajectories this scenario could take, depending upon a playwright's particular inclination.

Marston's *The Malcontent* (1600-4) is a light comic treatment of the cuckolded old man, although no trickery is involved because Bilioso (the old husband) is a 'wittol' – a willing cuckold. He has made a long career out of being a court sycophant, and offering the use of his young wife for the duke's pleasures is simply another service that he provides. Notably, although the fact is well known this liaison is never actually presented to view. On the contrary, the duke's devotion to his wife is emphasised throughout the play, which is rather incongruous with his alleged affair; further, he and Bianca (Bilioso's wife) never appear together as lovers. Marston seems to have introduced the idea merely as a means to provoke laughter, and as one instance (of many) of the corruption at which he rails in this play.

Malevole is the chief voice of caustic commentary and humour at Bilioso's expense; his remarks are typical instances of the attitudes voiced in play-texts against old men with young spouses: 'And how does my old muck-hill overspread with fresh snow? Thou half a man, half a goat, all a beast. How does thy young wife, old huddle?'⁵¹⁹ Malevole is fruitful in his insults – 'old ox, egregious wittol, broken-bellied coward, rotten mummy' – and Bilioso responds with a resilience born of indifference.⁵²⁰ He and Bianca have struck a fine bargain; he 'took him with his mouth empty of old

teeth', he received her with a 'belly full of young bones' and together they function like business partners, reaping a comfortable existence by pandering to the duke. Whilst Bilioso is content with this state of affairs he is also vain, so when Malevole suggests that he may be unwittingly cuckolded by some courtier of 'youth in good clothes, well-shaped, rich, fair-spoken, promising-noble, ardent, blood-full, witty, flattering' the old man is distinctly discomfited.⁵²¹ Still, this threat does not materialise, as Marston's intention in portraying Bilioso and Bianca is not to explore this kind of marriage, but rather to employ it as one more type of corruption within the court. The January-May marriage is portrayed in an entirely negative light, particularly the fatuous husband.

Cupid's Revenge is entirely different in tone. King Leontius's wickedly ambitious young wife exerts herself strenuously to sleep with his own son. When Leontius is wooing her, Bacha makes her scornful attitude and selfish motives quite clear in her asides. 'Lorde what a fine olde *Zany* my Love has made him Bite King Bite can such drie Mummy talke? Now hees in the Toyle, ile hold him fast'.⁵²² Their marriage elicits a lukewarm response from citizens (3.1), who know her to have been a whore and who watch with dismay as Leontius becomes a foolish sheep to his young wife. Bacha loses no time in approaching her former lover (now her step-son) to solicit a renewal of their liaison, and his refusal provokes part of the vicious plans by which this power-hungry, sexually driven woman nearly destroys the kingdom. Such, it is implied, may be the consequences of an old man's 'unseasonable' desires when they

⁵¹⁹ 1.3.35-8.

⁵²⁰ 1.4.58-60.

⁵²¹ 3.3.45-6.

lead him to seek a young spouse. While Leontius may ultimately seem to have paid rather too high a price for his error, the underlying suggestion is certainly that those who enter into such inappropriate marriages ‘get what they deserve’.

This principle is not apparent in Thomas Heywood’s *The English Traveller* (c.1627), which also shows an elderly man betrayed by his young wife. Instead of being punished the husband figures as an innocent victim with honest and good intentions whose lamentable experience serves to elevate the bond of male with male above that of husband and wife. Alongside this theme, the old-young marriage is specifically shown to be not just inferior to one between equals, but inherently unviable.

Old Wincott is married to a wife in her early twenties (at most) whose name, significantly, is never spoken – she remains, generically, ‘Wife’. They are apparently happy.

Though in their yeeres might seeme disparity
And therefore at the first a match unfit;
Imagine but his age and gouernement,
Withall, her modesty, and chaste respect;
Betwixt them, there’s so sweet a simpathie,
As crownes a noble marriage.⁵²³

She does not seem troubled by the fact that she is not one of those ‘[m]arried wives,/ That in their amorous armes, hug their delight;/ To often wakings subiect’.⁵²⁴

Nonetheless, in an exchange with Geraldine (2.1) she reveals that she had always hoped to marry him. Both of them resist the temptation to adultery, but evil enters in the shape of Delavill, Geraldine’s friend, who persuades the old man that she is unfaithful. ‘Who

⁵²² 2.6.27, 42, 67-8, 76.

⁵²³ 1.1 p.9.

can blame . . . her,' he asks,

Huging so weake an old Man in her armes,
To make a new choice, of an equall youth,
Being in him so Perfect?⁵²⁵

The truth is that Delavill and the wife are lovers. When exposed, the wife falls ill from anguish and guilt, and dies leaving a confessional letter for her mystified spouse to read. Notably, the stress in her repentance is upon her betrayal of her oath to Geraldine rather than her adultery, the point being that adultery was the *expected* outcome of such a marriage and so is, in some sense, a less 'heinous' action than the breaking of her vow. Wincott, instead of being grieved, turns to his relationship with Geraldine, and declares them to be united in 'a Marriage of our Love,/ Which none save onely Death shall separate'.⁵²⁶ Olde Wincott has, it is implied, lost nothing by his unfortunate but unsurprising experience. Rather, he has gained a proper sense of whom he should lay his affections upon in his old age – a young 'son' to whom he may safely entrust his inheritance and to whom love and marriage properly belong. The play's subplot and Geraldine's strong relationship with his own father reinforce the elevation of the father-son bond over that between man and woman, asserting that vertical generational ties are best kept within the familial sphere and out of marriage.

III. Unfulfilled expectations

In a much larger number of plays, the possibility of cuckoldry within the old-

⁵²⁴ 2.1. p.29-30.

⁵²⁵ 3.1. p.44.

young marriage is suspected or entertained but never realised. *Westward Ho!* (Dekker and Webster, 1604) is one such work, featuring three elderly London citizens whose younger wives deliberately set out to make them believe that they are having adulterous liaisons with rich young courtiers. The women fool not only their husbands but everyone else involved as well, and teach their old men to cast off the 'yellow infirmities' of jealous suspicion. But in the course of the play it is by no means always clear that they will not follow through on their planned cuckoldry, and they voice a wide range of spousal denigration. '[B]y my truly' declares Mrs. Honeysuckle, 'my old one is stark naught, and will cast no inck'.⁵²⁷ She pretends to be swayed by the classic arguments of her would-be seducer, who say that city wives 'can bee content to lye with olde men all night for their mony, and walk to your gardens with yong men i'th day time for your pleasure'.⁵²⁸ The other women are, to all appearances, similarly susceptible. The husbands themselves are conspicuous hypocrites, all three of them being customers of the same young prostitute, but this double standard does not trouble them much. While they appear shamefaced and suitably chastened at the end – for both their jealousy and their whoring – attention to their sexual indiscretions is conveniently diverted by making the old bawd Birdlime a scapegoat for their immorality. The wives are not grateful to her for exposing their husbands' infidelities, berate her for doing so, and no one (except Birdlime) seems troubled by the

⁵²⁶ 5.1. p.94-5.

⁵²⁷ 2.1.121-3.

⁵²⁸ 2.1.152-4.

inconsistency. The overall effect is of 'harmlesse meryment'⁵²⁹ at the minor expense of old men, but interestingly the January-May marriage itself emerges intact. Some such unions, *Westward Ho!* seems to suggest, can work. Nevertheless, the play still communicates the sense that these marriages are inherently more frangible than those between age peers are. A year later, Webster and Dekker used the device again in *Northward Ho!*, which however, I postpone discussing until the end of this chapter, as it addresses in unique ways the comic aspects of matrimony and sexuality in later life.

In a similar spirit to *Westward Ho!* and *Northward Ho!* is a later collaborative work by Webster, Rowley and possibly Heywood, entitled *A Cure for a Cuckold* (?1625), in which the cuckolded husband – having returned from a very long spell at sea to find his wife pregnant – responds contrary to expectations. Old Compass, unlike the needlessly jealous elderly husbands in most January-May marriages, really has been 'cheated' on by his young wife, although under the extenuating circumstance that she believed him to have been lost at sea. The old man's 'cure' is to adopt the child and persuade his wife to join him in mock death, so that they may pretend to meet, court and be married anew. Compass appears to be unique in the drama of that period, but his divergence from standard dramatic convention bears some similarity to other plays that also did not simply cash in on the predictable humour to be derived from ridiculing elderly husbands.

Two other works dealing with unfulfilled expectations are interesting for representing disparate responses to the January-May union. Fletcher and Massinger's

⁵²⁹ 5.4.308.

The Little French Lawyer (1619-1623)⁵³⁰ again features a needlessly jealous husband and a revenge plot against a young would-be lover, while the other, Fletcher's *The Nightwalker* (1611) shows a young wife falsely accused, ultimately vindicated and as a crowning 'reward' unexpectedly freed from the unsuitable marriage altogether.

The Little French Lawyer is a disjointed work, with a preoccupation with 'special effects' and the sensational which fragments the work as a whole. Its stance towards the old-young marriage is, in keeping with this quality, difficult to ascertain. Lamira's father arranged for her to marry the wealthy, but physically handicapped, Old Champernell. Elderly and lacking both an arm and a leg, he is a less than ideal husband but she accepts her fate with equanimity. However, a former suitor vents his thwarted passion by accosting the wedding party and insulting Champernell, Lamira and her elderly father. Shortly thereafter, he attempts to seduce her. In revenge, Lamira lures him to their home with promises of fulfilment, then exposes him to the laughter and ridicule of her jealous but (temporarily) reassured husband.

Thus far, it appears that the authors are supporting the union of old and young, but then they seem to switch allegiances, as the remainder of the play is devoted to the young man's revenge upon Lamira and Champernell. Arranging for them to be waylaid as they return from an evening party, he thereby reduces the crippled old man to helpless ineffectuality and terrorises Lamira by pretending that he is going to rape her. At the last moment, he reveals that he has only been taking his just vengeance upon them for wounding his honour – he is cured of his passion for Lamira and returns her

⁵³⁰ Dates taken from the editor's introduction to the play in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*.

intact to her grateful husband. Thus, by the play's end the young man has definitely triumphed, and one is left with the distinct impression that he is to be regarded as better off in all respects than either of the married parties. Lamira's husband is made to appear laughable and feeble, and Champernell is destined to suffer periodic bouts of jealousy in spite of his wife's chastity.

In *The Nightwalker*, Fletcher more straightforwardly rejects unequal marriage. Forced by her mercenary mother into marrying an unscrupulous old usurer⁵³¹ and Justice of the peace, she is utterly miserable. Her disappointed young suitor Frank attempts to seduce her in a secluded part of the house, and although he vanquish his lust, they are discovered and suspected of adultery. She appears to die on the spot, sending the usurer and her mother into a battle over the dowry. Like Hero, however, she has not died and through a series of cross-plots involving another young woman who disguises herself as a page, she eventually returns to her family and friends. In the meantime, however, the 'page' and some others succeed in frightening Algripe so badly that he repents of his misdeeds and makes reparations. When all are reunited in the final scene, the page reveals that she is a young woman to whom Algripe had promised marriage but had broken faith with because she proved too poor. He now agrees to honour this first vow (which has made his marriage to Maria invalid) and as a result, Frank and Maria are free to marry. (Algripe is very similar to the usurer Hogge in

⁵³¹ The usurer (usually an old man) is a character type not discussed in this study, as his old age is incidental to his economic and ethnic statuses – in general, only elderly men had accumulated enough wealth to be able to lend money, and they were not typically Christians (there is some suggestion in this play that Algripe is of Jewish extraction). For some information on this stereotype, see Hunter 514, Celeste Turner Wright, 'Some Conventions Regarding the Usurer in Elizabethan Literature' and Francis Lenton's portrait of 'An Usurer' in *Characterismi* (London, 1631, no foliation).

Robert Tailor's *The Hogge Hath Lost His Pearl* (1613), who also reforms, renouncing both greed and his tyrannical treatment of his daughter.)

Hence, in *The Nightwalker* the unhappy girl is spared from marrying an old man, while the other, less socially elevated girl is content with the respectability and security of such a match. The young couple exemplify the matrimonial ideal, while the other girl trades marital bliss for long-term well-being. Unlike the robust and earthy comedies of Dekker and Webster, these Fletcherian fantasy-romances are less able to incorporate a positive perspective on January-May marriages into their youth-dominated, melodramatic worlds. In *Monsieur Thomas* (1610-c.1616), imminent marriage between an old man and his young ward is stalled and eventually abandoned in favour of a union with someone her own age. The elderly lover Valentine (discussed further below) comes to accept the 'proper' role of father rather than husband.

IV. Turning the January-May marriage inside out: the evolution of Middleton's perspective

No playwright of the time subjected this marriage-type to more repeated or closer scrutiny than did Thomas Middleton. After employing it in *Michaelmas Term* (1604-1606), he returned to it in *The Widow* (c.1616⁵³²), *The Old Law* (c.1615-1618; with Rowley), *Anything For A Quiet Life* (c.1620-c.1621) and *The Changeling* (1622; with Rowley). Each time his presentation differs and there is a progressive change in how he chose to portray them. From conventional failure and cuckoldry in *Michaelmas Term* he

⁵³² Date from Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*.

shifted a decade later to a less absolute view in *The Widow* and *The Old Law*, still sceptical but very explicitly critical of those who, once in such marriages, abuse the trust of their elderly spouse. With *Anything For A Quiet Life*, he acknowledged the possible pitfalls of January-May pairings but came out in full support of their viability. Just shortly after this, he collaborated with William Rowley in *The Changeling*, the subplot of which (although probably written by Rowley) surely voices a view similar to *Anything For A Quiet Life*. Accepting G.K. Hunter's range of dates for *Women Beware Women* (1620-1627), it is arguable that it also reflects this view, after a fashion; Bianca is under twenty and the Duke over fifty, yet (after her rape-seduction) they are by the standards of the play world a devoted couple – Bianca drinks the dregs of the poisoned draught to die with him. While not wishing to stretch the point beyond credibility, we may still observe that their relationship, twisted as it is by the corruption of its Italian setting, nonetheless bears a broad resemblance to such marriages in his middle and late Jacobean plays.

In his early work, one finds the draper Ephesian Quomodo in *Michaelmas Term*, an old swindler remarkably unaware of his own failings but endearing for his limitless energy and *joie de vivre*. Nevertheless, the failure of his marriage with the much younger Thomasine is wholly his responsibility, unable as he is to prioritise his desires and meet his wife's emotional and sexual needs. Confusion exists in his mind between material and sexual fulfilment. Old men were frequently said to transfer their desire for sex to the acquisition of wealth as their sexual appetite waned (recall that in the morality play

The Castle of Perseverance, Humanum Genus takes up with Avaritia in his old age)⁵³³. But Quomodo retains both desires and cannot keep them separate. Hence, he indefatigably pursues money and property, and indulges in sexual daydreams, but becomes so absorbed in these activities that he neglects his wife. His two fantasising soliloquies reveal the confusion.

His first soliloquy (2.3.81-9) clearly shows the commingling in his mind of acquisition and sexuality. The *antithesis* between the sterility of acquisitive old age and the fertility of women and the natural world is a prominent theme in the play.⁵³⁴ In Quomodo's fantasy, the desired property metamorphoses into a slim gentlewoman, and his thoughts then slide naturally to his son (the evidence of Quomodo's virility) and thereby back to the estate that through his son will secure Quomodo's continuation beyond the grave. The later soliloquy (4.1.64-107, but particularly 64-76) follows upon his devious acquisition of the property and leads to a fantasy of intercourse with his wife upon a stream bank. His attitude toward the land is aggressive, as he plans to have all of the trees 'lopped immediately' for firewood. Similarly, he had earlier imagined the 'goodly load of logs' coming from his lands in Essex.⁵³⁵ The land, like a woman, seems to be purely a means to satisfy his emotional and physical needs.

It is particularly noteworthy that he likens the anticipated envy of his fellow drapers to 'an old lecher, girt in a furred gown,/ Whose mind stands stiff, but his

⁵³³ See above, chapter three, section 3.2.

⁵³⁴ Hunter, *English Drama* 333; Hunter cites 1.1.107, 3.4.135ff, 150ff, 4.1.34, 4.4.55 as examples.

⁵³⁵ 3.4.15.

performance down'.⁵³⁶ Evidently he in no way associates himself with this image, yet it is common knowledge that 'he did not use [his wife] so well as a man mought'⁵³⁷, and Thomasine's interest in Easy is ample evidence. Thus, Quomodo walks blindly into cuckoldry, unknowingly doing everything to foster this outcome because he does not comprehend his wife's true needs, being immersed in egotism and delusive dreams.

His counterfeited death and its backfiring are the ironic culmination of conjugal neglect.⁵³⁸ With unconscious irony, he delivers an encomium in praise of her modesty and chastity, just after she and Easy reappear from making love.⁵³⁹ Having thought that he would merely temporarily absent himself, he ends up losing himself in earnest, first because his identity is disbelieved and then, when he insists that he is Quomodo, 'the famous cozener'⁵⁴⁰, because he is punished by being deprived of his money and property – the two foci of his selfhood. By the play's end all of his fantasies have evaporated, dependent as they were upon his wealth and his wife. Although the apparent injustice of Thomasine having to remain with her old husband has troubled some critics, it is by no means certain that, having once tasted of infidelity, she intends to withdraw passively into her former role.

Middleton did not return to this scenario until several years later, and then in a very different manner. *The Widow* no longer takes for granted the stereotype of cuckoldry, but instead holds the convention up for scrutiny and (qualified) criticism.

⁵³⁶ 3.4.10-11.

⁵³⁷ 4.4.52-3.

⁵³⁸ Compare this with Volpone's counterfeited death and the similar backfiring of his intrigues.

⁵³⁹ 5.1.58-69.

⁵⁴⁰ 5.3.21.

Rather than encouraging his audience to sit back and laugh at the spectacle of a gulled old man, Middleton leads them into this habitual stance only to perform a volte-face and expose the unfairness and inaccuracy of the cliché. Although not didactic, the play nevertheless encourages a more wholesome acceptance of January-May marriages and of old husbands. Parity of age is still preferable in *The Widow*, but adultery is no longer a justifiable response for a dissatisfied young wife.

The plot seems straightforward at the outset: the elderly Brandino is married to Philippa, who is desperately trying to commit adultery. However, Francisco, the would-be lover, has a disturbing experience on his way to their tryst and vows not to violate Brandino's trust. Instead, he ends up marrying a young woman who has run away from home to avoid an arranged marriage with an old man. Philippa is suitably chastened and Brandino remains entirely oblivious to all of it. Looking more closely at Middleton's characterisation and his handling of particular scenes, one can observe how he succeeds in disrupting typical expectations of, and reactions to, the January-May cuckoldry scenario. Brandino is utterly benign, with none of the nasty traits of, for example, an Algripe, a Falso, or a Bilioso. He is not particularly astute, and is easily duped, but these features actually work in this play to make the activities of Francisco and Philippa more reprehensible. They are driven by simple lust and although Brandino is evidently an unsatisfactory sexual partner for her, Middleton does not encourage the audience to find this an acceptable excuse for Philippa's behaviour. Brandino's simplicity and age are both used to provide humour, but the tone is always merely irreverent – never contemptuous. If any characters deserve contempt, it is

implied, they are Philippa and Francisco, and the latter's change of heart is a critical point in the play. Brandino has made Francisco a welcome and trusted guest in his home, but the young man is about to take advantage of this when his conscience prompts him to recognise the sordidness and ingratitude of such an action.

The superficiality with which Philippa conducts herself prevents the development of any audience sympathy. She is selfish and so blinded by smug self-assurance that instead of making a fool of her husband and Francisco, she ends up looking the biggest fool of all. From the outset, she has been determined to adopt the role of young wife in the classic January-May situation. The very self-consciousness with which she does this, her desire for no particular individual but simply anyone who will enable her to commit adultery, highlights the conventionality of her behaviour. Middleton thus very explicitly draws attention to this social prejudice, and particularly to the way that it is portrayed in drama. He tempts his audiences to side against Brandino simply because he is an old husband, then exposes through Francisco and Philippa the faults in this partisanship. In doing so, he also implicitly criticises dramatic works which perpetuate these societal attitudes. Certainly, the 'ideal' marriage still appears to be between two young people. However, Middleton has moved considerably away from the assumptions of *Michaelmas Term*.

The Old Law is rarely studied, yet is arguably the most thoroughgoing dramatic exploration of the social, moral and personal aspects of ageing, and an important link in the chain of Middleton's representations of the elderly in marriage. The play reverses the usual sympathies of comedy, so that rather than feeling sorry for a young girl

forcibly betrothed to an elderly suitor, or being entertained by a young wife cuckolding her old husband, one sees these January-May relationships from the other side of the generational fence. There is no example of a truly successful marriage between people of disparate ages, yet the practice itself is not criticised as such. *The Old Law* thus does not make a definitive statement on the subject, tending instead to acknowledge how some marriages are, and to offer pragmatism rather than an idealised but unrealistic harmonisation of young and old. Chapter eight explores this and other aspects of the play further.

Up to this point, Middleton had used January-May marriages which were already of relatively long standing. In *Anything For A Quiet Life* he portrays one such union as it unfolds after the wedding. Although apparently depicting the disaster that ensues, the play voices support of the old-young pairing, showing it to be a workable arrangement, given the right individuals. For most of the play, however, Middleton seems intent on demonstrating how destructive a young wife can be for an old man. The elderly Sir Francis Cressingham, with indiscreet passionate haste, has married a fifteen-year-old girl of 'court breeding'. Paying no heed to his friends' warnings, he finds his world turned upside down by her imperious and implacable demands. When Sir Francis has been reduced to despair, Lady Cressingham reveals that it has all been an elaborate ruse, to encourage him to abandon the gambling and alchemical experimentation that has been eroding his fortune. At the close, the couple seem poised for a happy future. By this means, Middleton is able both to explore the drawbacks of such marriages and to argue for their feasibility under some circumstances. The

resistance to the traditional stereotype first manifested in *The Widow* reaches full strength in this play.

Sir Francis's friend Lord Beaufort voices classic arguments against the union of 'opposites': it is 'unnatural', like grafting a young blossom onto an old tree; she will be sexually unsatisfied take a lover, to the shame and ruin of the family.⁵⁴¹ The wedding has cost a small fortune and at his new bride's request, Sir Francis has sent his two youngest children to live in another household. She seems intent upon dividing the family to consolidate her power. The young Lady Cressingham achieves ascendancy by controlling access to her sexual favours. Sir Francis will sacrifice his son's inheritance for the sake of sensual pleasure. He is compelled to abandon his alchemy, sell all his ancestral lands, and by the fifth act he is 'like a ward' to his wife, living upon a meagre fixed income and only one new suit a year.⁵⁴² His children are to be apprenticed and he to be packed off into retirement.⁵⁴³ At the climax of this humiliation, Sir Francis's son George shouts,

The curse of lust and riot follow you!
Marry some young gallant that may rifle you;
Yet add one blessing to your needy age,
That you may die full of repentance.⁵⁴⁴

She laughs, but shortly reveals her true self and the reason for this extraordinary trial of her husband, then dedicates herself 'To warm these lips with love, and duty do/ To

⁵⁴¹ 1.1.22-32.

⁵⁴² 5.1.148-52.

⁵⁴³ 5.1.204-5.

⁵⁴⁴ 5.1.278-81.

every silver hair, each one shall be/ A senator to my obedience'.⁵⁴⁵ This surprise outcome has the powerful effect of qualifying all the disaster that has gone before; the stereotype of the wicked young wife has been used by a virtuous one to save her ageing husband from ruin and ensure that they can have a peaceful future together. Her earlier, apparently hypocritical declaration turns out to be genuine:

And though I'm young, yet I am confident
Your able constitution of body,
When you are past fourscore, shall keep you fresh
Till I arrive at the neglected year
That I am past child-bearing; and yet even there
Quickening our faint heats in a soft embrace,
And kindling divine flames in fervent prayers,
We may both go out together, and one tomb
Quit our executors the rites of two.⁵⁴⁶

It seems that Middleton not only took a greater interest than other contemporary playwrights in portraying such marriages, but also developed in the course of his career an increasingly positive view of them. The same stance is clear in *The Changeling*, and although Rowley is believed to have written the subplot involving Alibius and his sharp-witted wife, it is reasonable to assume that Middleton concurred with the portrayal. The oblivious Alibius resembles Brandino in *The Widow*, save that unlike Brandino he is always jealously suspicious. The clever wife resembles Lady Cressingham, both of them teaching their old husbands valuable that young wives really can be faithful to their elderly mates.

Middleton's optimism was apparently not shared by many playwrights. Regardless of what transpired in the real world, in the theatres such marriages were

⁵⁴⁵ 5.1.282-4.

most often vehicles for conventional social disapproval of unusual marriages, and sources of laughter at the expense of the elderly. Yet although it is unwise to attribute too much 'reality-value' to the drama of this period, one is tempted to ask whether – apart from creating humour – there was any social purpose served by the general literary assault upon January-May marriages. Possibly, the ridicule can be viewed in part as one of several means to further the exclusion of older people from competition with single young men for marriage partners. Older men in particular could be formidable financial rivals for young men, who in all likelihood made up a large proportion of the theatre audiences. Derision of unequal matches was hence possibly a tool for influencing the flow of wealth down through the generations. This might also partially explain why elderly couples were never made the focus of interest in plays; not only did available literary traditions locate dramatic interest in the romantic relationships of young people⁵⁴⁶, but the elderly married did not pose an economic or social threat to the younger generation since they were no longer involved in the 'mating game'.

Those who chose to pursue such games outside the bonds of marriage, however, were frequently represented in play-texts, and are the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

V. Desire sustained but contained

⁵⁴⁶ 1.1.368-76.

⁵⁴⁷ Or occasionally the middle-aged, as Shakespeare did in *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

Shakespeare, although sharing many features with contemporary dramatists, diverges from them in this area. He did not share their inclination to ridicule aged desire, or to show active sexuality as a part of old people's lives. Rather, he tends to avoid either censuring or endorsing sexuality in the old. Falstaff is really the only one of his elderly characters to be castigated for such transgressions. In spite of his charm and audience appeal, Falstaff receives his comeuppance in *Henry IV.2*, although for a pervasive immorality in which his sexual conduct is one of many faults. However, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Falstaff's misdemeanours are predominantly in the sexual arena. As Mistress Page remarks in 2.1, 'O, wicked, wicked world! One that is well-nigh worn to pieces with age to show himself a young gallant!'⁵⁴⁸ Sir John is a vain coxcomb, believing himself still handsome. '[G]o thy ways,' he murmurs to himself in the following scene, 'I'll make more of thy old body than I have done. Will they yet look after thee? . . . Good body, I thank thee'.⁵⁴⁹ Mistress Page puts him straight at the play's close, laughing, 'Why, Sir John, do you think, though we would have thrust virtue out of our hearts by the head and shoulders, and have given ourselves without scruple to hell, that ever the devil could have made you our delight?' – and he is called 'a hodge-pudding', a 'bag of flax' and 'Old, cold, wither'd, and of intolerable entrails'.⁵⁵⁰

The play is not a stinging rebuke of sexuality in this elderly. Nevertheless, it asserts that passionate love is for the young (Master Fenton and Anne Page), respectable love for mature women and men like the wives and their husbands, and

⁵⁴⁸ 2.1.20-2.

⁵⁴⁹ 2.2.138-42.

⁵⁵⁰ 5.5.146-54.

celibacy for old men such as Falstaff. *The Merry Wives* is the closest Shakespeare comes to making sport of sexuality in the old, but he refrains from invective whilst still holding firmly to essentially conventional prescripts against its expression. In this respect, *The Merry Wives* presents a 'containment' of elderly male sexuality akin to that found in other dramatists' works.

Notably, Falstaff, with his unique stage history, was no ordinary character and because of this not actually indicative of a type of old man in the same ways that most other Shakespearean old men can be said to be. A more characteristic instance of the Shakespearean style of sustained and/or contained elderly male sexuality is shrewd, genial Lord Lafew in *All's Well That Ends Well*. His vitality distinguishes him from the play's more sedate elders (the Countess and the King) and often finds expression through sexual jests and innuendo. Yet he is still one of the play's 'elderly personages' who, Barbara Everett writes, are 'nearly perfect, but . . . one of the meanings of 'perfect' is 'finished'. They give vital support to the activity of the young . . . but they do not and cannot act themselves'.⁵⁵¹ Part of a healthy and proper old age in this play is supporting the sexuality of the young while being indifferent to it for themselves. Lafew can admire women and use bawdy humour without incurring censure because his interest never translates into action.

Never sexually aggressive, Lafew is a model of respectful sensual appreciation of women, a foil for Bertram's juvenile vanity and self-absorption. In 2.1, he introduces Helena to the King. Knowing nothing to substantiate his claims for her healing powers,

Lafew's enthusiasm in 2.1 is based solely upon Helena's beauty. 'I have seen a medicine,' he rhapsodises,

That's able to breathe life into a stone,
Quicken a rock, and make you dance canary
With spritely fire and motion; whose simple touch
Is powerful to araise King Pippen, nay,
To give great Charlemain a pen in's hand
And write to her a love-line.⁵⁵²

The reference to dancing (sexually provocative), the sensuality of 'touch' and the bawdy puns in 'stone', 'raising' and 'pen' are witty rather than uncouth. Lafew's remarks are light-hearted, and he assures the King that his praise is founded upon Helena's self-presentation, rather than the 'weakness' of old age.⁵⁵³ Still, he inserts a sly hint in his parting joke that, like 'Cressid's uncle' Pandarus, he will leave the King alone to consult with the beautiful young girl.⁵⁵⁴

Two scenes later, when Helena is to make her choice of a husband, Lafew declares with disarming frankness that, 'I'll like a maid the better whilst I have a tooth in my head. . . . I'd give bay curtal and his furniture,/My mouth no more were broken than these boys' / And writ as little beard'.⁵⁵⁵ His references to teeth are both literal and figurative. To have a '(sweet) tooth' was a common euphemism for a sexual appetite⁵⁵⁶, while 'broken' mouth refers both to their youth (they are like colts unbroken to the bit) and to his decayed teeth. Indignant at their lack of enthusiasm and elitist contempt for Helena's humble origins, he calls them 'boys of ice' and 'bastards to the English' - 'And

⁵⁵¹ Everett 32.

⁵⁵² 2.1.72-8.

⁵⁵³ 2.1.85.

⁵⁵⁴ 2.1.97-8.

they were sons of mine,' he rages, 'I'd have them whipt, or I would send them to th'Turk to make eunuchs of'.⁵⁵⁷ His choice of sexual language makes him seem more of a man than these 'boys' but because he is right, he is free from any imputation of impropriety. Further, he (unlike Bertram) is never licentious, merely appreciative of the young woman's beauty and bearing. Notably, Lafew displays a more spontaneous, genuine attitude to sexuality than any of the young men.

Some readers view Lafew as salacious. Sheldon P. Zitner sees him as 'shrewd, generous, flirtatious', a man who has 'entered the garrulous twilight of male potency' with 'an unpleasantly self-conscious archness about his sexual allusions that suggests the brave face put on declining potency'.⁵⁵⁸ While an actor could choose to play Lafew in this manner, such an interpretation is out of step with the older generation's guiding role in this play, as well as incongruent with Lafew's sound judgement and self-awareness. He is not trying to revive a defunct virility; recognising that his time for romance is past, he can still play the role of gracious courtier and enjoy this innocent pleasure. Similar and closely contemporary to Lafew is the gentleman-poet Bellamont in Webster and Dekker's *Northward Ho!* His difficulties with a prostitute are discussed below. Like Lafew, Bellamont does not embody the moral writer's ideal of an elderly man; for instance, he can be bawdy at times. Yet he is an altogether honourable old gentleman whose practical and down-to-earth turn of mind gives him authenticity. Sexuality is not remote from either him or Lafew, but it *is* kept at a safe, socially

⁵⁵⁵ 2.3.41-2, 59-61.

⁵⁵⁶ See Tilley 420.

⁵⁵⁷ 2.3.86-8, 93-5.

acceptable distance.

Some play-texts reveal differing standards dependent upon class distinctions. Fletcher's *Monsieur Thomas, or Father's Own Son* (1610-c.1616) and *The Mad Lover* (1617) both illustrate this idea. In *Monsieur Thomas*, the explicit and unbridled sexuality of the subplot is an overt expression of the sexual undercurrents in the dramatically unconnected main story. Neither the gentleman Valentine, nor the 'middling' father, Sebastian, deals with the sexual aspect of his life moderately, but they are at opposite extremes. Sebastian is a 'wilde worme' who values dissipation and sexual licence so highly that he makes debauchery prerequisite for his son Thomas to be his heir. Valentine is the staid elderly guardian of Céllide, and although he now desires her as a wife, he is aware of his defects in comparison with a young suitor. His insecurity leads him to act with an artificial, forced ardency, while Sebastian is an id-like force expressing the passion still alive in Valentine.

The plots of *Monsieur Thomas* are too convoluted to describe in full, but in essence, Valentine returns from a journey with a young man (his long-lost son, unbeknownst to them both). The young man falls in love with Céllide and she reciprocates, stirring bitter jealousy in Valentine, but after much grief on all sides, he is reconciled to giving her up. Upon learning that he has relinquished her to his son, he gladly embraces fatherhood rather than matrimony (and sex). In emotional terms, Valentine can vicariously enjoy Céllide through his son's marriage to her. This relationship is mirrored in Sebastian's vicarious enjoyment of life through *his* son.

⁵⁵⁸ Zitner 124, 61, 145.

Sebastian welcomes home Thomas, 'lost' in another sense because he pretends to have forsaken sinful living. The old man raises a lament parodying that of the conventional prodigal's father:

How have I find that this affliction
Should light so heavie on me. I have no more sonnes;
And this no more mine owne, no spark of nature
Allows him mine now, he's growne tame.

I must go seeke an heire, for my inheritance
Must not turn secretary.⁵⁵⁹

Sebastian relies in some measure on his son's errant ways to feel fully alive, his sense of sexual energy depends upon seeing his youthful past replayed in the person of his own flesh-and-blood. When Thomas appears to be 'spoiled' Sebastian resolves upon what seems to him the only possible course of action: to father a new heir. In the most amusing scene of the play, he lines up his four housemaids to select a new wife from among them, only to find that Thomas has slept with all of them, which pleases him immensely.

Sebastian never concedes one jot of his wild principles, so he remains at the end a very different old man from Valentine – yet apparently equally acceptable. He harms no one and engenders a certain laughing affection for his dogmatic adherence to uncivilised behaviour. Valentine's jealousy, on the other hand, invites censure; however, through Sebastian Fletcher enables his audience to understand the substratum of sexual insecurity in Valentine. One example of several subtle connections throughout the play is Sebastian's open acknowledgement of his need for a 'little beer, and beef

broth' to fortify his sexual energy. This honesty contrasts with Valentine's hidden anxiety about the same trouble, which he tries to mask with overblown assertions of his manhood. Only when he is able to accept his unsuitability as a lover, *and* when he (like Sebastian) has a son through whom to live, can Valentine relax and play the role with which he is most comfortable – loving father. The play's alternate title – *Father's Own Son* – emphasises the emotional and sexual interconnectivity of father-son pairs.

Valentine's name seems a mockery of his unsuitability as a lover, yet I would contend that Fletcher intended it in irony rather than jest. He does use Valentine to demonstrate the socially prescribed way for an old man to behave, but he does not make fun of sexuality in the elderly, nor does he censure it. However, the play indicates that social standing is important. Sebastian is not on the same social level as Valentine; both their ways of handling sexuality are endorsed, but are implicitly limited to their respective social spheres.

Fletcher used character pairing to similar effect in *The Mad Lover*. The title character is an elderly general named Memnon who returns victorious from battle and falls in love with the king's daughter Calis. The bombastic and melodramatic Memnon acts like a complete fool when his love is unrequited, refusing to return to battle unless she marries him, and only the cleverness of his younger brother Polydor saves the situation. Polydor pretends to commit suicide over the whole affair and so brings his brother back to a sense of what is truly important in life. Parallel to the main action is a 'shadow' character of Memnon, the old soldier Chilax. Against Memnon's threats and

⁵⁵⁹ 1.2.59-62, 70-1.

attempts at Petrarchan-style rhetoric, Chilax's frank sexuality is a foil to his superior's ridiculous theatricality. The general tries to make his craving into something noble, whilst Chilax calls a spade a spade.

In the opening scene, Memnon boasts of his twenty-five years of valiant service as General, is struck dumb by Calis's beauty and then confidently assumes that he, an old man, can win a young princess's love. Immediately afterwards, Chilax speaks in soliloquy of *his* twenty-five years in the army, his poverty (due to Memnon's neglect of the troops) and of 'an old Lass' from whom he hopes to get some money in exchange for sleeping with her.⁵⁶⁰ Hereafter, an audience cannot help but continually compare the main character and plot with the activities of Chilax and the other commoners. At every step, Memnon's absurdly selfish desire causes others grief and he seems a fool. Chilax's sexual appetite and activities, on the other hand, come off without criticism. There are a few reasons for this.

First, Chilax is discrete about his liaisons, whereas Memnon creates an uproar. Second, Chilax is realistic about himself, specifically his age and physical appearance. Memnon still pictures himself a fine manly specimen with whom any right-minded woman should immediately fall in love. Only after causing much trouble does he slowly come to realise the truth and say to Calis,

O love! how sweet thou look'st now! and how gentle!
I should have slubber'd thee, and stain'd thy beauty
.
My cold stiff carkass would have frozen ye.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁶⁰ The situation invites comparison with Falstaff's use of Mistress Quickly for her sexual and financial services.

⁵⁶¹ 5.4.350-51, 357.

Ultimately, young Polydor weds the princess. Meanwhile, Chilax gets some money from the old priestess and a night of carnal pleasure with a young woman – but only by bargaining for it.

The Mad Lover does not entirely focus upon sexuality in the old. In each instance, though, it is made a matter of exchange: Memnon makes Calis a pawn to be traded for his military service; Chilax trades sex for money and obtains sexual favours from Chloe only after he does her a favour. Aged sexuality is confined to being suppressed, or shared with other old people; the bargain between Chilax and Chloe is clearly a one-off. Memnon's acceptance of the impropriety of his passion leads to a general improvement in his character, implying that by recognising his limitations in one sphere, he sees his shortcomings in other areas as well. By relinquishing the princess to his younger brother, he also symbolically accepts the passage of the world's attention onto younger people. Chilax's role as foil to Memnon is over once the general begins to change and his activities, although condoned rather than condemned, are still confined to those beneath the gentry class, making the apparently elitist distinction that old people *do* still desire sex, but only the common sort are socially 'low' enough to engage in it.

Many other elderly male sensualists figure in contemporary plays – including several already discussed in chapters four and five⁵⁶² – but one of the most charming combinations of rampant sexuality and shrewd, endearing good nature is Sir Bounteous Plenty in Middleton's *A Mad World My Masters* (1604-1607). He is one of Middleton's best comic characters, combining a boisterous generosity with a sexual appetite that

outstrips his abilities. Middleton does not censure or seriously ridicule his sexuality. This makes him a kindred character to Sebastian in *Monsieur Thomas*, but with significant differences: Sir Bounteous is of a higher social station, takes some pains to keep his sexual activities a secret, and is a more restrained and plausible character than Sebastian.

Sir Bounteous has a modest fortune, but keeps his young grandson Follywit on a tight financial rein. Follywit is aware of his respected grandsire's clandestine sexual activities, describing him with pointed double-entendres:

[H]e stands much upon the glory of his complement, variety of entertainment, together with the largeness of his kitchen, longitude of his buttery, and fecundity of his larder, and thinks himself never happier than when some stiff lord or great countess alights to make light his dishes.⁵⁶³

Sir Bounteous's primary source of sexual services is the young prostitute Frank Gullman (whom he believes to have been a virgin before him).⁵⁶⁴ The desire to entertain 'a lady i'th'nick' is one of Sir B's self-confessed weaknesses.⁵⁶⁵ He pretends to be too old for 'venereal dreams'⁵⁶⁶ but his grandson and servants are well aware of the truth. Young Follywit makes lewd jokes about his grandfather's impotence, and the audience is to some extent encouraged to laugh at the old man.⁵⁶⁷ According to the grandson, he is 'a little short old spiny gentleman in a great doublet' who (like Sebastian in *Monsieur Thomas*) needs 'hot caudle' to invigorate his sexual performance.⁵⁶⁸ Sir Bounteous

⁵⁶² E.g., the old Duke in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Justice Falso in *The Phoenix*, the Earl in *Westward Ho!*.

⁵⁶³ 1.1.67-73.

⁵⁶⁴ Frank Gullman and her mother are discussed further below.

⁵⁶⁵ 2.1.63.

⁵⁶⁶ 2.2.13-14.

⁵⁶⁷ See e.g., 2.4.

⁵⁶⁸ 3.2.7-8.

behaves foolishly enough to make him seem almost (but not quite) deserving of ridicule. When he meets Frank for a tryst and she pretends to be ill, he thinks she must be pregnant, at which thought he swells with pride. 'Though I be old, I have gi'n't her' he crows, 'Ha, ha, I have fitted her; an old knight and a cock a'th'game still'. But Frank laughs with ironic condescension, 'How soon he took occasion to slip into his own flattery, soothing his own defects' and the old man is again reduced in the eyes of the audience.⁵⁶⁹ At this point in the play, the implication seems to be that a sexually active old man deserves to be hoodwinked by his juniors, and Follywit scolds him sententiously:

this is the fruit of old grunting venery. . . . oh fie, in your crinkling days,
grandsire, keep a courtesan to hinder your grandchild! 'Tis against nature,
i'faith, and I hope you'll be weary on't.⁵⁷⁰

However, the audience is at the same time aware that Follywit is a spendthrift cheat. Sir Bounteous, robbed by Frank, realises that society will have no pity because of his sexual behaviour – 'Sfoot, the judges will but laugh at it 'Make the old fellow pay for's lechery' that's all the 'mends I['ll] get'.⁵⁷¹ Yet Middleton does not let the tide of morality drown the old knight. Throughout the play, Sir Bounteous is such a kind and generous person that he seems little deserving of disgrace. Further, his grandson is foolish enough to fall in love with Frank Gullman (not realising she is a prostitute) and the tables begin to turn. In the final scene, Follywit is undone by a stolen watch that chimes in his pocket, a sign that his time is up, his period of misrule over. As in

⁵⁶⁹ 2.3.53, 89-90, 98-9.

⁵⁷⁰ 4.3.42-6.

⁵⁷¹ 4.3.106-8.

emblems depicting Time as a grave elder, Sir Bounteous reasserts his authority, and has the last laugh at his grandson who has married a girl from whom he has already 'drunk the top'.⁵⁷² Thus, the old man triumphs in spite of the disapproval that *should* attach to his sexuality. In keeping with his tendency to make his elderly men more complex and less clearly culpable, Middleton in this respect has declined to make a conventional play. The audience is encouraged to shrug at the insignificance of sexual appetite when it is accompanied by a genuine and generous personality. *A Mad World* baits an audience into conventional denunciation of elderly male sexuality only to catch it endorsing *worse* behaviour in a young man. The whole issue of whether old men should remain sexually active is thus reduced and implicitly made a matter for private rather than public concern. Note, however, that Middleton did not necessarily dramatise this view later in his career, for in *The Old Law*, sexuality in the elderly is openly criticised.

VI. 'Unnatural hags'

Elderly female sexuality is represented quite differently by Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights. In *A Mad World*, the prostitute's mother is a shrewd but harmless old woman, similar to the old priestess in *The Mad Lover*. The latter is not subjected to severe treatment for her carnality. She is also realistic about her age and her physical appearance, being content to love someone her own age, even if only in exchange for her money. Implicitly, she must 'take what she can get' – perhaps not an entirely satisfactory situation from a modern point of view, but certainly much better than

⁵⁷² I.e., has had her virginity, 5.2.323.

persecution.

She is, however not typical, as the relatively few old women in play-texts are on the whole treated quite harshly. One axiom seems to be that old women are fair game for insults, cruel jokes and laughter about their appearance and sexuality. In Lyly's play *Endymion* (1588)⁵⁷³, Sir Tophas inexplicably falls in love with a very old witch. She evinces no interest in him, nor is she sexually inclined generally (which is interesting to note), yet the knight persists and his infatuation is evidently meant to be a source of grotesque humour. All her defects he sees as virtues:

How harmlesse she is beeing toothlesse! . . . In howe sweete a proportion
her cheekes hang downe to her brests like dugges, and her pappes to her
waste like bagges! . . . How vertuous is shee like to be, ouer whom no man
can be ielous!⁵⁷⁴

The unpleasant details are typical, but Dipsas's indifference is rare amidst other female characters of the period.⁵⁷⁵ Interestingly, Lyly's *Mother Bombie* is also an old woman who is assumed to fit the sexual stereotype, but turns out to be the young people's friend in need; Mother Bombie is the heroine and in reward has the play named after her – but she still does not completely escape the usual derogatory remarks.

Old women, said the conventional wisdom of Lyly's and his contemporaries' day, were physically repulsive but still sexually charged creatures by virtue of being female – indeed, this carnality could only grow worse with age. From such core assumptions was spawned a species of corrupt and sexually depraved old female characters in play-texts (as well as other literature). The degree of their enormity varied

⁵⁷³ Date from Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 235.

⁵⁷⁴ 3.3.54-60.

widely and some were less overtly harmful than others. But all of the female characters to be discussed are tinged with sexuality, and most have an ill effect upon others, particularly *young* people.

Brunhalt in *Thierry and Theodoret*, as already suggested in chapter four, is possibly the most extreme extant example of the grim condemnation of sexuality in elderly women, and her behaviour must have been both riveting and revolting to watch in the theatre, for she is meant to be a dramatically powerful character, full of impassioned speeches and action. In scene after scene, Fletcher offers a relentless condemnation of female sexuality in old age. Bernard Shaw called the Countess Rossilion in *All's Well* 'the most beautiful old woman's part ever written'⁵⁷⁶ and it is hard to imagine two more antithetical portraits of elderly women in this period. Shakespeare is again conspicuous in his departure from the general trend of other playwrights and does not (with a notable exception discussed below) fashion figures of sexually preoccupied old women. Queen Margaret in *Richard III* is a frightening figure but with few or no traces of sexuality. Mistress Quickly is certainly associated with sex to a certain degree but usually stumbles into bawdy words rather than using them deliberately, and her relationships with Falstaff and other men are not made a focus for scorn or disapproval. Shakespeare appears not to have been much interested in using old women's sexuality as an object of laughter, or in persecuting them for remaining sexual beings.

A last point to note about Brunhalt is her similarity to the other characters to be

⁵⁷⁵ It is of passing interest that she is reunited with her aged husband at the end of the play.

considered in this section. She is fantastical, nightmarish, virtually demonic; yet it is ambition and pride, far more than lust, which push her to act with such extraordinarily obsessive malice. Her concern with sex is not, in itself, markedly greater than that of many other old women in plays of this time. However, usually these characters occur in the context of comedy rather than tragedy.

One such character who is similar to Brunhalt but lacking her personality, is the Guardianess in *Wit At Several Weapons* (1613?).⁵⁷⁷ The elderly Sir Perfidious Oldcraft will only leave his estate to a clever heir. His son, Witty-pate, has thus far disappointed him, so he intends to write his nephew into the will instead. Oldcraft also has a rich and quick-witted niece (whose guardian is 'an old doating Croane'⁵⁷⁸) whom he wishes to marry to the wealthy Sir Gregory Fopp. Cunningame, another suitor, eventually outwits Fopp and Oldcraft through numerous ruses, one of which is relevant to the present discussion. Early in the play, he gains access to the niece by pretending to court the Guardianess. Although she is at least sixty, he flatters, fawns and wins her over with embarrassingly little resistance. She simpers and makes lewd innuendoes, and shows immodest (not to say incredible) confidence in her sexual abilities.

It is the married woman (if you mark it)
And not the Maid that long [for sex], the appetite
Follows the first taste, when we have relisht
We wish cloying, the taste once pleas'd before,
Then our desire is whetted on to more.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁶ Quoted in Wells and Taylor 855.

⁵⁷⁷ The play is believed to be by Middleton, Rowley, and possibly Fletcher. It's dates of composition and first performance are not known, but it is likely a mid-Jacobean work (Sandra Clark, *Sexual Themes* 142).

⁵⁷⁸ Description from the list of dramatis personae. The edition has no lineation; references are to act and scene only.

⁵⁷⁹ 2.1.

So revolting is her behaviour that an audience can hardly feel pity when Cunnigame drops his mask and unceremoniously dismisses her: 'Away you Burr,' he sneers,

Hang of Fleshhook, fasten thin ichy claspe
On some dry Toad-stool that will kindle with thee,
And burn together.⁵⁸⁰

Thereafter, she recedes into the background, a bitter harridan spitefully intent upon ruining the marriage plans of her pretty, young ward.

The Guardianess's jealousy and unwillingness to relinquish precedence, in the sexual sphere, to young(er) women, is common to most other old women discussed in this section. Jonson introduces a slight variation in *Epicoene*, making Lady Haughty a sort of 'tutor' to the young ladies of her 'College'. She teaches them a perverted morality, according to which women must give highest precedence to the preservation of their fleshly beauty at all costs – even to the extent of having multiple abortions, for 'How should we maintain our youth and beauty, else? Many births of a woman make her old, as many crops make the earth barren'.⁵⁸¹ Thus, in her twisted set of values, the products of a woman's natural fertility are destroyed for the sake of superficial appearance. Lady Haughty appears to have instructed her acolytes well, as one of them declares that, 'We are rivers that cannot be called back, madam: she that now excludes her lovers may live to lie a forsaken beldame, in a frozen bed'.⁵⁸² Jonson seems to have included Lady Haughty and the College ladies mainly for satirical purposes, and does not develop the vein further. However, the elderly beldam bears a kinship with a long line of elderly

⁵⁸⁰ 2.1.

⁵⁸¹ 4.3.67-70.

⁵⁸² 4.3.46-51.

women in literature who have a malevolent influence on the younger generation, most of whom are bawds.

VII. 'A bawd, a bawd, a bawd. So ho!'

The most important type of elderly female character to consider when discussing sexuality and the old in plays of this period is the panderess, bawd, or ancient procuress, as she was variously styled. In his book of *Characters*, itself certainly shaped significantly by the characters of English Renaissance stages, Sir Thomas Overbury describes 'Maquerela, in plaine English a Bawde' as

an old *char-cole*, that hath been burnt her selfe, and therefore is able to kindle a whole greene coppice. . . . [She] weepes in the cup, to allay the heat of her *aqua vitae*. Her teeth are falne out; marry her nose, and chin, intend very shortly to be friends, and meet about it. Her yeares are sixty and odde: that she accounts her best time of trading; for a *bawd* is like a medlar, she's not ripe, till she be rotten.⁵⁸³

She is usually a former prostitute, ugly, sometimes alcoholic, but making a better living now than at any previous time in her life. An important feature to note about Overbury's character is the implicit judgement that old women who become bawds are, as it were, doubly damned: first, for contaminating old age with sexuality, and second, for their pernicious influence upon young men and women. As Overbury continues,

Her envy is like that of the devill, to have all faire women like her; and because 'tis impossible they should catch it being so young, she hurries them to it by diseases. Her *parke* is a villanous barren ground . . . for what she encloses to day, shee makes *common* to morrow. . . . [S]he can easily turne a sempstresse into a waiting gentle-woman, but her wardrobe is

⁵⁸³ Overbury 99-100.

most infectious, for it brings them to the *falling-sickness*.⁵⁸⁴

Once her own body was too old to sell, she turned to making a living selling the bodies of young women instead. Typically, she was quite a shrewd businesswoman, ruthless with her employees but ingratiatingly sweet otherwise, especially to potential clients. Her standard complaint was that business was poor, and her standard protestation that she was an 'honest gentlewoman'. Although she was sometimes portrayed as lascivious, her appetite was usually more for money than for sex. Stereotypical bawds were not overmastered by sexuality – rather, they used it to gain money and influence, and thereby power.

How accurately this literary type reflects contemporary reality remains obscure and debatable. Information on prostitution in the period only exists, to date, in any substantial amount for London, although the subject has yet to be explored fully in a scholarly way.⁵⁸⁵ A recent historian of prostitution in London has cautioned that literary sources read and interpreted without archival work for comparison will give only 'a corrupt view of everyday experience and mentalities'.⁵⁸⁶ His work indicates that women did make up a large proportion (71.2%) of Elizabethan brothel-keepers, though they were not, as imaginative literature would suggest, the only ones in the trade.⁵⁸⁷ (However, for a husband-wife partnership in the drama, see the Bawd and Pander in Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* [1606-1608].) A study of late medieval brothels in

⁵⁸⁴ Overbury 99-100.

⁵⁸⁵ Ruth Karras has recently published *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England*.

⁵⁸⁶ Griffiths 54. More information on prostitution in this period can be found in Archer chapter six, esp. pages 211-215, 231-3, 249-54.

⁵⁸⁷ Griffiths 46.

England shows female brothel keepers comprising between 34% and 59% of the total.⁵⁸⁸ The ages of such women are not known, however. A handful of scattered references to elderly bawds can be cited, for example, the description in an Essex court record of old Mother Bowden, a brothel-keeper who was beaten and dragged about her establishment by one of her client's wives. However, such anecdotal evidence is unfortunately too patchy and hardly constitutes sufficient evidence, so that one is left with the unsatisfying conclusion that it was an occupational choice for some elderly women, but one about which little, as yet, can be said.⁵⁸⁹

The historical lacunae are frustrating, yet they also add piquancy to an investigation of these characters. Whether or not bawds really were mostly old women at this time, the fact that they were portrayed as such is of interest, as also are the ways in which they are treated by other characters. The women discussed here are diverse (within the limits of the stereotype) but whilst they are sometimes punished and sometimes forgiven, they are always treated insultingly and with contempt. They are cankers on the commonwealth and their greatest crime is corruption – both physical and spiritual – of youth. Elderly women were supposed to be exemplars of virtue, who 'instruct the younger women to be sober minded . . . temperate, [and] chaste'.⁵⁹⁰ Instead, bawds are depicted as turning girls into harlots and young men into whoremongers, and spreading disease and depravity through all levels of society.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁸ Karras, 'The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England' 113-14.

⁵⁸⁹ Emmison 26; G.R. Quaife makes the unsubstantiated assertion that 'the usual family team was mother and daughters' (149).

⁵⁹⁰ Mildmay 45.

⁵⁹¹ I am grateful to Paul Griffiths for first suggesting the age-corrupting-youth theme, in a private communication.

Maquerelle in Marston's *The Malcontent* is a standard specimen of the type, 'an old crone in the court . . . [and] a cunning bawd'.⁵⁹² When she first appears on stage she is being bribed by a young courtier to persuade the Duchess Aurelia to commit adultery. Maquerelle drives a hard bargain and peppers her speech with crude innuendoes, as though to ensure her customer that he is dealing with a woman who knows her trade. As a reflection of her inner corruption, she is physically repulsive; in one quarto version of the play, the fool Passarello comments to Malevole that,

I would call her whore. But now that antiquity leaves her as an old piece of plastic t' work by, I only ask her how her rotten teeth fare every morning, and so leave her. . . . She were an excellent lady, but that her face peepleth like Muscovy glass.⁵⁹³

Passarello mocks the corporeal signs of her wickedness, but Malevole comes nearer the matter when he calls Maquerelle 'Old coal' and candidly elaborates upon the metaphor:

Methinks thou liest like a brand under these billets of green wood.⁵⁹⁴ He that will inflame a young wench's heart, let him lay close to her an old coal that hath first been fired, a pandress, my half-burnt lint, who, though thou canst not flame thyself, yet art able to set a thousand virgins' tapers afire.⁵⁹⁵

Overbury would use the same imagery, as already cited: 'an old *char-cole*, that hath been burnt her selfe, and therefore is able to kindle a whole greene coppice'. Plainly, the panderess destroys the younger generation with the evil fires of carnal concupiscence.

A later scene finds Maquerelle with the young women Emilia and Bianca, sharing a 'posset' or aphrodisiac drink, and giving them advice upon how to preserve the

⁵⁹² 1.1.117, 121.

⁵⁹³ 'Muscovy glass' = mica. Addition B, after 1.2.35-42.

⁵⁹⁴ I.e., the other young women present.

⁵⁹⁵ 2.2.4-8.

appearance of youthful beauty as they age.⁵⁹⁶ She encourages them in their worldly preoccupations and her speech is laden with blasphemies: 'But for your beauty, let it be your saint . . . There cannot be an uglier thing to see than an old woman, from which, O pruning, pinching and painting deliver all sweet beauties!'.⁵⁹⁷ The young women are willing disciples, but Maquerelle meets her match when sent to persuade the virtuous Maria (wife of the disguised duke/Malevole) to marry the wicked Mendoza. Although she attempts to absorb Maria into her circle of fallen women by talking of 'our liberty' Maquerelle's sexual degeneracy is a foil for the young wife's exemplary chastity. When justice is finally meted out, the old bawd is banished from Court to the suburbs, where she will have to scrape together a living as a common brothel-owner. Marston seems to present her fate as a justifiable punishment for peddling iniquity under the guise of matriarchal old age. Young women in the drama are frequently the victims of unscrupulous men, and should be able to look to their own sex for succour and protection – especially to older, experienced and virtuous women. Like Maquerelle, however, bawds in play-texts rarely act for anyone's good but their own, whilst each unfortunate victim 'pants like a pigeon vnder the hands of a Hawke'.⁵⁹⁸

The roughly contemporary *Westward Ho!* contains a similar figure, named 'Birdlime' – referring both to the lime smeared upon branches to catch small birds (which were often then sold at market) and to the bawd's profession of catching 'birds' (young women) for brothels. Dekker was probably writing *The Honest Whore, part 2* with

⁵⁹⁶ Jonson may have been thinking of this when he wrote a similar scene in *Epicoene* 4.3.

⁵⁹⁷ 2.3.33-47, note the parody of the Litany in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

⁵⁹⁸ *Westward Ho!* 2.2.53-4.

Middleton at this time as well, and they created Horsleach, a kindred character, although somewhat less developed than Birdlime. The first scene contains Birdlime carrying jewels and a new gown to bribe Mistress Justiniano for the libidinous Earl of the realm. She presents herself as ‘an olde Gentlewoman . . . that cast away my self vppon an vnthrifty Captaine, that lies now in Ireland, [and now] I am faine to pick out a poore living with selling complexion, to keep the frailty (as they say) honest’.⁵⁹⁹ Attempting in this way to gain the sympathy of her victim, her deceit is so transparent that the wife spots the ruse even before the old woman has opened her mouth. Birdlime really deceives no one and comes close to persuading the wife only because she has been driven to desperation by her jealous husband. When Birdlime tells the Earl that Mistress Justiniano will rendezvous with him, she delays, delays and teases him in a scene that echoes Juliet’s Nurse’s behaviour in *Romeo and Juliet* (2.5).⁶⁰⁰ She combines features of the Nurse with those of a common bawd, first complaining of her aches and pains, then waxing indignant that she, ‘an honest motherly gentlewoman’ had been called ‘plaine Bawd to my face’.⁶⁰¹ To ensure that she receives ample reward for her services, Birdlime salaciously itemises the wife’s many attractive qualities, stoking the Earl’s desire and eliciting generous payment. There is a wicked and significant irony in her affectation of motherly concern for the wife (in 2.2.55-6), when she is making a living by doing what no natural mother would do to her daughters.

Birdlime’s plan backfires when Mistress Justiniano, who believes the Earl to be a

⁵⁹⁹ Complexion = cosmetics, 1.1.49, 107-110.

⁶⁰⁰ The Nurse is discussed as a sort of panderess later in this chapter.

⁶⁰¹ 2.2.14-21.

young and attractive man, sees he is actually elderly and decrepit. She rails at the bawd in scathing terms:

thou art a Divel
Cast in a reverend shape; thou stale damnation!
Why hast thou me intist from mine owne Paradice,
To steal fruit in a barren wilderness.⁶⁰²

Having failed in this venture, Birdlime turns to one of her easier clients, the Earl's nephew Frank Monopoly who shares his uncle's appetite for women. Birdlime supplies Frank with the young prostitute Luce, who also caters to the three merchant husbands in the play. Yet although the old bawd helps the men's wives to discover their spouses' infidelity (and hypocrisy), she is brusquely excluded from the comic harmony of the play's ending, in much the same way as Maquerelle, with 'you mother of Iniquity . . . go, saile with the rest of your bawdie-traffickers to the . . . suburbes'.⁶⁰³ Once Birdlime is expelled, the comic ritual of purification is complete, leaving festivity and merriment to ensue. The old bawd is the scapegoat, allowing the errant men to sweep their peccadilloes under the carpet. Once she is gone, it is implied that the young persons of the play can pursue licit pleasures without fear of being tempted into vice

Comic endings so often require this sort of purgation before their harmonious closure, and it is interesting how many times this is effected through the pattern of a bawd (or bawd-like character)⁶⁰⁴ who is employed by her social superiors, mocked and

⁶⁰² 2.2.152-5.

⁶⁰³ 5.4.247-50.

⁶⁰⁴ Middleton's *Women Beware Women* should also be noted as a close kinsman to this dramatic and thematic pattern; in that play, the aunt is a bawd-like character who leads her niece into an incestuous relationship. Although the aunt is middle-aged rather than old, the play constructs a dichotomy between the two generations which has the same effect as I am discussing – the illustration of 'youth' being betrayed by 'age' in whom it should be able to find safety and spiritual guidance.

laughed at for her age and trade, and finally expelled when she is no longer wanted, or when her employers have experienced a moral conversion. Such is again the case in Thomas Dekker's *Match Me In London* (?1620). The old bawd Dildoman is, as one courtier reports to another, 'the Kings nuthooke . . . that when any Filberd-tree is ripe; puls downe the brauest bowes to his hand: a Lady pandresse, and . . . has a priuate hot-house for his Grace onely to sweat in'.⁶⁰⁵ In other words, she seeks out choice young women virgins or newlyweds for the King of Seville's pleasure. Her latest discovery is Tormiella, whose charms she outlines in tantalising detail for her master. She arranges for him to watch whilst Dildoman tenders his propositions to Tormiella. However, she goes too far and tries to forcibly prevent Tormiella from leaving. The king reveals himself and, after letting the young wife depart in anguish, he turns upon the bawd with sanctimonious anger:

Th'art a damn'd Bawd:
A soaking, sodden, splay-foot, ill-look'd [J]ade;
Not all the wits of Kindgomes can enact
To saue what by such Gulphes as thou art wrack'd,
Thou horie wickednesse, Diuels dam.⁶⁰⁶

Dildoman recedes from the action after this reproof, but her punishment is announced at the play's end, by the very King whose appetite she had served: 'Let that slye Bawd,/ Engine of Hell, who wrought vpon thy Chastity/ Be whipt through *Sivill*, foure such tempting witches/May vndoe a City'.⁶⁰⁷ The King has mended his ways, but he bestows no forgiveness upon the old woman who was his tool.

⁶⁰⁵ 1.4.98-101.

⁶⁰⁶ 2.2.92-6.

⁶⁰⁷ 5.5.37-40.

This is the standard fate of a bawd. Her sin of procuring is, ironically, deemed greater than the lust of her superiors – who should, by rights, be moral exemplars for their social underlings. This suggests that this pattern of ‘social cleansing’ involving bawds is heavily dependent on the generally low status of elderly women in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English society. It should be noted here that very occasionally, male panders appear in a play-text, such as in Fletcher’s *The Tragedy of Valentinian* (1610-14). Significantly, the four elderly courtiers who act as panders are not given the same venomous and debauched personalities as the panderesses Ardelia and Phorba – even though it is all six of them who are responsible for luring Lucina into the palace, where she is raped by the king and then commits suicide.

Although a bawd, whenever she figured in a play, was usually regaled with disagreeable epithets and treated with contempt, not all dramas took an extreme view of her type. Some plays survive which indicate that the bawd could herself be a source of interest and show some character development, within the boundaries of the stereotype.

Such is Leucippe in Fletcher’s *The Humorous Lieutenant* (?1619).⁶⁰⁸ She is the unofficial procurer for King Antigonus and the rest of his entourage, and has a bawd’s characteristic shrewdness and business sense, enlarged to almost corporate proportions. ‘[S]he’s a stirring woman indeed,’ remarks a court sycophant,

There’s not a handsome wench of any mettle
Within an hundred miles, but her intelligence
Reaches her, and out-reaches her, and brings her

⁶⁰⁸See chapter four for a summary of the plot.

As confident to Court, as to a sanctuary:

There is no young wench, let her be a Saint,
Unlesse she live ith' Center, but she findes her.⁶⁰⁹

Soon, the audience is introduced to Leucippe at her place of business, a bustling chamber where two maids sit as clerks, writing industriously in meticulously kept record books of past, present and future candidates for the royal pleasure. Leucippe manages her affairs like a man – when her elderly husband enters, her tone is distinctly patronising ('Poor, weak man,/ I have a thousand eyes, when thou art sleeping,/ Abroad, and full of business').⁶¹⁰ She encourages her clerks with industrious maxims and surveys her domain with the air of a harassed businesswoman who, notwithstanding, is quite pleased with her profitable trade.

Unlike her poorer counterparts in the suburbs, she usually deals in top quality 'merchandise'. When approaching Celia, the heroine, Leucippe recognises the value of her prize and meets her at Court with all the graces of a staid and virtuous elderly gentlewoman. As in many other play-texts, this scene juxtaposes virtuous and innocent youth with villainous, guileful old age, again stressing the theme that the old are not necessarily the safe guardians of young men and women which social ideals would have them be. A small incident in 2.3 reinforces the reality that young people can be at the mercy of unscrupulous elders, even their own parents. An old woman is ushered in to Leucippe with her daughter, '[a] pretty girle, but out of cloathes' whom her mother,

⁶⁰⁹ 2.1.37-47.

⁶¹⁰ 2.3.100-101.

‘for a little money’ wishes to sell into prostitution.⁶¹¹ Sizing her up like a horse-dealer, Leucippe surveys and criticises the girl’s body, knocking the price down to a mere ten crowns and a round of cheese. The transaction proceeds so matter-of-factly that one could almost forget that a mother has just sold her daughter into shame, misery, disease and damnation. This mother’s betrayal of her sacred duty as a parent is another form of pandering which occurs with some frequency in the drama of this period, and we shall consider some other pandering mothers presently.

Running alongside and sometimes intersecting with the theme of ‘old age corrupting youth’ in *The Humorous Lieutenant*, is the well-established dramatic device of youth’s triumph over aged wisdom. Leucippe (who is part of the old, prosperous, powerful, canny generation in this play) feels confident that she can snare Celia (part of the young, unestablished, vulnerable generation), but the latter is not for one moment fooled by Leucippe’s pretence of matronly respectability. Leucippe loses her prey and one expects her to receive the bawd’s standard punishment – public humiliation and ostracism. However, the play ends without taking a strong stand against the sexual misdemeanours of its elderly figures, including the old bawd. King Antigonus does not renounce his sexual pastimes and Leucippe is neither turned out nor otherwise punished; she merely recedes from the action when no longer dramatically necessary. Such mild handling contrasts with the harsh correctives meted out in other plays. Leucippe is an engaging character, not a virtuous old woman, to be sure, but her chief fault lies in her occupation, not her personality as such. Fletcher neither annihilates the

⁶¹¹ 2.3.56,68.

dignity of elderly women, nor uses the stereotype of the old bawd to epitomise corruption in this particular play. Although she does not fulfil her prescribed role as guide to and protector of youth, Leucippe is an enterprising and capable elderly woman whose harmful effects upon others are downplayed to suit the overall lukewarm morality of the play.

Frank Gullman's mother, mentioned earlier in conjunction with Sir Bounteous Plenty of *A Mad World My Masters*, is a less striking character than Leucippe, however she also merits notice for the easy treatment she receives – particularly as she is panderess for her own daughter. Rather than this fact being a cause for greater censure, Frank's mother is presented as shrewd 'Old Gentlewoman'⁶¹² who has spent her own youth 'on the game' and is now using her expertise to help her daughter. In the course of the play, the old woman reveals that her plan is to save enough of Frank's earnings to make a substantial dowry, and then find a gentleman who (ignorant of her past history) will marry her and secure both women's futures. The old woman is thus acting partially in her own interest, but she seems genuinely concerned for her daughter's well-being. The means by which she seeks to achieve this mutual security is morally indefensible, from the strict viewpoints of the time. However, the tenor of Middleton's play is emphatically not set by a desire to extol an inflexible morality. Just as Sir Bounteous Progress is forgiven the weakness of his unquenchable sexual appetite, Frank's mother is treated with a decency not normally accorded to bawds in the drama. It is arguably of significance that she is always identified as 'Mother' in stage directions and when she

speaks, never as 'Bawd'. Further, at the play's end only Frank and her mother know the full truth of Frank's history – that she was not a virgin before serving Sir Bounteous Progress, and is a 'common whore'. One of the effects of Middleton's representation of this mother-daughter duo is arguably to remind the audience how often other parents in plays essentially 'prostitute' their daughters by forcibly marrying them to a rich but undesirable (and often, old) man. (Lady Yellowhammer, for instance, tries to do this in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1611-1613), as does the Mother in Fletcher's *The Nightwalker*.) Thus, as with his representations of January-May marriages, Middleton is also typically much less severe than his contemporaries towards elderly desire, particularly in his middle and later plays. Tolerance and acceptance of social realities such as prostitution and sexual desire in the old are characteristics distinguishing Middleton from the majority of other Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights.

The Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* also claims a place at the end of this inquiry into aged sexuality. She is an ambivalent character, or perhaps 'inconstant' is a better term. The Nurse is not part of the original old folk narrative, but was introduced by Bandello in his version⁶¹³, retained by Boiastuau in his translation of Bandello into French (1559) and in Arthur Brooke's translation of Boiastuau in *Romeus and Juliet* (1562), which Shakespeare is believed to have used as his primary source. Shakespeare considerably enlarges upon her character in some respects. In Brooke's version, she is not so pleasant and amusing as in the play. She is described as 'froward' and is only won over to

⁶¹² Description from the list of *dramatis personae*.

⁶¹³ In the *Novelle*, volume two (1554).

Juliet's cause with money, like a typical bawd.⁶¹⁴ The poem includes her fond recollections of Juliet's youth, but whereas in *Romeus and Juliet* they are merely the 'tedious long discourse' of the 'prating noorse'⁶¹⁵, Shakespeare develops this and other exchanges into the genuine tender relationship of his play. Brooke's Nurse accepts gold from Romeo, swears to use all her 'crafty wit' to help him and 'cowers' before him; she also omits to tell Juliet of the bribe. Payment makes her zealous and she energetically persuades Juliet not waste a moment of, as she calls it, 'blisse'.⁶¹⁶ When Romeo is banished, the old woman's perfidious disloyalty is more emphasised by Brooke and her 'wicked wordes' stir Juliet to wrath.⁶¹⁷ Brooke's Nurse is thus more culpable and less likeable than Shakespeare's character in many respects, and resembles a typical bawd, including her banishment at the story's end.

Comparison with *Romeus and Juliet* indicates that Shakespeare wished to apply a somewhat gentler touch to his old woman, using her (and the Friar) in part to accentuate the distance between the young people and their parents. Juliet's situation is a particularly lonely one, having a mother who appears to be endowed with little warmth and maternal love. The Nurse at first seems partially to fill this gap. Juliet is like her own daughter, a replacement for her little Susan whom she lost in infancy. When it comes to discussing Juliet's impending marriage to Paris, the aloof gravity of Lady Capulet is balanced by the Nurse's frank speaking; the old woman broaches the sexual side of marriage quite naturally amidst her reminiscences and ribald comments.

⁶¹⁴ Brooke 627-8.

⁶¹⁵ 659-60.

⁶¹⁶ 702.

Although Brooke's Nurse does this as well, he makes her behaviour seem coarse.

Shakespeare's Nurse pledges her help to the young lovers (*without* asking for pay). Yet the sharp-witted and razor-tongued Mercutio recognises the nature of her mission at once, and tellingly cries, 'A bawd, a bawd, a bawd. So ho!'.⁶¹⁸ Already, her go-between role resembles that of a bawd, as does her generally sexual nature which would be unacceptable in a 'gentlewoman'. Still, the Nurse helps the young lovers several times, until Romeo's banishment.

Then, her attitude suddenly changes, reverting to the pragmatism of the panderess stencil from which her character is largely traced. When the Nurse begins to urge Paris's suit, she actually begins to fulfil Mercutio's accusation of 'bawd'. By encouraging Juliet to break a sacrament of the church, she is propelling the child's soul towards damnation; and from a worldly point of view, she is encouraging Juliet to give her body to Paris when she has already given it to the one man she loves. Juliet would be prostituting herself to please her parents' wishes. Tellingly, Juliet when alone castigates her former confidante with words typically applied to bawds: 'Ancient damnation! O most wicked fiend!'.⁶¹⁹ The Nurse's failure to support Juliet signals the decline of her involvement in the play. Shakespeare does not punish her with banishment, as in Brooke's poem – but he virtually banishes her from the action once Juliet has taken her draught of sleeping potion and is discovered 'dead'. Brian Gibbons gives an illuminating summary of the Nurse, her transformation, and the effect of this

⁶¹⁷ 2310-11.

⁶¹⁸ *Romeo and Juliet* 2.3.121.

⁶¹⁹ 3.5.235.

on the play's atmosphere:

The role of the Nurse seems at first designed to temper Juliet's cool, tentative air with earthy vigour and indulgently humorous acceptance of sexual desire and enjoyment, while her lower social position enables her to give practical help in advancing the cause of love. . . . Yet later, in the crisis of Romeo's banishment, when the Nurse's love and understanding of Juliet are really tested, it is apparent that the girl she nursed has grown into a womanly maturity far beyond her comprehension. . . . [H]er tone of coy and cosy assurance fail[s] to disguise a brutal opportunism and moral blindness. The spirit of comic anarchy looks suddenly ugly and destructive.⁶²⁰

The old Nurse is thus a rather interesting character within this complex play of extremes – of love, of hate and of ages. As an old woman with a decidedly sexual side to her nature, she is portrayed throughout much of the play as a decent and likeable person. However, when she privileges opportunity over virtue, truth and love, she becomes just another part of the old generation which seeks to 'barter' their children, treating them as items rather than individuals deserving of respect and consideration. Although the Nurse is not a 'bawd' in the strict sense, she shares many features of the type; regarding her against the backdrop of similar old women enriches one's understanding of the extent to which Juliet and Romeo resist the dishonesty of their elders. It also accentuates the comic framework around which Shakespeare constructed his play and the extent to which the younger generations rely on the goodness of their elders to avoid the tragic.

In the balance, it would appear that Elizabethan and Jacobean play-texts present a rather narrow set of views on sexual desire in old men and women. The former are permitted considerably more leeway than the latter, reflecting existing social patterns in

which women were generally treated with less respect in old age and censured over sexuality at any age. It is arguable that the preference for treating elderly sexuality comically rather than tragically, when considered in conjunction with relevant historical evidence, indicates that social disapproval had to be tempered with tacit acknowledgement that some people did remain sexually active in old age. The laughter elicited in plays registers both uneasy acceptance and – particularly with regard to women – the boundaries of tolerance.

Coda: ‘*Age-ward Ho!*’

Unlike some of Dekker’s or Webster’s other plays such as *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1599), *The White Devil* (1609-1612), or *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612-1614), *Northward Ho!* has received little critical attention. It is not, it must be granted, a *superb* work, either structurally or poetically. However, thematically it is quite unusual and innovative in some respects and succeeds in a metatheatrical critique of certain major dramatic conventions, whilst remaining highly comic and entertaining. From beginning to end, *Northward Ho!* takes the standard commonplaces, situations and dilemmas of old age and generation-based conflicts and inverts or otherwise skews them; the result is an extended commentary on the temptation to rely upon stereotypes for an understanding of individuals generally and of elderly men specifically.⁶²¹ Dekker and Webster, in other words, critique most of the dramatic age-conventions discussed in this chapter. Further,

⁶²⁰ Gibbons 66.

⁶²¹ Once again, there are no elderly women at all in this play.

they do so by making one of the main characters a poet and dramatist, well versed in classical and contemporary theatre. This has the effect of reminding the audience that they are watching a play that is itself commenting upon the phenomena of dramatic representations and of theatre-going – as entertainment and as a way of making sense of life. In charge of orchestrating most of the play's plots are two old men – the husband Mayberry and the poet Bellamont. Their status as principal characters – 'heroes' in that sense – is the first of many reversals in the play and focuses the main interest upon old men rather than young ones. Cyrus Hoy, one of the few critics to consider *Northward Ho!*, contends in his discerning introduction to the play that ' *Northward Ho!* owes much of its success to the finely realised characters of Mayberry and Bellamont'.⁶²²

It is generally agreed that Bellamont is a portrait of the playwrights' friend and fellow-poet George Chapman.⁶²³ Although Chapman would have been only forty-five or forty-six at the time, poetic license ages him, although Bellamont is a vigorous man despite his age. This stage likeness is 'richly detailed and immensely attractive'⁶²⁴ entirely believable and humorous but not at the expense of his age or his person. More than his friend Mayberry, Bellamont focuses and concentrates *Northward Ho!*'s deliberate exploration of comic conventions involving the elderly. The structure of *Northward Ho!*'s plotline is essential to its critique of stereotypes of the elderly and their roles in society. Four key character/plot conventions are overturned in the play: the clever young hero(es), the outwitted and cuckolded old husband, the sexually

⁶²² Hoy 237.

⁶²³ See Nicoll 216.

⁶²⁴ Hoy 250.

preoccupied old man and the prodigal son. Much of the fun of *Northward Ho!* lies in being led down the garden path, then refreshingly surprised by the deception.

The play opens 'where most comedies of adulterous intrigue end' – a young gallant has failed to seduce a citizen's wife, and now in a fit of sour grapes is slandering her.⁶²⁵ Greenshield has been spurned by the attractive Mistress Mayberry and he vows revenge; Greenshield's friend Featherstone agrees to help him retaliate by making her husband believe she has cuckolded him. Meanwhile, Mayberry and Bellamont, two respectable elderly citizens (the former presumably a merchant, the latter a poet) are just returning from the annual fair at Stourbridge. Bellamont's delighted recollections of the fair provide the audience with its first glimpse into his character:

I tel you Gentlemen I have observ'd very much with being at *Sturbridge*; it hath afforded me mirth beyond the length of five lattin Comedies. . . . I could make an excellent description of it in a Comedy.⁶²⁶

Bellamont's ensuing report shows his lively character, as well as his gift for observation and vivid description; it also introduces the play's theatrical motif, making the work highly self-reflective. As a poet and playwright, Bellamont is frequently comparing their adventures to dramatic plots, commenting that such-and-such would 'make an excellent comedy' and tacitly reminding the audience that they are viewing a fictional dramatic representation, rife with conventions and depictions of the old that convey a particular (and particularly) youth-biased agenda.

Greenshield prepares his trap for old Mayberry by relying upon the customary assumption about January-May marriages, that an old husband will naturally expect his

⁶²⁵ Hoy 247, who notes, 'this is not the least of its [i.e., the play's] novelties'.

young wife to engage in affairs with young gallants. Just as Greenshield lays the bait for Mayberry, so too do Dekker and Webster tempt their audience into assuming this will be a 'conventional' comedy, in which Mayberry will suspect his wife, only to suffer the ritual humiliation of a jealous old husband. However, Bellamont sees through the young men's plan (perhaps because as a playwright he is familiar with such plot devices) and convinces his friend that the men are lying. This is the first instance of 'plot refraction'.

The next scene opens with another stereotypical situation from comedy – the arrest of a young man (Bellamont's son) for debt. For some reason, this thread of the plot is only partially developed and then dropped as the focus fixes upon the old men's schemes to dupe Greenshield and Featherstone. Nonetheless, it is introduced at an early stage of the play and establishes another set of expectations about Bellamont – that he will be the usual old father with a 'prodigal son', exasperated, well-intentioned, but generally unremarkable. He turns out to be quite otherwise. Conversely, whilst the prodigal is usually charming, Philip is quite obnoxious; he shows no gratitude to his father for paying off his considerable debts and even mocks the old man's literary activities. The father and son part with mutual antagonism and instead of being urged to sympathise with reckless youth, the audience is asked to look from the other side of the generational gap.

In 1.3, the excitable Mayberry is in a paroxysm of jealousy and on the verge of becoming a comedy figure – the suspicious old husband discussed above in section

⁶²⁶ 1.1.39-41, 54-5.

three. Particularly interesting at this point is the use of Bellamont to manipulate the play through overt references to the acting profession. He upbraids Maybery for his ranting – ‘Sfoot you talke like a Player’⁶²⁷ – calling our attention to theatrical artifice and, by natural extension, to the various conventions of plot, character and theme used in contemporary plays. After Maybery replies that he would give Bellamont a piece of silver plate to write his wife into one of the poet’s comedies, his old friend continues, ‘I wud give two peeces of Plate, to have you stand by me, when I were to write a iealous mans part: Iealous men are eyther knaves or Coxcombes, bee you neither’.⁶²⁸ In an attempt to recall his friend to his senses, Bellamont refers in jest to the ‘two wicked elders’ of the *Book of Susanna*⁶²⁹, which conjures up the abundant cultural assumptions about elderly men and sexuality, particularly their taste for young women. In this case of course, the roles are reversed, the husband being old and the ‘wicked elders’ being two young men.

The self-conscious references to theatricality continue in the second act, as Doll and her colleagues prepare for their clientele in 2.1. Another old man, named Jack Hornet, is pretending to be her father as she assumes the role of wealthy heiress. Hornet describes how he make his performance convincing:

I will looke gravely *Doll* . . . like the fore-man of a Iury: and speak wisely like a Lattin school-maister, and be surly and dogged, and proud like the Keeper of a prison.⁶³⁰

In his stereotype of the ‘old father’, he will ‘cough and spit gobbets’, making sure that

⁶²⁷ 1.3.28-9.

⁶²⁸ 1.3.35-41.

⁶²⁹ See above, chapter five, section 2

he truly fits the image of an infirm and senile patriarch. At the end of this scene, Philip Bellamont enters and Doll suddenly takes a fancy to meeting his father – little expecting that she will fall in love with him. Webster and Dekker continue the themes of disguise and role-playing, as Philip and Doll plan to embarrass Bellamont by having him unwittingly receive a prostitute into his private chamber. Again, this seems a prelude to the elderly father being made the butt of their tricks, but once more the playwrights will foil the audience's expectations.

Meanwhile, the old men are continuing to concoct their little drama to ensnare the young gallants. Mistress Maybery is to play the part of flirtatious wife and Bellamont coaches her, assuming the director's role with which he is comfortable by profession. Maybery takes the part of wittol – the willing cuckold who winks at his wife's affairs.⁶³¹ 'Yee see Gentlemen, the affection of an old man', he says self-deprecatingly to Featherstone and Greenshield.⁶³² At the same time, Bellamont must labour to reassure Mistress Maybery that her husband is not the one having an affair, because a new woman has suspiciously arrived – Greenshield's wife Kate, posing as his sister; Kate's disguise is yet another strand in the play's metatheatrical web. Wisely, Bellamont advises her to abandon such misgivings, warning that 'Suspition workes more mischief, growes more strong,/ To sever chast beds then aparant wrong'⁶³³ – important words for the play as a whole. Suspicion, it should be noted, involves the

⁶³⁰ 2.1.30-2.

⁶³¹ Compare with Bilioso in *The Malcontent* and, especially, Allwit in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, who actually receives payment from Sir Walter Whorehound for the 'use' of Mistress Allwit.

⁶³² 2.2.36.

⁶³³ 2.2.179-80.

beholder assuming that the suspect is acting a false part, and then recasting that person into a role other than the one they are outwardly playing; hence, in *Northward Ho!* the theme of suspicion meshes with the metatheatrical commentary on dramatic conventions and the pitfalls of stereotyping.

Thus far, two old men have the upper hand of two cocksure youths. It is extremely interesting that the key technique in Maybery and Bellamont's manipulation of Greenshield and Featherstone is to use the stereotypical representations of old citizens that such young men (in real life) would see in contemporary plays. Being gallants, the young gentlemen would almost certainly be playgoers and therefore readily susceptible to believing Maybery's and Bellamont's little drama. Ironically, whilst Greenshield and Featherstone are, in their own minds, playing the roles of fashionable men-about-town and, in the case of Greenshield, seducer, they are completely unaware that they have two knowledgeable audiences (the old men and Mrs. Maybery, as well as the actual playhouse audience) and that they are subsumed in a larger masquerade, the dynamics of which they are utterly unaware.

By the end of the second act, Middleton and Webster have established an intricate counterpoint between theatricality and reality, stereotyping and individuality, particularly as these relate to the elderly. 'Real life' (of both the play world and the playhouse) and 'drama' keep mingling, chiefly via the character of Bellamont who as a playwright is positioned with a foot in three worlds; for Bellamont is further complicated by his existence as a fictional character who is, at the same time, based

upon the real person of George Chapman⁶³⁴. In the first two acts, he is largely in the position of 'maker', observing the people around him and dreaming up plots. However, in 3.1 he is plunged into the heart of someone else's plot in which he is first taunted and ridiculed, then urged to play the traditional role of licentious old man. Under the pretence that Doll is a wealthy gentlewoman wishing to commission some poetry, Philip brings her to Bellamont's home. When Doll's identity is revealed, Philip sneers that he has tricked his father

for nothing but to shew you that your gravity may bee drawne in: white haire may fall into the company of drabs as well as red bearded into the society of knaves.⁶³⁵

However, as with previous age-related assumptions in this play, the supposition that the young have out-manoeuvred the old in this situation is again false. Although Doll calls Bellamont 'a scoffing Poet'⁶³⁶, her own scoffs will prove to be of little avail against the promptings of her heart. In the oddest reversal of the play, Middleton and Webster turn the conventions of elderly desire upside down. Doll is a young, attractive woman and according to the usual assumptions about old men, Bellamont should fall for her charms; such a development would initiate a typical sequence of actions leading to the downfall of the upright father and the triumph of his son. Instead, act four brings an altogether different set of developments, once more stalling the dramatic machinery that usually brings embarrassment and ridicule upon the old.

As 4.1 opens, the audience receives a cosy, domestic view of Bellamont is at

⁶³⁴ G.K. Hunter suggests a possible reason to suppose that '[t]he relation of real-life plots and dramatic plots could . . . have been a sensitive point for Chapman' (*English Drama* 327).

⁶³⁵ 3.1.91-3.

home working on a play, musing to himself about his talent, seasoning pleasure with jocular self-pity. 'Why should not I bee an excellent statesman?' he declares.

I can in the wryting of a tragedy, make *Caesar* speake better than ever his ambition could: when I write of *Pompey* I have *Pompeies* soule within me, and when I personate a worthy Poet, I am then truly my selfe, a poore vnpreferd scholler.⁶³⁷

Only minutes later, Doll bursts passionately into Bellamont's chamber. This is very much the 'world upside down'; instead of an old man chasing skirts, the audience sees a young woman – further, a prostitute, typically notoriously jaded and cynical on the stage – overmastered by a bizarre infatuation with a senior citizen.

Bellamont responds with good humour. 'If I were a yonker,' he admits, 'it would be no Imodesty in me to bee seene in thy company; but to have snow in the lap of Iune; vile! vile'. '[Y]et,' he teases her, 'come; garlick has a white head, and a greene stalke, then why should not I?'.⁶³⁸ However, he is only using the stereotype of the licentious elderly man to toy with her. Rejecting her offer, Bellamont asks contemptuously, 'Mad for me? why, if the worme of lust were wrigling within mee as it does in others, dost thinke Ide crawle vpon thee?'⁶³⁹ Baffled, she falls back up the cultural repository of exaggerated insult: he has 'a body not worth begging by a Barber-surgeon'⁶⁴⁰, is nothing but a 'carcas of a man' who has 'gon over the bridge of many years, and now art ready to drop into a grave'.⁶⁴¹ But her will has been overcome by irrational desire. Whilst creating a farcical situation, the playwrights also remind their audience of the two

⁶³⁶ 3.1.136.

⁶³⁷ 4.1.6-10.

⁶³⁸ 4.1.131-5.

⁶³⁹ 4.1.160-1.

⁶⁴⁰ I.e., not fit even for dissection.

stereotypes upon which this scenario relies – the lustful old man and the elderly father who tries to steal his son’s lover. They are not necessarily criticising the use of these stereotypes in play-texts, but they are at the very least encouraging viewers to remain aware of their society’s common assumptions about old age and not forget that individuals frequently transcend stereotypes. This point is reinforced by the way that Bellamont uses further humorous references to drama, to dispel his perturbation. ‘Is this my Poeticall fury?’ he jokes to himself, and tells Maybery, ‘I have been at a most villanous female Tragedie’.⁶⁴²

Maybery himself devises the plot that will finally ensnare Greenshield and Featherstone in their own nets of lies. Featherstone is having an affair with Greenshield’s wife Kate, and the two paramours have gone to the town of Ware for a weekend of mischief; Maybery lures Greenshield there with the promise of Mistress Maybery. Bellamont adds the last touch to their revenge by having Maybery capitalise on the stereotype of the lustful old man who hires a prostitute behind his wife’s back. Kate is propositioned by Bellamont, who plays procurer for Maybery:

Youle say your yong Gentleman, is your onely service . . . but I assure you, they must not onely have variety of foolery; but also of wenches: whereas your conscionable gray-beard of *Farrington* within, will keepe himself, to the ruines of one cast waighting-woman an age.⁶⁴³

To complete their drama, Mistress Maybery acts the deceived wife, accusing Bellamont of being not a ‘reverent old gentleman’ but Kate’s pander; thus, Bellamont’s role-play doubles back upon itself, as he becomes a virtuous old man playing a wicked old man

⁶⁴¹ 4.1. 157, 144-45..

⁶⁴² 4.1.201, 209.

who is in turn pretending to be virtuous. Soon after this metatheatrical climax, the Mayberys' revenge is complete: Greenshield discovers he has been betrayed by wife and friend, and all the young people stand sheepish and chagrined whilst the two old men exult in their victory. However, there is still one piece of unfinished business – Doll's unrequited passion for Bellamont. As her arrival is announced, the poet conceives one final scheme to save his dignity. Employing another stock dramatic scenario, he tells Featherstone that Doll is a wealthy young woman who has run away because her wicked elderly guardian plans to marry her against her will; Doll, meanwhile, is swiftly convinced that Featherstone is also wealthy and the two are married before they realise the ruse. Sufficiently chastened, the young remain silent at the play's end, whilst Bellamont and Maybery deliver the final lines invoking comic reunion and harmony.

Thus, in this unusual and inventive play the old fellows win the day. Clever, energetic and good-humoured, Bellamont and Maybery nonetheless scrupulously behave as befits their age and position. The self-conscious theatricality of the work draws attention to the many ways in which the comic genre relies upon stereotypes of old men. It also reminds the audience that the stereotypes of the stage and of real life mingle freely in people's minds. By manipulating contemporary stage conventions and overturning many of their audience's expectations about intergenerational dynamics, Dekker and Webster devised a play which comments upon the very process of comic creation, most particularly the extent to which scenarios of intergenerational conflict are

⁶⁴³ 5.1.135-49.

essential to good comedy. However, the apparently limited success of the play in its time, and since, suggests that in spite of its intelligent construction and fine comic qualities, most audiences and readers preferred, and still prefer, young heroes to old ones, and the victory of youth over age.

CHAPTER 7: PARENTS AND CHILDREN

*To you your father should be as a god;
One that compos'd your beauties; yea, and one
To whom you are but as a form in wax,
By him imprinted, and within his power,
To leave the figure, or disfigure it.*

(A Midsummer Night's Dream 1.1.47-51)

Most play-texts of this period contain parents, many of them elderly. This plethora of stage representations is plausibly attributable to the pre-eminence of the parent-child connection in people's everyday life, on every level of the social scale; in turn, one may conjecture that these representations also reinforced certain elements of English family structures, in conjunction with the many other contemporary works which discussed or presented the dynamics between parents and their offspring. Tudor, Elizabethan and Jacobean theories of social order and statecraft centred on the model of the patriarchal family, in which (according to one aspect of the theory) the father was to be accorded absolute authority and respect. Aged parents were doubly venerable for their longevity. However true the foregoing statements be, they are nonetheless a gross oversimplification of the ideology of patriarchalism circulating in England at this time. Instead, it is useful to talk of the different 'faces' of patriarchal ideology which existed simultaneously, seemingly contradictory and yet frequently present even within the same piece of writing – whether play-text, sermon, tract or treatise. One impetus for the direction of this chapter's discussion has been provided by Deborah Shuger's acute

explication of 'patriarchy as a cultural ideal'.⁶⁴⁴ Near the end of her analysis, she emphasises that

patriarchal discourse cannot be strictly separated from political . . . the theological model of the loving family is shot through with strategies based on guilt and suffering. And these discourses cannot be separated, because the need to be loved entails the need for power. It is only in the drama, however, that the contradictions between these two needs surface'.⁶⁴⁵

These 'contradictions' she earlier describes as the contrasting images of the father as autocratic tyrant, and as loving, nurturing parent. Both concepts, or faces, of patriarchy can be discerned, over and over, in Elizabethan and Jacobean play-texts. It is necessary to elaborate somewhat on the exact nature of these two basic faces, as Shuger describes them.

Without question, the idea of the father's absolute power over his household formed part of the core of English Renaissance notions of the family:

While no one would deny the existence of oppressive male power in English Renaissance society or that the father's power over his children *was* sometimes used to justify marital and political autocracy, in its most characteristic form patriarchalism is not concerned with legitimating such power. Rather, it provides a model for sacred and social relations based on the mutual love (*storge*⁶⁴⁶) of parents and children, a love frequently defined in contrast to political relations of domination and oppression. . . . almost always, patriarchalism expressed two things: a longing for the gentle and forgiving intimacy of parental love and a deep anxiety about subordination and hierarchy.⁶⁴⁷

Shuger suggests that the appearance of representations of parents as loving and

⁶⁴⁴ In Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*, chapter six.

⁶⁴⁵ Shuger 249.

⁶⁴⁶ *Storge* is a transliteration of the Greek *στοργή*, meaning the mutual love felt between parents and children. Shuger states that '[t]he term was not important in Greek thought' (225). However, that is only if one looks specifically for the noun. The verb, *στέργω*, 'to love, of the mutual love of parents and children', is used frequently from Sophocles and Euripides onward (see entry in Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*).

protective were, in part, a response to the growth of absolutist theology and politics, as well as the increasingly competitive, proto-capitalist economy of sixteenth-century England.

the uniquely nonutilitarian basis of parental love allowed that relation to be perceived as essentially different from all other social ties. Therefore it seems possible to argue that in both ideology and praxis, the loving parent and family emerge by the sixteenth century in response both to the increasingly mobile and competitive conditions of Renaissance society and to the rather arbitrary power of the state. . . . the parent is perceived as having a natural, noncontractual relation to the child, whereas all other relations – lordship, marriage – are social and therefore contingent. The Renaissance family, in these accounts, is not the domestic reflection of its monarchy, but the counterpart: a response to power politics and cultural complexity.⁶⁴⁸

She acknowledges that ‘Kings and fathers are at least as often equated as contrasted’⁶⁴⁹, a feature which can certainly be discerned in play-texts of the period. Yet whilst one would expect to find positive representations of sovereigns, certainly of great interest (as argued above in chapter four) is the number of plays in which absolute rule – often by elderly sovereigns – results in corruption or tyranny. Conversely, given the extraordinary power of fathers in English Renaissance society, and the hostility expressed in play-texts against elderly authority figures such as magistrates, justices of the peace, judges, husbands, suitors, one might also expect portrayals of parents to be severe and repressive. Such parents do appear in dramas, but relatively infrequently compared with their opposite. Shuger, discussing non-dramatic representations, asserts that ‘the significance of *storge* lies precisely in establishing a space outside the political; a

⁶⁴⁷ Shuger 246.

⁶⁴⁸ Shuger 235.

⁶⁴⁹ Shuger 239.

hierarchy where the stronger loves and cares for the weaker, where forgiveness and tenderness are unconditionally given’.

This space is not a mystification of the political but, if anything, the mystification (or, less judgementally, articulation) of a need to escape political relations felt as coercive and contingent. . . The textual representations of the dutiful child and loving father symbolize the desire to establish a relationship exempt from coercion, mutability, and struggle.⁶⁵⁰

Yet a complication is the extent to which the parent’s need for reciprocal love is dependent for fulfilment upon exerting power over the child; paradoxically, the loving parent was often seen as needing to use coercive methods to elicit love from his child.

This situation arose because, according to Renaissance theories of familial relationships, love always naturally ‘flowed downward’ from parent to child. Daniel Rogers’s advice in *Matrimoniall Honour* (1642) is illustrative of the tacit contradiction:

love must descend, not ascend: it is not natural (saith Paul) for children to provide to parents, but for parents to provide for them, therefore invert not providence . . . *be sure to hold stroke sufficient in your hand, for the securing of love and duty from your children.*⁶⁵¹

Returning, then, to Shuger’s statement about the drama – that it is only in plays of the period that the contradictions between the parent’s needs for love *and* for power ‘surface’ – the primary objective of this chapter will be to take Shuger’s ideas where *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* indicated but did not go, namely into the play-texts themselves. Tracing and exploring both ‘loving’ and ‘coercive’ representations of parent-child relationships in play-texts, we may be able to substantiate the connections such representations have with contemporary socio-

⁶⁵⁰ Shuger 235-6.

economic conditions, and theories of the family and the state.



No other group of elderly characters in this study poses such a problem of overabundance as parents, particularly fathers. In the one-hundred-and-forty plays examined, over eighty elder fathers or father figures were identified; by contrast, these plays contain less than twenty elderly mothers or mother figures. Consequently, the approaches to fathers and mothers in this chapter differ. The discussion of fathers will centre on some of the most representative and well-developed elderly fathers, illustrating the predominant currents running through most play-texts between c.1580-1625; five texts – Middleton's *A Trick To Catch The Old One*, Dekker's *The Honest Whore, Part 2*, and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear* – will be the focus. Mothers will be addressed in a more general fashion, as the portrayals of them run the gamut from loving and protective to weak-willed and corrupt(ible). The variability in representations of aged mothers is possibly attributable to conflicting principles, between on the one hand, the (assumed) inferior moral, spiritual and social status of women and on the other, the need to ensure a fundamentally obedient stance towards *both* parents in order to maintain social order. Regardless of the flaws and weaknesses which women were believed to have, the fact remained that mothers had to play a crucial role in the proper upbringing of children; thus, they required consideration and respect *as mothers* – but *as women* they were still liable to be regarded with critical

⁶⁵¹ My emphasis, Rogers, *Matrimonial Honour* 92-3, cited in Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love* 111

scepticism. This is offered as a highly generalized suggestion rather than a closely argued contention, as the number of instances of elderly mothers in the drama is too small to support a definitive explanation for the trends, or absence thereof, in play-text representations.⁶⁵²

In chapter one, the salient points of English familial life in the early modern period were sketched: the European marriage pattern, inheritance practices, retirement and the support (or absence of this) of the infirm elderly by their families. A more in-depth review of these matters is germane to this discussion, in order fully to appreciate the representation of elderly parents and their children in play-texts. Issues of financial security, patrimonies, dependence and independence, duty versus personal choice, and care of senescent parents, surface frequently in the majority of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. Comparison of historical research data and literary materials indicates that there was probably a high degree of correspondence between the experience of elderly parents in everyday life and what playwrights were showing in the drama of the period.

I. Family relationships

For most people in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, the family was the primary sphere of significant relationships and affected the rest of their existence beyond it. Understanding formation and dynamics of families and households in the

⁶⁵² Shuger (242) also offers another, very different, tentative suggestion for 'the strange absence of mothers in Renaissance literature'.

past adds significantly to an understanding of the parental figures in contemporary dramas. To recapitulate the relevant information presented in chapter one: most of the English, especially below the rank of gentry, married in their mid- to late twenties, establishing a separate household from their parents, and had children until the wife reached menopause. Their children most often were sent into apprenticeship around the age of fourteen and usually did not return thereafter to live in the parental household except perhaps for brief transitional spells. Those of higher rank usually received further education of some sort, in University or the Inns of Court, preparing for careers in law, the royal court or trade. Whatever the situation, relationships between parents and their children usually did not involve co-residence beyond the early teenage years. This fact, along with other assumptions, has led a few social historians to contend that familial relations in this period were cold and impersonal, and children neither viewed nor treated with love and affection. The most influential historian of this opinion was the late Laurence Stone, whose study *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* was influenced in part by the work of French social historian Philippe Ariès in *Centuries of Childhood* (1962). The explosion of work in English family history that followed the publication of Stone's book has for the most part challenged or refuted his basic thesis that family relationships were 'cold and harsh'. Alan Macfarlane and others have pointed out, among other things, that English parents did not have children purely for their labour value or to provide caretakers for themselves in old age.⁶⁵³ As with virtually any area of human relations, tendencies

⁶⁵³ See Macfarlane's *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840*; also, Wrightson 66-118,

rather than rules emerge from closer analysis of the data. Judging from the work of social historians since the 1970s, it seems that over-arching features of most family's relationships in this period were warmth and strong ties of love.⁶⁵⁴

Nevertheless, both generations recognized the potential for problems of jurisdiction and conflicting desires, particularly concerning patrimonies and the devolution of property. Young people trying to make their way in the world and establish their own households faced the difficulties of amassing sufficient money and property. A marital system that embraced the custom of neolocality could make marriage infeasible for a son until his parent either gave him his inheritance in advance, or died. On the other hand, the surrender by a parent of his or her rights over their property while still alive could pose a threat to their welfare if a child proved unthrifty or unscrupulous. Jokes about parent-offspring tensions were ubiquitous, such as the 'Holy Mawl' which hung over the interior of a church door in late seventeenth-century Somerset, and was said to be for sons to use in dispatching their fathers at age seventy⁶⁵⁵; such humour acknowledged through sublimation the real concerns of both children and parents. For most parents, relinquishment of possessions meant loss of all effective power. Ecclesiasticus 33.20-1 expresses advice often repeated in this period:

while you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place. For it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should look to the hand of your sons.⁶⁵⁶

If one were to take all contemporary references to such ideas at face value and used

⁶⁵⁴ See Houldbrooke, *The English Family* and *English Family Life*.

⁶⁵⁵ Cited in Laslett, *Fresh Map* 98.

⁶⁵⁶ Cited in Thomas, 'Age and Authority' 239, where several other warnings are given.

them to measure parent-child relations, certainly a black picture would emerge. Some children *were* shamelessly cruel to a dependent parent. Richard Gough of Myddle, Shropshire recalled the story of one Richard Wolph whose son-in-law 'by fair and flattering speeches persuaded the old man to deliver all his estate to him, on condition of being maintained while he lived'. The son-in-law, a violent drunkard, 'would so abuse the old man, that he made him a weary of his life; and therefore, in a melancholic fit of grief' he poisoned himself.⁶⁵⁷ Fears of similar treatment probably motivated a dying old man in Balsham, Cambridgeshire in 1578 to ask his surgeon secretly to take dictation of his will, for if his son and daughter-in-law (with whom he lived) 'found out he intended to leave free land to someone other than them,

he should not be well tended & have that he woulde have, and if enye of his friends or acquaintances . . . should write his sayd will, his sayd sonne yonge Lennard . . . woulde knowe of it, and soe laye on him that he shoulde not or coulde not make his wyll accordinge to his owne mynde.⁶⁵⁸

The lines of duty and obligation were not, even in theory, clearly cut in English society. Macfarlane discusses what he sees as the mixture of contradictory imperatives for children. On the one hand was the principle of 'descending' love already discussed above. On the other side were beliefs in the sense of duty children should feel, a debt incurred by their parents' efforts in raising them; thus, Thomas Becon in the early sixteenth century urged children, 'if their parents be aged and fallen into poverty,' to help them, 'forasmuch as their parents cared and provided for them, when they were not able to care and provide for themselves'. If a parent is 'old, poor and froward,'

⁶⁵⁷ Gough 173.

⁶⁵⁸ Cited in Spufford, *Contrasting Communities* 182.

wrote Thomas Fuller, 'as his parent bare with him when a child, he bears with his parent if twice a child'; even if neglected by his father in his youth, a son 'confines him not a long way off to a short pension, forfeited if he comes in his presence, but shows piety at home . . . and learns to requite his parent'.⁶⁵⁹

Thus, although the thesis that parent-child relations were cold and unloving has been largely overturned, the subsequent picture is an admixture of several contradictory characteristics: loyalty and resentment, love and hostility, gratitude and guilt. The significant rate of inflation of the sixteenth century, along with rapid population growth, inevitably meant greater competition for resources and, for the better off, professional placements; with a younger population than it had had since prior to the greatest ravagements of the Black Plague, more young men and women were competing with each other and with their elders for the means of livelihood. An additional tension during the Protestant Reformation was division over religion; even in the 1580s and 1590s, much of the elderly population would have been born and probably raised as Catholics, or feel a closer identification with the conservative face of Protestantism than with the more radical reform movements and sects of the later Elizabethan and the Jacobean eras. These immediate social pressures almost certainly competed to some extent with traditional principles of filial feelings and conduct. Together with the contradictory presence of both nurturing and autocratic qualities in the all-pervasive patriarchal model – which permeated not only theories of the family, but those of the household, civic structures, education, government, sovereignty and

⁶⁵⁹ Becon, *Works* (1844 ed.) 358, Fuller, *The Holy State* (1948 ed.) 14, both cited in Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love* 109. See

religion –experiences of parent-child relationships were likely fraught with complexities, many of them not necessarily consciously recognised by those involved. When turning to play-texts, we can often detect within the structures of native and imported dramas, of the morality, estates and nativity plays, of prodigal son stories, of New Comedy farce, Italian *commedia erudita* and *dell'arte*, expressions of contemporary social anxieties and tensions surrounding the issues of patrimony, love, trust, duty and responsibility.

II. 'There is some ill a-brewing towards my rest...'

Whether or not money is indeed the root of all evil, it is certainly the root of innumerable comic and tragic conflicts between old parents and their children in Renaissance English play-texts. With money, of course, comes power and independence. Customarily in England, parents were expected to assist their children in attaining financial independence, without consigning themselves to poverty as a result. How and when this was done, however, could be a matter of disagreement between young and old. The typical literary scenarios in broadsheet ballads, jest books, novella and the like involved impatient young people (usually young men) chaffing at their financial restrictions whilst their elderly parent or guardian withheld the desired allowance or inheritance – sometimes out of greed, sometimes for fear of jeopardizing their own comfort and security in old age. As discussed above in chapter three, the chief literary precursors of this struggle for resources were the Roman comedies of Plautus

and Terence, particularly the former, augmented by the biblical prodigal son motif, which also surfaces repeatedly in Elizabethan and Jacobean texts. An ideal representative work is *A Trick To Catch The Old One* (1604-1607), a 'city comedy' in which Middleton captures the spirit of avaricious and conniving old age in the characters of masters Lucre and Hoard.⁶⁶⁰

Both men are guardians rather than biological parents, reflecting the fact that orphans were a more common phenomenon in the early modern period than now. For all intents and purposes a guardian would become the 'parent' of his or her ward until the child reached the age of majority and could claim his or her inheritance. The question of whether, in the real world, such guardians were kind and responsible, or coldly exploitative, is probably overly simplistic – even given the knowledge that the Mastership of the Court of Wards was coveted as an extremely profitable position⁶⁶¹, chiefly for the 'goodwill' gifts one was given. The buying and selling of guardianships was a reality and figures in the mercenary schemes of *A Trick*. Middleton, however, uses the ward-guardian scenario as a springboard for a critique of generational battles over the distribution of wealth, not of guardians as such. Hoard and Lucre are exemplars of the selfish, senescent avarice that disregards the needs of the young; but Middleton with characteristic acuity presents a more complex and persuasive view of the situation than his contemporaries writing similar plays.

Lucre is, by his nephew Witt-good's description, one of the 'old Foxe-braind –

⁶⁶⁰ Massinger based the plot of *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (pub. 1633, first performance ?1621-?1625) on that of *A Trick*.

⁶⁶¹ See Hibbert 155.

and oxe-browde Uncles, [who] have still defences for their Avarice, and Apologies for their practises',⁶⁶² a man whose conscience is either non-existent or permanently inactive. Lucre has financed his spendthrift nephew at usurious rates. Immediately, therefore, the audience is encouraged to perceive the young man as the victim, in spite of the past misdeeds to which he regretfully admits. His contrition builds audience sympathy and the portrait of Lucre prepares us for a simple stereotyped character. The question is, will Middleton give us that or not?

Before Lucre himself enters, two gentlemen deepen the interest by revealing that there is another old man named Hoord (i.e., Hoard), and that Hoord and Lucre are 'mortal Adversaries'. The rapid brushstrokes of their description are brief but evocative:

Two old tough spirits,
They seldome meete but fight, or quarrell when 'tis calmest;
I thinke their anger bee the very fire
That keepes their age alive.⁶⁶³

Three things apparently motivate Hoord and Lucre: avarice, hatred and cunning. Their generic label-names also suggest depersonalised types; but when they actually appear on stage, both old men are so well-delineated and convincing that they slowly win an audience's admiration, even whilst they bring laughter upon themselves. They are, for example, inspired to heights of rhetorical finesse when upbraiding one another. In 1.3 Hoord delivers a complaint rich with indignation and self-righteousness, his diction carrying biblical overtones; Lucre replies in a contrasting matter-of-fact, patronizing tone full of coarse metaphors and insults. Hoord in turn attempts to upbraid Lucre for

⁶⁶² 1.1.11-12.

⁶⁶³ 1.1.111-14.

practicing deception upon his nephew, but makes no headway. Slowly, their exchange deteriorates into name-calling and they stand jeering at one another like two schoolboys until some acquaintances have to haul them away.

In such ways throughout the play, Middleton erodes the assumption that old men are competent, mature father figures simply by virtue of their age, and reminds his audience that humans are flawed regardless of the accumulation of years. Lucre is, quite simply, sincerely convinced that he is right to appropriate Witt-good's fortune. He is not a vainglorious schemer who revels in his cunning⁶⁶⁴ – he genuinely seems to feel that because his nephew is a wastrel and spendthrift, he would use the money better.⁶⁶⁵ Lucre does a volte-face, of course, when Witt-good retaliates by spreading the rumour that he is about to marry a wealthy heiress. Lucre, formulating a new plan to appropriate even more of his ward's money, thinks that he is being very clever when talking with the Host who, as Witt-good's accomplice, conveys the rumour; however, the audience knows that Lucre is dissembling to a dissembler. Thus, when Lucre asks rhetorically, 'Am I a foole at fifty foure?' we are inclined to answer 'Yes!' and when he continues, 'Doe I lacke subteltie now that I have got all my wealth by it?' the audience can already foresee his fall.

The breach in his 'subteltie,' the crack through which his wealth will fall squarely into Witt-good's lap, is that Lucre is motivated as much by competitiveness and malice towards Hoord, as by naked greed. This distinguishes him from the rather generic elderly parents and guardians of less skilfully constructed plays, who are propelled by

sheer rapacity. Lucre is also quite impercipient about his own iniquity, rather than deliberately amoral.⁶⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Witt-good persists in emphasising the stereotype to justify his self-interest and disrespectful treatment of his guardian.

Meanwhile, Hoord is also being conned by Witt-good and his 'Courtesan'. Witt-good devises a plan to marry her to Hoord (as compensation for taking her virginity): she poses as a young wealthy widow and immediately the old man is clambering to marry her fortune. Although this is not directly connected with the subject of elderly parent-child relationships, it is an important part of the young man's stratagems to recover financially from his youthful mistakes by duping an ungenerous 'parental' generation. An essential component of the Renaissance new comedy/ English city comedy tradition is the firm assertion that regardless of the morally questionable actions of the young protagonists, the old parental figures are legitimately being denied power – both financial and social – over the young, albeit temporarily. *A Trick* definitely follows this line, as Lucre and Hoord become progressively less and less deserving of their superior positions over the younger generation. Yet once Witt-good has succeeded in reclaiming the mortgage for his lands, he begins to redirect audience sympathy towards the old men.⁶⁶⁷ The Courtesan also indicates that her conscience troubles her for deceiving her new husband into paying Witt-good's debts.⁶⁶⁸ In the final scene, when all of the tricks are revealed, Lucre tacitly accepts his nephew's success, whilst Hoord

⁶⁶⁴Such as, for example, *Volpone*.

⁶⁶⁵ 2.1.6-10.

⁶⁶⁶See, for example, his soliloquy in 2.2.158-70.

⁶⁶⁷ 4.8.88-92.

⁶⁶⁸ 4.4.175.

regrets his own 'malice' and 'spite', and laments his folly; the two young people then fall on their knees to ask forgiveness of their elders in lengthy speeches renouncing their former wayward lives. Thus, once Witt-good has accomplished two tasks – to secure his and the Courtesan's future and to purge the parental generation of its greed – he willingly hands the reins of power back to his elders.

The final effect of *A Trick* thus *seems* to be not to overturn the accepted ascendancy of aged parents/guardians over the young, but to point out that irresponsible or unethical guardians deserve to be schooled by the Golden Rule; once they have been 'done unto' as they have done to others, they are expected to realize their errors and behave in a manner appropriate to their age and responsibilities. However, some critics have argued that the repentance speeches of Witt-good and his accomplice are tongue-in-cheek satiric mockery of traditional but insincere deference displayed by the younger generation towards their elders. This seems to me to import late twentieth-century sceptical cynicism into Middleton's London without proof that such an attitude existed or would have resonated with audiences at that time. Certainly, one can detect cynicism in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, but it is more an anti-romantic, 'capitalist' cynicism of the marketplace, as Hunter suggests:

[Wit-good] has . . . learnt a serious lesson, and it is not one of repentance; he now knows that he need to be cleverer than the con artists of the city who have robbed him of his estate. He must be able to manipulate others as they have manipulated his naïve notion of himself as a gentleman among gentlemen. And so he devises a plot so well adapted to the city outlook, in which human exchange is based on financial exchange – what we tend to call Reality – that it can run under the momentum of the city's

*pre-programmed responses.*⁶⁶⁹

The idea that Lucre and Hoord are so 'pre-programmed' into a mindset of marketplace competitiveness that they, with all their experience, can be duped by a novice, resonates with the suggestion that the city is becoming a place where conventional familial hierarchies can be overridden by finance. In spite of Witt-good's retraction and pledge of respectability, one is left, as Hunter says, with the question 'but is respectability more than money?'⁶⁷⁰ And if it isn't, then with what can elderly patriarchal authority steady itself against the levelling tide of the market? Love and nurturing have no place in this world, where money runs thicker than blood.

Much of the efficacy of Middleton's play lies in the 'remarkable psychological verisimilitude' that Charles Barber remarked upon over thirty years ago.⁶⁷¹ *A Trick* is a comedy involving realistic situations and characters, and exploring in dramatic form one of the most significant areas of social tensions in the period – the transfer of wealth and power from old to young, specifically from parents (or guardians) to offspring (or wards).

Middleton was, of course, one of numerous playwrights who made this conflict over resources a driving force in comedies. Yet Middleton had, it seems, a particular interest in exploring this and other old-young social tensions, and continued to do so throughout his career.⁶⁷² *The Old Law*, discussed in the next chapter, takes problems between parents and children further than Middleton did in any of his other plays and

⁶⁶⁹ Hunter, *English Drama* 330, my emphasis.

⁶⁷⁰ Hunter, *English Drama* 331.

⁶⁷¹ Barbed, ed., *A Trick to Catch the Old One* 6.

further than most other Elizabethan and Jacobean play-texts.

Despite the popularity of scenarios of cunning and deception, it would be a mistake to conclude either that actual relationships between elderly fathers and their children were uniformly cold and calculating, or even that they were always portrayed this way in the theatres. With approximately the same frequency, stage fathers are kind and loving, and receive respectful love back from their children. Prospero, although sometimes an irascible master – and in that way, typical of the autocratic side of patriarchy – is such a father, though prone to impatience. Another who mixes sternness with brusque affection is the remarkable Orlando Friscobaldo in Dekker's *The Honest Whore, Part 2*.

In *The Honest Whore, Part 1* the prostitute Bellamont is converted by Hippolito, a virtuous young man who is in love with the daughter of a duke but finds Bellamont's wasted beauty a pitiable tragedy. The play concludes with Hippolito's marriage to his beloved Infelice, and Bellamont's marriage to her first seducer, a violent good-for-nothing named Matheo. In *Part 2*, the action is resumed about fifteen years later. Matheo has become a gambler and alcoholic who beats and torments Bellafront; Hippolito is now in love with her and tries to turn her into his mistress.

The key new character is Orlando Friscobaldo, Bellafront's elderly father who hasn't seen her for seventeen years. He has heard a rumour of her reclamation and, being of a sceptical turn of mind, wants to know if it is true, so he disguises himself and enters Matheo's service to observe his daughter secretly. The principal tension in the

⁶⁷² See below, chapter eight.

play arises from the counterpoint between his feelings of doubt and misgiving, and his increasing pity and affection for his child. The forces of parental love and filial devotion are very strong in this play, but are presented in such a natural and entertaining fashion through the singular character of Orlando that they avoid seeming insipid. In Hunter's words, Dekker was able to 'turn a dramatic function into a free-standing human being', using 'a mode of speech that turns plot function into individual character, showing Orlando, both in and out of disguise, as crusty, self-consciously eccentric, at once grieving and fantastic, loyal and bitter, determined to help but determined to do so only in his own terms'.⁶⁷³ Like so many other fathers in the drama, Orlando experiences the contradictory impulses of needing to love, and be loved by, his child but also desiring to retain the power of self-control over his emotions and the power of authority over his offspring.

Before Orlando makes his first appearance, the audience hears that the penitent Bellafront does not expect to receive any kindness from him, for 'when Children/ From duty start, Parents from love may swarve./ He nothing does: for nothing I deserve'.⁶⁷⁴ Orlando, as one of his acquaintances recalls, is one in whom 'age hath not command of [the] blood'⁶⁷⁵, an energetic and determined man who, deep down, wishes to believe in his daughter, but will not allow himself to hope until he has solid proof of her contrition. Beneath his verbosity and gaiety, Orlando is an old man with no family in the world save Bellamont. When Hippolito, lying, says she is dead he breaks down

⁶⁷³ Hunter, *English Drama* 384. Hunter also cites William Hazlitt's copious praise of Orlando (see *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe (21 vols.; London, 1930), vi. 235-8).

⁶⁷⁴ 1.1.155-57.

weeping, but finding that he has been tricked he bluffs to keep his true feelings concealed, revealing these only in soliloquy:

Las my Girle! . . . Ile to her, yet she shall not know me; she shall drinke of my welth, as beggars doe of running water, freely, yet never know from what Fountaines head it flowes. *Shall a silly bird picke her owne brest to nourish her yong ones, and can a father see his child starve?*⁶⁷⁶

Orlando is a consummate actor, showing the audience two possible and plausible paternal reactions to Bellamont's earlier mistakes: total rejection, founded upon the father's shame and injured pride, or forgiveness and tender concern. He wants to forgive her, but is suspicious and demands extensive proof of her virtue. Because he has a close rapport with the audience throughout the play, he seems hard but not unreasonable. By showing his true face only to the audience, he induces sympathy for the conflict he feels between natural love and caution. Even when Orlando visits Bellamont and Matheo out of disguise, he plays the role of angry and cruel father⁶⁷⁷, unconvinced that his daughter is not still a whore. He is a very strong man, strictly moral but also deeply caring towards his child, especially once he sees her beset by Hippolito and abused by a violent brute of a husband. In the final scene, he takes on the role of 'Physician' who 'cures' Matheo and Hippolito of their vices and saves his daughter from a wretched future. One aspect of the ending that may be distasteful to modern audiences is Bellamont's loyalty to her horrible husband, but we are encouraged to believe that Matheo has undergone a sudden reformation and will henceforth live decently. Yet Orlando, ever cautious, delivers with his generous fatherly

⁶⁷⁵ 1.2.38-40.

⁶⁷⁶ 1.2.168-76, my emphasis.

blessing an important caveat:

My house shall be thine,
My meate shall be thine,
And so shall my wine,
But my money shall be mine,
And yet when I die,
(So thou doest not flie hie)
Take all, yet good *Matheo*, mend.
Thus for ioy weepes Orlando, and doth end.⁶⁷⁸

Orlando will be sure to hang on to his money, to protect himself and his daughter – a final practical manoeuvre that resonates with the advice of moralists from Ecclesiasticus onward.

Orlando Friscobaldo is certainly the character that makes *The Honest Whore, Part 2* a vibrant and cogent drama, in spite of its general sentimentality. Dekker managed successfully to fuse many different qualities – generosity, kindness, wit, sensitivity, vitality, pride, morality – without making Orlando seem impossibly virtuous. He is the most extensively realized character in the play and one of the best old men outside of Shakespeare's plays. Through his persuasive personality, the comedy promotes conventional attitudes of respect and deference towards parents, and reciprocal love between parent and child, while also giving expression to the tensions between love and power which appear to be inherent to English concepts of patriarchy.

Shakespeare's handling of the relationships between old parents and their offspring is also frequently 'conventional'. However, out of the familiar conflicts over money, marriage, independence and ambition he manages to forge individuals who

⁶⁷⁷The *senex iratus* of Roman comedies (see above, chapter three).

⁶⁷⁸ 5.2.479-86. 'Flie hie' = 'hang from the gallows (for theft)'.

capture an audience's attention and command consideration, even if their role is relatively minor. Old Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, transcends the merely stereotypical mould from which he originates. Blinded by years of habitual hate, he destroys his last treasure, 'the hopeful lady of my earth', in an absurd battle of wills.⁶⁷⁹

His geniality at the masqued ball is as much a part of his character as his later ire over Juliet's resistance to marriage with Paris. In 1.5, Capulet bustles about encouraging people to dance, giving instructions to the servants and generally enjoying fussing over the young people whilst playing the jovial host, recalling when he used to tell/ A whispering tale in a fair lady's ear'.⁶⁸⁰ He debates points of memory amiably with an elderly relative and the scene generally deepens the characterization of Capulet, emphasizing his good nature. When Tybalt threatens to disrupt the harmony, the old man's quick temper (already evidenced in 1.1) flares – as much for Tybalt's insolent recalcitrance as for his belligerence. Capulet's volatility and sensitivity to insubordination are the unfavourable traits which ultimately eclipse his finer paternal feelings. Although he would like to think of himself as a father who puts his daughter's preferences first in choosing a suitor, when push comes to shove in 3.5 (some productions have Capulet punctuating his words by pushing or shaking Juliet about), he ranks the preservation of his authority above the preservation of a loving relationship with his child.

To say, however, that a sixteenth-century audience would not necessarily have viewed Capulet's behaviour as damnable is not to assert that playgoers endorsed either

⁶⁷⁹ 1.2.15.

the inflexible authoritarianism of Juliet's father and mother, or Arthur Brooke's tone in his rather disingenuous preface to *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562). Clearly, the young lovers are the protagonists; Yet Capulet's grief in 4.5 is genuine and meant to be pitiful, even if the audience is inclined to shout, 'Too little, too late!' In short, Capulet, by far the most developed elderly parent in *Romeo and Juliet*, exhibits a considerable range and depth of characteristics in his dramatic function as the play's key representative of the 'paternal experience', as it plays out in the arena of matrimonial arrangements. This is a much more complex rendering of the parental perspective than is found in, for example, the relative 'flatness' of Leonato's character in *Much Ado About Nothing* (?1598). Leonato, in turn, is nonetheless more persuasively verisimilar than the bulk of the paternal 'blocking' figures in Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies addressing related issues of parent-child conflict. Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare managed to attain an exceptionally clear insight into the heart of parental experiences – their social as well as personal facets – *and* to contrive poetic and dramatic modes which very nearly convey the inexpressible tensions and contradictions at war within fathers, most often elderly ones.

However, to make a satisfactory attempt at assessing the elderly parents of Shakespeare's dramas would require a separate study. Hence, rather than make dissatisfying generalities, I shall address a character who has received less critical attention – Titus Andronicus – to his most famous 'old man', Lear.

III. Titus Andronicus and King Lear

*When like the bee tolling from every flower
Our [thighs] pack'd with wax, our mouths with honey,
We bring it to the hive, and like the bees,
Are murd' red for our pains. This bitter taste
Yield his engrossments to the ending father.*

(Henry IV.2, 4.5.74-79)

Titus is a remarkable example, early in Shakespeare's career, of the particular care that the playwright shows throughout his play-texts in the depiction of parents, the elderly and elderly parents. His experiences are a lesson illustrating the fundamental importance of parent-child relationships, as the matrix upon which any functional society must be built. This theme is repeated over and over in the plays of this period, as the conflicts which inevitably arise between different generations are emphatically subordinated to the primacy of familial ties. In comedies, resolution is usually accompanied by marriage and celebration; in tragedies such as *Titus* and *The Spanish Tragedy* (an important precursor to Shakespeare's play)⁶⁸¹ resolution takes the form of revenge and death, and the old usually suffer most – Edgar's (or, in Q1-2, Albany's) concluding words in *Lear* are equally applicable to Titus: 'The oldest hath borne most; we that are young/ Shall never see so much, nor live so long'.⁶⁸²

Titus prefigures Lear in many respects. Pride, agony, disillusionment, madness, are key features of both men's experiences – and both elicit from audiences a peculiar combination of frustration and compassion. Titus is not as complex a character as Lear,

⁶⁸¹For a discussion of this, see Eugene M. Waith's introduction to the Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Titus Andronicus*, pages 37-8.

but both are 'family tyrant[s]'.⁶⁸³ Unlike Lear, however, Titus is torn between family on the one hand and a combination of state and 'virtue'⁶⁸⁴ on the other, whereas Lear's hell is largely (though not entirely) self-created. Even when they are partially responsible for their misery, audience sympathy is directed towards them. Eugene M. Waith has commented that there is a 'subtle contradiction in Titus's character between cruelty and piety, between inhumanity and love of family and country', which makes him, in some respects, a richer character than his important precursor, Hieronimo⁶⁸⁵ – and on the other hand a more schematic and less compelling character than Lear. Waith suggests that

[t]he most conspicuous aspect of Shakespeare's characterization of his hero is the contradictions it contains. The spectacular scenes of the first act show both his devotion to Rome and cruel inflexibility, his pride and self-depreciation, his good intentions and faulty judgement. . . . Our response to his story is complicated not only by this contradictory mixture of characteristics but by the disproportion between his faults and the price he is made to pay for them.⁶⁸⁶

Some of Titus's 'contradictions' derive from the conflicting imperatives of his positions as Roman *pater familias* and, put anachronistically, 'Renaissance father' – again, Shuger's distinction between the pull of autocracy and power on the one hand, tenderness and love on the other. Titus can certainly be considered as a symbol of Old Rome, in a drama depicting the Empire's decline into decadence and arbitrary tyranny. It is in this capacity that Hunter recognizes his suffering as 'universal . . . because it expresses the

⁶⁸² *King Lear* 5.3.326-7.

⁶⁸³ Hunter, *English Drama* 493.

⁶⁸⁴ Perhaps 'Roman virtue' would encapsulate both ideas, if one considers loyalty to the emperor a facet of virtue in that society; this would not, however apply in a Republican Rome.

⁶⁸⁵ Waith 36.

⁶⁸⁶ Waith 63-4.

destruction of a whole culture, a total value-system that belongs not simply to Titus himself but to Roman history in general. There is here a sense of blankness, a disappearance of the sources of meaning that misses the personal poignance of Hieronimo in the search for something larger'.⁶⁸⁷ However, it is reductive to restrict him to this dramatic function. As an elderly father he is a multi-dimensional character, through whose suffering we can observe that Shakespeare already had in 1594 a highly developed awareness of antithetical forces within patriarchal ideals and parental experiences, although not until *Lear* did he refine and distil the internal conflicts of elderly parenthood into one character. The differences between the depictions of Titus and *Lear* as aged fathers might also owe something to the more generalized changes and developments that occurred in drama through the 1590s and James I's reign, especially the trend towards a greater level of attention to personal experience and individualized characterization.⁶⁸⁸

When Titus first enters Rome, he is a victorious but exhausted general – an image of the Roman Empire in the twilight of its greatness, as Titus is in the twilight of his. A description of Sir Laurence Olivier's Titus, in Peter Brook's 1955 Stratford production, convincingly suggests Titus's state of mind and spirit at the play's opening:

When Titus appeared, in triumph from the Goths, he was a veteran white-haired warrior, a man desperately tired. The lines of his body drooped; his eyes, among the seamed crowsfeet, were weary. Standing in mid-stage like some crumbling limestone crag, he greeted Rome because it was a thing of custom, but there was no spring in his voice, no light.⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁷ Hunter, *English Drama* 87-8.

⁶⁸⁸ Seen in the plays by Middleton and Dekker discussed earlier, for example.

⁶⁸⁹ In *Shakespeare on the English Stage 1900-1964* 235-36, quoted by Waith 55.

From this low ebb of aged fatigue, Titus will rise through intense suffering to the heights of a tragic heroism 'undeniable even though inseparable from horrifying fantasy'.⁶⁹⁰ But at this early point, the image of a great military figure (which the opening dialogues have led an audience to expect) is juxtaposed with that of a grieving father, as he addresses his family tomb:

O sacred receptacle of my joys,
Sweet cell of virtue and nobility,
How many sons hast thou of mine in store,
That thou wilt never render to me more!⁶⁹¹

Titus's insistence that Tamor's eldest son be sacrificed seems obtusely cruel when she appeals to his paternal sensibilities with, 'And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,/ O, think my son to be as dear to me!'⁶⁹² Yet this is the essence of Titus's personality, an inflexibility that ultimately blinds him to contradictions within his own heart. 'Titus's military achievements,' notes Hunter, 'his family history, his social prominence, the reverence with which the Roman public treats his name – all these establish him as a prototypical Roman soldier of the old school, inflexible, self-punishing, intensely focused on a narrow band of values'.⁶⁹³ When he confines himself to the role of soldier, his alabastrine purity of principle is, if harsh, at least comprehensible. But when he slays his son Mutius, his authoritarian impulses turn his sword upon himself, in effect. It is only, however, after Titus has seen two more sons bound for execution and his daughter savagely mutilated that he seems to realize the intense irony of Saturninus's

⁶⁹⁰ Waith 64.

⁶⁹¹ 1.1.92-5.

⁶⁹² 1.1.107-8.

⁶⁹³ Hunter, *English Drama* 87.

earlier words to him, 'Thanks, noble Titus, father of my life!'⁶⁹⁴ It is an irony that the villains of Shakespeare's play – Tamora, her sons and Aaron, Saturninus in his ignorance being too inconsequential a figure to be a true villain – exhibit an instinctive familial loyalty which Titus only privileges after his 'doctrinaire stubbornness'⁶⁹⁵ has wreaked havoc upon his kin.

Once Titus turns this corner of awareness, he begins to swing in the other direction, abandoning the dictatorial stance first for the one of a helpless, emasculated and deranged old man, and then for that of the lioness crouching with protective ferocity over her cubs, in 'a wilderness of tigers'. 'Tigers must prey,' he continues, 'and Rome affords no prey/ But me and mine'.⁶⁹⁶ Tellingly, he repeats the distinctive phrase 'me and mine' in 5.2.109,⁶⁹⁷ whilst formulating his revenge against the unsuspecting Tamora, and the repetition marks the change in him between the cataclysmic Act III, scene I and the play's end. As the third act opens, Titus's collapse is figured in the emphasis he places on his old age. No longer proud, he kneels in the dust pleading for 'pity of mine age . . . And for these bitter tears which now you see/ Filling the aged wrinkles in my cheeks'.⁶⁹⁸ But this phase of inaction is transitory, soon succeeded by the 'north by northwest' madness that informs his newly kindled familial feelings. In 3.2, the curious 'fly scene' which appears only in the First Folio, Titus reproaches his brother for failing to consider the grieving father and mother of the dead insect, projecting his

⁶⁹⁴ 1.1.253.

⁶⁹⁵ Kermode 1068.

⁶⁹⁶ 3.1.54-6.

⁶⁹⁷ Note also his use of 'mine own' in 3.1.199, and Aaron's echos of this in 4.2.105, 121.

⁶⁹⁸ 3.1.2, 6-7.

paternal grief into other situations much as the mad Lear does when imagining that Tom o' Bedlam is also a victim of his 'unkind daughters'.⁶⁹⁹ Unlike Lear, though, he does not experience the *simultaneous* pulls of opposing desires with respect to his children. Titus's imperious attitude of power over them swiftly dissolves when they are harmed – there is never a point when he is torn between personal impulses in the way that Lear is over and over.

As Titus edges closer to retribution, Tamora and her sons ironically become more confident and more scornful of his old age,⁷⁰⁰ oversights which Titus uses to his advantage. The final, grisly scene has attracted much adverse criticism, as well as the suggestion that it crowns the entire play as a burlesque of Senecan tragedies⁷⁰¹, an argument that I find unconvincing. It is heavy-handed, certainly, compared with later dramas but not by the standards of the 1580s, under the influence of which it was most certainly written.⁷⁰² When the old man exacts his terrible revenge, audience sympathy is deliberately divided. Should he be condemned for assuming the divinity's retributive role? Or is he exonerated by circumstances and the poignant grief of his kinsmen? A choice is only possible by ignoring unequivocal textual evidence for one or the other position. Titus, it must be realized, does not kill Lavinia to assuage his own shame, but to annihilate hers in the only way possible. In the recent (1999-2000) film version of the play, *Titus*, with Anthony Hopkins as Titus, Lavinia (Laura Fraser) movingly conveyed her desire to die, with a desolate and imploring gaze into her father's eyes. Still, he

⁶⁹⁹ See *King Lear* 3.4.49-75.

⁷⁰⁰ See 4.4.29, 89-93, 96-99.

⁷⁰¹ See, for example, Jonathan Bate's introduction to his edition of the play in the New Arden series.

acknowledges that her death is an 'outrage':

[I have] Kill'd her for whom my tears have made me blind.
I am as woeful as Virginius was,
And have a thousand times more cause than he
To do this outrage, and it now is done.⁷⁰³

Ultimately, the only way that Titus can give final expression to his love is by killing his dearest child; after this, the only tolerable future can be found in the release of death with the knowledge that his heir survives 'To heal Rome's harms, and wipe away her woe'.⁷⁰⁴ The audience is encouraged, in the last instance, to remember the tender grandfather who danced Lucius's son on his knee and told him bedtime stories, and to whom his son (passing over his earlier filicide) pays his 'last true duties'.⁷⁰⁵



It is perhaps because Shakespeare only succeeded in fashioning a rough-hewn representation of complex paternal conflicts, external and internal, that he returned to the task with superior skills two decades or more later. In spite of the smaller number of atrocities in *King Lear*, there is still the sense that the extent to which Titus is 'more sinned against than sinning' pales in comparison with Lear's experiences. More relevant to this discussion, however, is not Lear's degree of suffering but Shakespeare's achievement of a complex and penetrating exploration of self-division within an elderly father and, by extension, within contemporaneous ideals of parenthood. In the

⁷⁰² See Kermode 1065-67.

⁷⁰³ 5.3.49-52.

⁷⁰⁴ 5.3.148.

⁷⁰⁵ 5.3.155, 161-66.

following discussion I hope not to offer an all-encompassing 'interpretation' of *King Lear*, but to observe how it presents elderly fathers' competing impulses towards love and domination, yet does not offer any clear-cut answers to this paternal dilemma which lies at the centre of much of English Renaissance drama.

Among the many questions which *King Lear* poses, a critical one is certainly 'How should a father love his children, without leaving himself vulnerable?' Or, put slightly differently, 'Can a father show his children love without losing his power and hence his authority and security?' The questions seem deceptively simple to a modern Western audience, accustomed to the existence of a welfare state, of retirement and other care facilities, to the range of 'safety nets' available for the aged in the early twenty-first century. Conditions in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England were radically different in this respect, with no effective state provisions for the poor and no social imperative that children care for their elderly parents. The Elizabethan Poor Law, although enacted in 1601, was not implemented and enforced with any efficacy until well into the seventeenth century, even in London. The terms of the Law itself reflect the limited responsibility which immediate family members were deemed to have for elderly kin:

The father and grandfather, mother and grandmother, and children of every poor, old, blind, lame and impotent person, or other poor person not able to work, being of sufficient ability, shall at their own charges relieve and maintain every such poor person, in that manner, and according to that rate, as by the justices . . . in their sessions shall be assessed.⁷⁰⁶

⁷⁰⁶ Cited in David Thomson, 'The Welfare of the Elderly in the Past: A Family or Community Responsibility?' Pelling and Smith 197.

Although some historians take this as a clear indication that children were required to provide for their old fathers and mothers, others more recently note the very limited range of obligations defined, the importance of the specification ‘of sufficient ability’. Thus, David Thomas observes in his study of the Poor Law that it ‘was designed to formalize a system of *public* responsibility for the needy.

[T]his much-quoted statement of apparent familial responsibility was a minor qualification incorporated within a much more powerful and significant declaration of collective duty and obligation. . . . *This is no sweeping affirmation of the principle of filial or familial duty, but is instead an explicit statement of obligation in a very limited set of circumstances.*⁷⁰⁷

Children could be required to pay for their parents but not to house them. Paul Slack states unequivocally that ‘[g]enerally speaking, it was the community not the family which supported the elderly in early modern England’.⁷⁰⁸ The reasons for this limited filial responsibility seem to be a combination of cultural preference and economic realities. Thomson writes of ‘the overwhelming impression [in local court records] that everyone involved – magistrates, poor law officers, the families of the poor, the elderly themselves – found this a distressing and offensive business’.⁷⁰⁹ Providing support for their aged parents was simply not possible for most children, and the prevailing ‘European’ marriage pattern was the primary reason. Later marriage ages led to a synchronicity of the deficit phases of children and their parents, a pattern described by Richard Smith and others as ‘life-cycle poverty’. Hence,

married children would frequently find themselves entering their first

⁷⁰⁷ Thomson 198-9, my emphases.

⁷⁰⁸ Slack 84-5.

⁷⁰⁹ Thomson 199; this raises the question of *why* the English seem generally to have felt this way, which it is beyond the scope of this paper to answer.

family 'deficit' phase between approximately 35 and 45, in fact reaching their peak family deficits just as their parents were entering their own second 'deficit' period in their late sixties.⁷¹⁰

This meant that even if children were not themselves in poverty, they were very unlikely to have money to spare for their parents. Yet despite the low degree of both the expectation and the practice of family support for the aged poor, some children evidently *did* help their parents; as Tim Wales stresses, '[i]t is important to emphasize the presence or possibility of kin support, just because it is so easy to neglect and impossible to quantify'.⁷¹¹

What bearing does this have on *King Lear*? Although Lear begins as a king, by divesting himself of his kingdom and effective power he reduces himself to the level of a beggar – a kinship which he comes to recognize on the heath in the storm (3.4.28-36). His story seems to support the view of those moralists who, with Ecclesiasticus, warned against making one's child one's keeper. Lear learns, too late, 'while you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place'.⁷¹² However, it is more than status and material security that Lear loses; worse, he is stripped of the illusion that Goneril and Regan love him. Further, he is compelled to face the fact that it is not only their wicked natures that are to blame, but that he bears some fundamental responsibility as well. It is this that Lear takes longest to accept. He realizes his mistaken actions – dividing the kingdom, misjudging all his daughters – quite quickly, but is slower to grasp how completely he has misunderstood the scope of his paternal role.

⁷¹⁰ Smith, 'Some Issues' 74.

⁷¹¹ Wales 383-4. Boulton found that in St. Saviour's parish, London, 'local kin could play an integral part in the system of parish poor relief' (see Boulton 259-261).

Put overly simply, Lear expects (contrary to accepted wisdom) that love will ascend from his children to him, that children have an obligation to love their father. Gloucester, conversely, recognizes that love descends more easily than ascends. Thus, like the Sultan in Fulke Greville's *Mustapha*, Gloucester's 'vivid awareness that love descends, that fathers love their children more than the reverse, breeds suspicion of his son's intentions, encourages his fear that his son plans to betray him'.⁷¹³ Gloucester's susceptibility to mistrust on this count blinds him to the rational inference that he should regard Edmund with equal suspicion. Lear, on the other hand, is initially oblivious to the potential for danger in hierarchical relationships, even between parents and children. The two old men's experiences trace the complex interactions of power, love, dependency and resentment, ultimately offering reflections without answers.

As king and father, Lear is accustomed to the power and authority embodied in the patriarchal model of both kingship and paternity. He is not a political tyrant, but he is accustomed to having subjects' and daughters' obedience. What he fails to perceive is that children do not necessarily respond as subjects do. 'Instead of voluntary obedience,' suggests Shuger, 'patriarchy here creates the *libido dominandi* – the response of inferiors to a love that, by descending, marks its objects as inferiors, burdened with 'the debt immense of endless gratitude' ' (quoting *Paradise Lost* 4.52).⁷¹⁴ Lear needs love, needs to feel that he is loved by his children, but does not see that love cannot be commanded – he confuses his kingly with his paternal position. Again, *Mustapha* is

⁷¹² Ecclesiasticus, quoted above.

⁷¹³ Shuger 245.

⁷¹⁴ Shuger 245. She cites a saying in George Herbert's *Outlandish Proverbs*, that 'God, and Parents, and our Master, can

relevant:

For Power may be fear'd; Empire ador'd;
Rewards may make knees bow; and self-love humble:
But love is onely that which Princes covet;
*And for they have it least, they must doe love it.*⁷¹⁵

Neither can love be bought. First, he casts off Cordelia because he measures her 'merit' by her refusal to flatter and lie to him; then, he tries to bind Goneril and Regan with obligation, to reinforce the 'bond of childhood' with the 'dues of gratitude' incurred by his gift of the kingdom.⁷¹⁶ Repeatedly, Lear fails to divine the alchemy which will combine love and power into a stable compound – even though Cordelia offers it to him in the form of her respectful honesty. He rejects her assertion of independence, and its implicit limitation of his paternal power:

Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.⁷¹⁷

As far as Lear is concerned, her 'bond' to him should be limitless and nontransferable to another man. Since he cannot have it all, he chooses to have none of it, to reject his paternity in her, or rather transfer it, making Cordelia 'new adopted to *our hate*'.⁷¹⁸ As Goneril and Regan remark, Cordelia has fallen short of her duty as her father perceives

never be requited'.

⁷¹⁵ *Mustapha* 1.1.73-76, cited in Shuger 248.

⁷¹⁶ 1.1.53, 2.4.178-9.

⁷¹⁷ 1.1.95-102.

⁷¹⁸ 1.1.203, my emphasis.

it – has ‘obedience scanted’.

Thus far, an audience can feel justified in finding Lear blameable. Turning to Gloucester’s situation in the following scene, it is more difficult to perceive this old father’s fault. His ‘love is to the bastard Edmund/ As to the’ legitimate’, and he is not guilty of placing unreasonable demands on either son; that Edmund has been living abroad is hardly grounds for treachery and is never raised as a reason or justification for Edmund’s villainy. Even more than Lear’s daughters, Edmund illustrates the danger faced by all parents: that regardless of their devoted care, they may one day end up like the ‘hedge-sparrow [who] fed the cuckoo so long,/ That [it] had it head bit off by it young’.⁷¹⁹ Yet part of Shakespeare’s artistry in *King Lear* is the way that he leads up to the horror of Gloucester’s blinding through *comic* structures, what Susan Snyder has termed the ‘comic matrix’ of his tragedies.⁷²⁰ Until 3.7, the Earl bears a marked resemblance to the elderly fathers in City comedies who are well meaning, but gullible and easily manipulated. Edmund uses a classic comic scenario to play upon Gloucester’s insecurities: his son and heir is plotting against his life to gain his fortune. He swallows the letter’s stereotypical commonplaces like poisoned bait – ‘This policy and reverence of age . . . keeps our fortunes from us . . . an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged tyranny . . . If our father would sleep till I wak’d him, you should enjoy half his revenue for ever . . .’ – and fails to question their authenticity precisely because they conform to the standard suspicions of any senior generation which relies on power to maintain its authority, when love is not enough. It is because Gloucester

expects the sort of treatment which takes Lear by surprise, that he is so susceptible to Edmund's designs. Thus it appears that parents are at risk both in ignoring the possibility of treachery and in too readily expecting it.

Disregarding the social status of Lear and Gloucester, it is not difficult to discern the relevance of their concerns to the average male householder in the Globe Theatre's audience where the play was first performed. Fathers would have been well aware of the delicate balance required between authoritarianism and affection, between withholding and overindulgence (of both property and emotions). 'Goneril, Edmund, Macbeth, or Satan [in *Paradise Lost*],' argues Shuger,

cannot be overcome with kindness because the very kindness shown to them instills a restless impatience with being on the receiving end; it instills political consciousness, the consciousness of power relations of superiority and subordination. . . . Within hierarchically structured relations – whether regal, domestic, or supernatural – where love implies inferiors, the submerged interdependence of politics and patriarchy reveals itself. And it reveals itself as tragedy.⁷²¹

Although the key figures in the play are in socially elevated positions and the stakes necessarily higher than those of ordinary people, the dilemmas remain fundamentally the same: as adults, sons and daughters wish to be independent, but cannot gain uncontrolled access to the family's (i.e., father's) property until they inherit; parents (usually fathers) are advised to retain 'stroke sufficient' in Daniel Rogers's words, to avoid becoming dependent upon their children's good will. However, even when the 'stroke' is wielded kindly, it reinforces the inequality of the parent-child relationship,

⁷¹⁹ 1.4.215-6.

⁷²⁰ See *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, especially chapter four on *King Lear*.

⁷²¹ Shuger 245-6.

making resentment more likely.

Lear is blind to these basic power dynamics, seeing himself only as 'Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all'.⁷²² Proud himself, he nevertheless does not think of others having pride as well – Cordelia, who will not devalue herself or her relationship with her father with the 'glib and oily art' of flattery, Goneril and Regan who, after thus abasing themselves have no qualms about humiliating the father who would bargain for their affection. France's comment to Burgundy also applies to Lear, 'Love's not love/ When it is mingled with regards that stands/ Aloof from th' entire point'.⁷²³ This is not to exonerate or even excuse Regan and Goneril, but to make their stance more comprehensible within the framework of ordinary parent-child relations as conceived of in the period. Lear expects his daughters to engage in a mortifying public ceremony for his gratification, but still respect and honour him; when Cordelia resists, he accuses her of 'pride, which she calls plainness', projecting his fault onto her.⁷²⁴ Regan and Goneril are motivated by ambition more than injured pride, compounded with impatience at 'aged tyranny, who sways, not as it hath power, but as it is suffer'd'. Certainly, Lear *is* a tyrant over his children, and when he carelessly tosses away the crown, the power by which he ensured that he would be 'suffer'd' is gone. He also learns that the love given by subjects (a monarch's other 'children') is ephemeral. His knights are governed by that self-interest which the Fool articulates: 'Let go thy hold

⁷²² 3.4.20.

⁷²³ 1.1.238-40.

⁷²⁴ 1.1.129.

when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following'.⁷²⁵

Fittingly, his two eldest daughters appropriate the patriarchal mode to control him. The first and second Quartos emphasize this slightly more than the Folio text, through Goneril's scornful remarks in 1.3:

Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away! Now by my life
Old fools are babes again, and must be us'd
With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abus'd.⁷²⁶

The Fool makes sure that Lear feels the bitter irony of the reversal – 'thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers, for . . . thou gav'st them the rod, and put'st down thine own breeches', and now his daughters 'will make [him] an obedient father'.⁷²⁷ In this vein are Goneril's use of the word 'pranks' and Regan's of 'tricks', their insistence that he 'should be rul'd and led by some discretion' better than his own, or if he will not then his 'injuries . . . must be [his] schoolmasters'.⁷²⁸ What both women lack is any sense of the nurturing face of patriarchy. This is not because they have never seen it, for in spite of his tyrannical streak Lear does try to be a loving father. There is, apparently, no 'cause in nature' for their cruelty, just as there is none for Edmund's – its origin is obscure. Certainly, it is likely that the daughters would like to reduce their father to being a genuine suppliant (in retributive mirroring of their posture in 1.1), which makes his mockery of that role even more galling to Regan in 4.5.152-6. Still, theirs are the faces of ambition and tyranny rather than simple retaliation.

⁷²⁵ 2.3.71-3.

⁷²⁶ 1.3.16-20.

⁷²⁷ 1.4.172-4, 235.

As for Edmund, he is the 'victim' of Nature his goddess just as much as of custom, and far more than of his father, since it was the natural impulse of passion which led to Gloucester's indiscrete liaison with his mother. Although the old man has not scanted his affection, like Lear he has not fathomed how to make such a child love him. Relating this predicament to those of Solymon in *Mustapha* and King James in England, Shuger comments,

Neither Solymon nor James nor Lear could figure out how to make their children and subjects return their love. Parents, Tyndale remarks, 'promise more gifts still without ceasing' to make their children love them, but the consequences of such patriarchal kindness can be unpredictable. As Lear finds out, give your daughters each half your kingdom, and they will hate you. If the language of patriarchy resonates with the child's need for security, warmth, and parental tenderness, it is also shaped by the pathos of the parents' need for gratitude, the king's need for his subjects' affection.

It is possible to draw from *King Lear* the conclusion that 'except for offspring like . . . Cordelia, the only way to make one's child love back is to hide one's love and use parental power.'⁷²⁹ Certainly, it seems in Gloucester's case that generosity and trust are repaid (by Edmund) with treachery and parricidal behaviour (since he was willing to betray his father in the knowledge that death was the threatened penalty). Yet Edgar does not respond to love with hate, although he has far more reason to. Gloucester believed his guilt almost immediately, did not even exercise any judgement before declaring him a 'villain' and 'murderous coward', without waiting to hear his defence. This seems the most likely explanation for Edgar's delay in revealing his identity to his father – to punish the old man for his faithlessness. 'If,' his action seems to say, 'you did

⁷²⁸ 1.4.238, 2.4.157, 248-50, 304.

not truly know me before I was driven away, then you shall not know me until I see fit, and shall suffer in the meantime'. In a more benign echoing of Regan and Goneril's schooling of their father, Edgar also schools his, teaching him to endure affliction, '[b]ear free and patient thoughts' and not hasten his end. The irony in this last lesson, however, is that he brings on Gloucester's death by 'teaching him a lesson', i.e., that he grossly misjudged both his sons. Playing the role of withholding patriarch, Edgar keeps back his forgiveness too long and repents of the mistake (5.3.193).

Few audiences would deny that both elderly fathers are 'more sinn'd against than sinning'. They are at fault towards their good children and are abused by the bad ones. This much is obvious and does not explain Shakespeare's choice, after more than a decade, once again to make an elderly father the centre of a tragedy and augment the story with a secondary plot also focused on an elderly father. The preceding discussion is not intended to provide an all-embracing explanation of the depiction of such men in *King Lear*, but rather to locate it with respect to other elderly fathers in Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas, and gauge its proximity to their palpable concerns with concepts of patriarchy. Lear and Gloucester share with many contemporary elderly fathers in plays a conflict between the need to retain power (both financial and emotional) over their children, and a longing to be loved by them. In the real-world context of perceived parent-child relations and 'habits of thought' about patriarchal structure, *King Lear* and many other play-texts gain further dimension as social documents and artistic works. Should one be a nurturing or an aloof parent? Generous and indulgent, or withholding

⁷²⁹ Shuger 248, quotation from Tyndale's *Exposition on Matthew*.

and severe? Are guilt and obligation ever acceptable tools in parenting? Is it a father's fault if his offspring are cruel to him? To these and other related questions *King Lear* refrains from giving unequivocal answers. As in the case of so many issues, the play leaves such debates in a state of irresolution. The only unimpeachable character, Cordelia, is obliterated on the threshold of goodness's victory over evil, and her death renders success meaningless. Did Gloucester die a happy or a grief-stricken man? Did Lear learn from his mistakes, or is his fantasy of a life in prison with his darling child an indication that he still clings to the notion of possessing her love entirely? What did either man 'deserve'? These questions are not resolvable, and neither is the tension in *King Lear* between elderly fathers' need for filial love, and their anxious belief that they can only guarantee this by the paradoxical (and risky) tactics of domination and denial.

Coda: elderly mothers

The social issues which resonate in stage presentations of elderly fathers are, perhaps not surprisingly, almost entirely absent from portrayals of elderly mothers. Although children were enjoined to respect and pay reverence to their mother, she had no concrete control to exert over them. Her property usually became her husband's upon marriage; if he died, it was only hers to use in her lifetime, automatically passed on to the children when she died, and most often she retained only part of it whilst they also received a portion.⁷³⁰ Hence, the conflicts over property and independence that existed between fathers and sons were virtually non-existent between the latter and

their mothers.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, only a handful of elderly mothers appear in the dramas of the period. With a few exceptions, these women are not particularly developed characters, and those who rise above the incidental and commonplace are not vehicles to address inter-generational tensions, or dilemmas in the experiences of parenthood/motherhood. The most that can be said about these female characters is that they appear to suggest a fairly diverse set of viewpoints on the roles and positions of ageing/aged mothers. Interestingly, however, almost half of the fifteen mothers surveyed are presented in a distinctly negative light, as either weak-willed and corrupt(ible) or over-bearing and domineering. These include: Brunhalt of *Thierry and Theodoret*, Rossellia of *The Sea Voyage*, the Lady of *The Nightwalker*, Gratiana of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Frank Gullman's mother in *A Mad World, My Masters*, Leantio's mother of *Women Beware Women*, Volumnia of *Coriolanus* and Margaret, Richard's mother in *Richard III*.⁷³¹ The other mothers are generally loving and supportive, but peripheral figures, setting quiet examples (frequently, of patience and endurance) for their children as well as for other ageing women – for example, Antigona in Middleton's *The Old Law* and Mother Gruel of *Michaelmas Term*. The last-named character offers an interesting instance of an old mother being utterly ill used and neglected by her only son, until she finally disowns him for his outrageous conduct. This is the only instance of which I am aware of such a situation being

⁷³⁰ See Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, *passim*.

⁷³¹ Although Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet* remarks upon feeling old, just before she dies, it is more plausible that she is still a younger woman, unhappily married to an old man; it is known that she was married very young, and

addressed and resolved in a play-text of this period.

More often, mothers are respected but do not have a distinctively positive effect upon their children's lives. Sometimes their influence is quite malign. Volumnia, Coriolanus's mother, is the most striking instance of a domineering mother, in the stereotyped mould of the Roman matron. Interestingly, although there is not conclusive evidence within the play-text that Volumnia is old, theatrical tradition seems with few exceptions to have interpreted her in this way, and the monopolistic authority which she exercises over her son fully accords with her being an elderly matriarch. Only one of Shakespeare's recognized sources for the Coriolanus story is explicit on this point, Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, translated by Philemon Holland in 1600. When Cnaeus Martius is preparing to march on Rome, Livy writes, 'Then the matrons went in a body to Veturia, the mother of Coriolanus . . . [and] they succeeded in inducing the aged Veturia to go . . . to the enemies' camp'.⁷³²

Regardless of the admiration which Volumnia's powerful personality may induce in an audience (particularly an early-twentieth-century one), she is the keystone that brings the arch crashing down upon her son. Volumnia's attitudes towards him are based upon a vicarious absorption in his identity. He is all that she is and, more importantly, cannot be, and through him she reaches for power that would never be within the grasp of a woman, not to mention an elderly mother. Notably, Shakespeare deviated from his main source, the *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch, in which Volumnia is a rather soft-hearted, over-tender parent, making her severe, emotionally withholding

unless she has had repeated miscarriages or other children who have died, she is probably not much past thirty.

and selfish. As R.B. Parker has noted, she 'has always demanded that her love be earned. . . . She wheedles, flatters, teases, browbeats, seduces, and uses emotional blackmail; and her final trick, which always works, is icy withdrawal with a threat of her own death'; he aptly calls this approach the 'corruption of nurture into aggression'.⁷³³

A vividly realized character, Volumnia is obviously anomalous by early modern standards. One can take an overly simplistic view of her personality and label her a destructive virago who ultimately reaps the bitter harvest of selfish ambition. However, Shakespeare takes Volumnia beyond this, particularly when she is faced with the ultimate challenge of dissuading Coriolanus from destroying Rome. At last, she can be a 'warrior', squaring off against the empire's greatest soldier – her own son; and she wins, but for an appalling price. After the stinging appeal to and rebuke of Martius, her silence

is so different from her characteristic volubility that it must mark some definite change in her; and grief would seem to be the most plausible explanation for it. She is facing the reality of a sacrifice she glibly exaggerated in 1.3; and, if she realizes this, her fate too is tragic'.⁷³⁴

Volumnia, even more than Old Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, must witness the fatal result of her despotic nurturing – the oxymoronic nature of which is redolent of the paternal power-love dilemma discussed throughout this chapter. In essence, Volumnia assumes and enacts the role of father (Coriolanus's father is conveniently deceased in the play), making her in this sense closer to an elderly patriarch than a mother.

⁷³² Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 2.40.

⁷³³ *Coriolanus* (ed. Parker) 49-50.

The weak-willed or corrupt elderly mothers in play-texts generally succumb to the temptations of money and status. Leantio's mother in *Women Beware Women*, for example, is part of the old(er) generation which either tacitly consents or openly contributes to the corruption of the younger generation. She is easily swayed by the wealth and power offered to her daughter-in-law (which she assumes will become available to herself as well), despite the humiliation and peril which obviously will result for her son. Likewise, Gratiana in Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* is persuaded to convince her daughter to become a prince's mistress (another instance of a pandering mother). After being severely reprimanded by her children she repents, but remains an uninspiring representative of motherhood, of a piece with the play's generally bleak view of family relationships. The reconciliation of Vindice's family is, if not quite perfunctory, certainly futile in the world of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, where Vindice's love for his dead father runs parallel to, and is thus contaminated by association with, Lussurioso's for the revolting old Duke.

Shakespeare created a few mother figures who run counter to the general negative trend: the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Countess of Rossillion in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*. The Nurse alienates Juliet with her obtuse worldly pragmatism, but in the first half of the play she is a loving and devoted foil for the cold, awkward Lady Capulet. The Countess of *All's Well* is a lovely old woman who lends her affectionate support to her ward, providing gentle guidance without interference. When Bertram acts abominably, she determines to 'wash his name

⁷³⁴ Parker, ed., 53.

out' of her blood and declare Helen 'all my child'.⁷³⁵ She makes her presence distinctly felt with only a few scenes, it is a pity that Shakespeare did not develop her character even more. Paulina's role as a mother figure in *The Winter's Tale* is secondary to her work as a counsellor, but her wisdom and gruff affection casts a 'matronly' glow around all her actions. Nonetheless, the significant point to observe about these last two plays is their *absence* of actual mothers, old or otherwise. The same can be noted in several other of Shakespeare's plays; where are the mothers in *Pericles*, *The Tempest*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure For Measure*, *Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *King Lear* – to name a few? In *Richard II* we find the Duchess of York pleading for her traitorous son's life, but she is not a well-developed character; whilst in *Richard III* another Duchess of York must in her old age suffer the misery of watching her son murder innocents and cripple a kingdom, and the deranged Margaret is too vicious to evoke sympathy for her plight as a grief-stricken mother. To judge by the few extant characters, elderly mothers could have added interest and richness to the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; however, one suspects that the paucity of boy actors in adult companies may have been the most significant factor limiting their creation.

⁷³⁵ 3.2.67-8.

CHAPTER 8: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE OLD IN *THE OLD LAW*

The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept.

(Measure For Measure 2.2.9)

This final chapter has two aims: to draw critical attention to what is possibly the least studied of Middleton's plays but one of the most relevant texts for this inquiry, and to use the play to review many of the major character types, scenarios and themes discussed in previous chapters. *The Old Law* is a collaborative product of Middleton and Rowley, but unlike their other joint work *The Changeling*, it has held little interest for critics. This may be because it is by no stretch of the imagination either great literature or great drama. Its weaknesses are exacerbated by the differences between present-day and Jacobean sensibilities, particularly since its original audiences would have been far more accustomed to overt didacticism and rhetorical embellishments. However, it does have a sustained and multidimensional interest in representing elderly men and women. The cast includes seven aged people, four of them women. Issues of leadership, public service, parenting, inheritance and the competition for resources, spousal relationships, sexuality, physical appearance, respect and ridicule, all receive an airing, making this play virtually unique in the period and certainly of significant interest for this study. The breadth of the play's representation of the elderly as either problematic or valuable to society makes it ideal for bringing together many of the primary strands of this investigation.

The Old Law is usually labelled a 'tragicomedy', yet it has a rather 'anti-comic' quality. George Rowe sees it as the culmination of Middleton's career-long exploration of and experimentation with the conventions of comedy and the values implicit in those conventions. The comic rule that demands the triumph of youth and its desires is, he believes, taken to its logical conclusion in *The Old Law*, and the play 'passes judgement . . . on the assumptions and values of comedy itself'.⁷³⁶ This is an interesting interpretation which may receive support from the present study, many aspects of which are relevant for enhancing critical understanding of the play. The text also invites comparison with the social world of which it was both a part and a product. Nevertheless, my intention is not to consider the play as a piece of unambiguous social evidence but rather to analyse how this text portrays aged persons in a society and depicts the personal experience of ageing. Within a fictional framework, *The Old Law* delves into some of the major social tensions and personal anxieties generated by the ageing process, and while it provides some answers, it leaves other problems unresolved.

The structure of the chapter roughly mirrors the organisation of chapters four through seven (sovereignty, magistracy and counsel, marriage and sexuality, parenthood) since many of the concepts that have already been examined recur in *The Old Law*.

⁷³⁶ Rowe, especially chapter 5; quotation from 183-4.

I. Structural and thematic features

As most readers are unfamiliar with the play, a brief plot summary follows. Central to all the storylines is the youthful Duke Evander's decree that henceforth, all men in the kingdom of Epire aged eighty and above, and all women sixty and above, are to be executed. One young couple, Cleanthes and Hippolita, endeavours to save Cleanthes's father Leonides by hiding him in a forest retreat while pretending he has died. They are exposed by Eugenia, the 'May' wife of old Lysander, who is eagerly waiting to inherit his possessions and marry the young dandy Simonides; he in turn is anticipating the disposal of his two parents, Creon and Antigona, whose fortune he will inherit. Young Gnotho is married to old Agatha and has the parish register falsified so that she will be killed earlier, and he can keep her money and marry his mistress. All of the potential tragedies are averted when Duke Evander discloses his true intention – to find the 'weeds' dwelling in his court – and reveals that the 'executed' elderly citizens are actually safe, hidden in a paradisaal retreat.

These four interlocking plots give rise to sets of clearly contrasting characters and themes. The proper attitude of children towards aged parents, exemplified in Cleanthes and Hippolita, is set against the obdurate wickedness of Simonides. The warped marital relationships of Eugenia and Lysander, Gnotho and Agatha, contrast with the love and devotion of Simonides's parents and of Cleanthes and Hippolita. The purity of Cleanthes's and Hippolita's love is a foil for the erotic pleasures sought by Eugenia, Simonides and Gnotho.

Throughout the play, there also exists an implicit contrast between different standards for judging the authority and value of the elderly. One standard deems their authority and value to be intrinsic (although authority may be imperilled or even denied in cases of foolish or inappropriate conduct). The other measures their worth in financial and sexual terms, and accords authority to the elderly only under legal compulsion, or for personal advantage; the decree cites the elderly's nonproductiveness as justification for their elimination (2.1.138-52). For most of the play, the first standard falls in line with divine law and the second with civil (temporal) law. Ultimately, however, the Duke shows civil law to be in accord with the moral law of heaven that accords reverence to age. The supreme test of his subjects' virtue is their response to a law of men which violates the divine 'natural' order by harming the old. Symbols and metaphors from the natural world reinforce this theme throughout the play.

The conflict between standards of intrinsic versus material worth was present in Middleton's and Rowley's source – a tale in *The Seven Sages of Rome*, translated from Greek into Latin c.1200 by the monk Jean de Hauteville and possibly available to the playwrights from an English chapbook version. In this story, the prince is not testing the moral fibre of his court, but has been advised by his young courtiers to pass the decree during an economic crisis, brought about by a prolonged siege. The elderly are, they argue, a drain on the state because they are not productive. The young son who hides his father succeeds over time in using the arguments that his wise father tells him,

to persuade the prince to repeal the law.⁷³⁷ Thus, in the source story a belief in the intrinsic worth of the elderly, especially their wisdom and accumulated knowledge, is upheld, reinforced and passed on to the next generation. In *The Old Law*, Evander's pretence keeps the play a comedy (none of the elderly are actually killed) and adds the important feature of a young ruler who is wise in spite of his youth – the *puer senex* or 'wise child' topos which dates back at least to the Book of Daniel.⁷³⁸

In addition to these motifs of the 'natural' world and human 'nature', civil versus divine law, the play deals with decrepitude, elderly sexuality, filial and spousal hostilities, and the border between laughter/ridicule. These, as I hope to have indicated, are important issues throughout Elizabethan and Jacobean play-texts containing elderly characters. Unlike many of their predecessors and contemporaries, Middleton and Rowley do not submit all of the characters to the homogenising power of an unqualified harmonious ending. In this sense, *The Old Law* has as much affinity with *The Changeling* and *Women Beware Women* as with other Middletonian comedies.

II. False kings

The play is very concerned with the roles, status and authority of the elderly at the state level and in the community. The audience knows almost immediately that the ruler of Epire is a *young* man with new ideas who will 'cleanse' the realm. Later, the stereotype of the youthfully imprudent monarch will be overturned, but at the play's

⁷³⁷ Source information from Shaw xxviii-xxix.

⁷³⁸ See Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* 99-102.

outset, Evander seems to confirm the belief that wisdom is not a quality of youth. Like the young wife in *Anything For a Quiet Life* who feigns the selfish and autocratic personality of 'May' in a January-May marriage, Evander pretends to be a stereotypical 'prodigal' who, once he attains the throne, will act only in the interests of himself and his young cronies – the sort of ruler which Falstaff expects Hal to be when he becomes king. This stereotype assumes that only mature or elderly men can be competent to rule. However, as I argued in chapter four, Elizabethan and Jacobean play-texts in general do not uphold such a view, seeming for the most part to question or confidence in the abilities of elderly rulers. In so far as the play ultimately represents an effective youthful leader and does not actively promote aged monarchy, this aspect of *The Old Law* is essentially congruent with contemporary play-texts' perspectives on old age and sovereign government. Ultimately, the Duke shows himself to be not prodigal but provident, in the vein of Phoenix, inaugurating his rule by diagnosing the realm's ills and prescribing the cure. His success tacitly indicates that young blood, properly directed, can have a rejuvenating effect not necessarily so readily achievable under an elderly sovereign.

However as discussed in chapter five, counsellors to the monarch and magistrates who implemented and enforced laws and royal decrees were, according to received wisdom, ideally to be at least solidly middle-aged, preferably elderly. Yet play-texts from *Gorboduc* onward not infrequently took issue with this assumption, usually through implied rather than direct criticism. *The Old Law*, on the other hand, appears to ratify the accumulated wisdom of experience, primarily through its extremely negative

depiction of the young men surrounding Evander. They despise the elderly, alleging they are 'unfruitful' and offensive because of physical weaknesses (2.1.42-9). The latter reaction is easily interpretable as revulsion born of the fear of death, the desire to resist the reality that 'all flesh is grass'. The allegation of nonproductiveness is inconsistent with the complaints levelled by the young men, that their elders are occupying jobs desired by them. This is the inconsistency of stereotypes, which shift according to the immediate needs of the stereotype. The imagery in 1.1 and 2.1 is significant, likening the elderly to animals and plants, which would not have been deemed worthy of moral consideration. By using such figurative language, the young men obscure the otherwise obvious contradictions in their arguments.

The heartlessness of the Duke's advisers is designed to make the audience doubt that as magistrates and judges they can be entrusted with the welfare of the state. Likewise, when Evander initially gives the courtiers the power of judgement over the good characters, there is a clear irony in Simonides declaring, 'Never by prince were such young judges made'. Hippolita's comments underscore the unnaturalness of the situation:

Alas! I know not how to style you yet;
To call you judges doth not suit your years,
Nor heads and beards show more antiquity;
Yet sway yourselves with equity and truth,
And I'll proclaim you reverend, and repeat
Once in my lifetime I have seen grave heads
Plac'd upon young men's shoulders.⁷³⁹

And Cleanthes protests,

Of upright judgement you would rob the bench
· · · · ·
turn all into disorder,
Imprison virtue, and enfranchise vice,
And put the sword of justice into the hands
Of boys and madmen.⁷⁴⁰

This vision of a world turned upside down articulates the worst fears of a social order still deeply committed to age-based hierarchies of power. From this brink of anticipated chaos, Evander rescues this society by declaring that the returning fathers will be the judges.⁷⁴¹ The qualifications and limitations upon elderly magistracy articulated in the majority of contemporary play-texts are absent here. The message appears to be highly conservative and is conveyed with little subtlety. Although Cleanthes and Hippolita are made moral governors of their peers, this does not undercut the authority of their elders; furthermore, one can detect a tacit suggestion that Cleanthes and Hippolita, although admirable, are almost preternaturally virtuous for their youth.

Additional insecurities underlie the young courtiers' hostile ridicule of their elders. Beneath the accusation of uselessness lies a real concern over competition for material resources, which has already been noted as a tangible social concern frequently portrayed in the drama; significantly, Evander's decree refers specifically to inheritances. Simonides paints a distorted picture of the old as decrepit but clogging the system because of an irrational social reverence for the elderly:

Are there not fellows that lie bedrid in their offices,
That younger men would walk lustily in?
Churchmen, that even the second infancy

⁷³⁹ 5.1.18, 49-55.

⁷⁴⁰ 5.1.237-42.

⁷⁴¹ 5.1.258.

Hath silenc'd, yet hath spun out their lives so long,
 That many pregnant and ingenious spirits
 Have languish'd in their hop'd reversions,
 And died upon the thought? and, by your leave, sir,
 Have you not places fill'd up in the law
 By some grave senators, that you imagine
 Have held them long enough, and such spirits as you,
 Were they remov'd, would leap into their dignities?⁷⁴²

The population explosion of the sixteenth century had intensified competition within and between generations, as had the spread of education. The contribution which well-educated young men, for lack of other occupations, made to the theatrical profession specifically has been well documented⁷⁴³ and may be hinted at here. Like the Hoords and Lucres of Middletonian and other city comedies, such men are typified as having '[t]heir pockets in their sleeves, as if they laid/ Their ear to avarice, and heard the devil whisper!' At the same time, the critics realise uneasily that their own sons in time will practise the same policies towards them:

[First Court.] 'Twill be a fine world for them, sirs, that come after us.
Second Court. Ay, and they knew't.
First Court. Peace, let them never know't.
Third Court. A pox, there be young heirs will soon smell't out.
Second Court. 'Twill come to 'em by instinct, man.⁷⁴⁴

This reference to 'instinct' adds to the complex and at times conflicting uses made in the play of nature and natural concepts. Villains and heroes alike employ natural imagery and references to bolster their opposed positions, leaving the audience in the end with the disconcerting realisation that it may be just as 'natural' for the young to overthrow their elders as to revere them. However granting the presence of this interesting wrinkle

⁷⁴² 1.1.31-41.

⁷⁴³ See, for example, Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 18-22.

in the issue, this play still chimes with the essential tenor of others in this period, that when a principle as fundamental as the honouring of the elderly is overturned, the social fabric begins to disintegrate. Debauchery and dissolution of the family unit represent the beginnings of a landslide that could sweep away Epire's society in its path.

Where does this leave the old of the play as participants in civil society? First, the play refutes the stereotypes of senility and incompetence by the fact that the elderly are sound in body, mind and soul – 'worthy,/ Judicious, able, and religious'.⁷⁴⁵ Concurrently, however these same characters disavow interest in active participation in governing. Hence, whilst the *right* of the old (specifically, men) to retain social prominence is reasserted and confirmed, the ideal of the spiritually dedicated elder overlays and refines this assertion. Creon, Leonides and Lysander are ultimately free to devote themselves to 'that difficult lesson, how to learn to die. . . . [to which] All studies else are but circular lines,/ And death the centre where they must all meet'.⁷⁴⁶ I would argue that the symbolism of the restoration of judicial powers to the elderly is more significant than the literal fact.

An important social issue raised but left unresolved in *The Old Law* is the question of those debilitated elderly who are still holding offices – the decrepit officials, clergy, lawyers and the rest referred to in 1.1. The old characters of *The Old Law* are (conveniently) healthy and willing and able retire from paid employment; the pressing

⁷⁴⁴ 2.1.50-1, 28-32.

⁷⁴⁵ 2.1.6-7.

⁷⁴⁶ 5.1.15, 18-19.

social questions of poverty and of competition between young and old for occupations and material resources thus remains unaddressed.

III. False sons

Money is also at the root of the antagonism between the elderly parents and their offspring. Blatantly hostile and mercenary attitudes are opposed by the ideal beliefs and behaviours of Cleanthes and Hippolita. However, conversion of the former to the latter is strikingly absent at the play's close. This raises provocative questions about the true nature of the relations between old parents and their offspring, questions which suggest that normative views in play-texts had to jockey for audience approval with less optimistic interpretations. Inheritances, and the tension between love and the need for power, are once more the paramount familial issues. What makes *The Old Law* interesting in this respect is the extent to which its characters openly voice the hostilities which young sons were often perceived to harbour. Further, the play offers an idealised scenario of perfect paternal-filial harmony, but undercuts it with the patent failure to convert Simonides to this view, and the imposition of a law to enforce filial fear, if not reverence. This perspective on relationships could be termed 'cynical'. Yet it is worth considering that there is a possible allegorical dimension to the play, centring on the model of the king as 'father' of his people. This interpretation leads to various possible conclusions, one of them being that the elders of the community represent the established order of paternalistic government which, if not willingly respected, will

compel respect (from subjects) through civil law. In this light, the play stresses the 'natural' and divinely ordained positions of kingship and patriarchal government, along with the threat of punishment for resistance to this fixed order. Equally, though, is present the undeclared suggestion that although sons (subjects) may be forced to comply, they will not necessarily do so willingly, nor voluntarily respect their fathers (monarchs and governors). Evander's closing remarks are a potentially ominous reassurance that 'The good needs fear no law,/ It is his safety, and the bad man's awe'.⁷⁴⁷

Such a reading enriches the play, but I would also argue that the representations of parent-offspring relationships in and of themselves merit attention independent of their potential allegorical functions. As seen in the previous chapter, in the typical generational battles for money the young son/nephew/ heir fools paternal authority whilst maintaining a flow of audience sympathy in his direction. Simonides, on the other hand, although he casts his father into the stock role of tight-fisted elder, is so manifestly avaricious and devoid of charm that he inspires revulsion. His attitude is relentlessly combative, his viewpoint exclusive: parents and their offspring cannot thrive together, the destruction of the former is 'necessary'.⁷⁴⁸ Simonides, although as odious as Edmund is magnetic, nonetheless bears a certain resemblance to Gloucester's bastard son. His words in 1.1.72-4 seem to echo Edmund's in *King Lear* 1.2.20-1:

[Simonides] Here's a spring for young plants to flourish!
The old trees must down kept the sun from us;
We shall rise now.

⁷⁴⁷ 5.1.712-13.

⁷⁴⁸ See 1.1.43, 50.

[Edmund] Edmund the base
Shall [top] the' legitimate. I grow, I prosper . . .

The compass of his diseased morality is measurable by a perverse attempt to convince his respectable elderly mother to take a young lover (2.1.136-9). Simonides's behaviour is a truly virtuoso display of all the vicious qualities young heir were purported to possess.⁷⁴⁹ Devoid of all respect, much less love, he is a paradigm of the 'gravitational' view of the unidirectional flow of love from parents 'down' to offspring. To the end, he remains unreformed, only asking pardon because he has no choice:

I had ne'er thought to have been brought so low as my knees again; but
since there's no remedy, fathers, reverend fathers, as you ever hope to
have good sons and heirs, a handful of pity! we confess we have deserved
more than we are willing to receive at your hands, *though sons can never
deserve too much of their fathers*, as shall appear afterwards.⁷⁵⁰

The words in italics are surely deliberately ambiguous.

Against this vile example is set that of Cleanthes and Hippolita, whose devotion borders upon idolatry – e.g., 5.1.678: 'This is the altar of my sacrifice,/ Where daily my devoted knees shall bend./ Age-honour'd shrine!' It would be understandable if a reader took them to be a parody of the ideal filial attitude, their language is so excessive and monothematic. An interesting feature of their otherwise monotonous rhetoric is the reversal of the metaphor of love, by which it is now 'natural' for offspring to love their parents. Their images of nature form a distinct counterpoint to those of Simonides. Cleanthes refers obliquely to the tale of the oak and the briar that aspires to grow past it

⁷⁴⁹ See also 1.1.28-9.

⁷⁵⁰ 5.1.655-61, my emphasis.

only to be buffeted by the gales from which the oak had protected it⁷⁵¹, and later asks

Does the kind root bleed out his livelihood
In parent distribution to his branches,
Adorning them with all his glorious fruits,
Proud that his pride is seen when he's unseen;
And must not gratitude descend again,
To comfort his old limbs in fruitless winter?⁷⁵²

Yet as Shuger points out, what is actually 'natural' in parental relationships is (and was) debatable: 'in Calvin's words, 'the nature of man is such that every man would be lord and master over his neighbours, and no man by good will [*sic*] be subject'. Goneril and Regan are, in one sense, unnatural daughters, but in another, very natural indeed'.⁷⁵³ The same could be said for Simonides and his ilk, to whom fathers and mother are not nurturing roots but 'old trees', depriving saplings of light.

Cleanthes's dialogue also transforms the negative associations of wealth with greed, into images of his father's (and by extension, all fathers') value:

I cannot be too circumspect, too careful;
For in these woods lies hid all my life's treasure.

Here's virtue's throne,
Which I'll embellish with my dearest jewels
Of love and faith, peace and affection!⁷⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, he also invokes as his model the supreme example of filial devotion – Aeneas carrying old Anchises from the flames of conquered Troy.⁷⁵⁵ There is a question of whether Cleanthes's love is entirely sound, or whether the authors are suggesting

⁷⁵¹ See Spenser's 'December eclogue'.

⁷⁵² 1.1.314-19.

⁷⁵³ Shuger 243.

⁷⁵⁴ 4.2.4-5, 5.1.675-7.

⁷⁵⁵ 5.1.179-86.

that even with the best of intentions, reverence should have reasonable limits. This ambiguity surrounding the appropriateness of Cleanthes's extreme devotion forms part of the crux of the play's ending, and Leonides's behaviour contributes to the confusion, for of all the elderly people in *The Old Law*, only he is content to obey the law and meet his death.⁷⁵⁶ Yet Cleanthes and Hippolita absolutely insist upon saving him, and he acquiesces to please them, not himself. Leonides for his part appears desirous to shift the weight of his son's affections to Hippolita, as though suggesting that Cleanthes's love is too narrowly focused, perhaps even 'unnatural'.

Overall, though, *The Old Law*, like *King Lear*, emphasises that the tie of blood is not always enough. Simonides's rebelliousness forces the audience to recognise a reality that at times supersedes the ideals of filial gratitude and reverence. This realisation casts a shadow over the final scene, and the play as a whole.

IV. False widows and widowers

Further shadows are cast by problems in January-May marriages and the question of sexual relations. Two elderly spouses suffer in this play in marriages with young partners, reversing the usual sympathies of comedy so that rather than the audience being entertained by a young wife cuckolding her old husband, or feeling sorry for a young girl forcibly betrothed to an elderly suitor, it sees these January-May relationships from the other side of the fence.⁷⁵⁷ While parity of age appears to be more

⁷⁵⁶ 1.1.399-426.

⁷⁵⁷ Notably, the relationship between Gnotho and Agatha is one of the only such instances in English Renaissance

advisable, the marriage of old and young is not simply written off. Instead, the problems of being old and married to a young man or woman are raised but not really settled, contributing again to the play's ambiguous representation of the elderly.

The problems that arise in both marriages have two foci: money and sex. In the two corresponding ideal marriages (Cleanthes and Hippolita, Creon and Antigona) neither of these are an issue. Only Simonides refers⁷⁵⁸ to Antigona's 'widow's third' (the portion of a husband's property to which a widow was entitled for her lifetime⁷⁵⁹). As for sexual relations, none of these ideal spouses acknowledges such worldly matters, in sharp contrast to the carnal concerns of most of the other characters in the play. Indeed, the elements of fertility and renewal, such common themes in comedy, are muffled. Aside from the ways in which this subverts the comic genre, the asexuality of the old characters represents the extreme, conservative social censuring of elderly sexuality already noted in previous chapters. Part of what makes the play noteworthy in this regard is that Lysander spells out and then works through many of the anxieties stifled by a denial of sexuality.

Eugenia and Gnotho both married for money, as do three serving men in the course of the play. Eugenia waits impatiently to cash in on her investment of time:

we young wenches, that have mother-wits,
And love to marry muck first, and man after,
Do never think old men are old enough,
That we may soon be rid on 'em; there's our quittance.

– and she advises her step-daughter Parthenia, 'always take age first, to make thee

drama of a young husband with an old wife.

⁷⁵⁸ 1.1.275.

rich:/ That was my counsel ever, and then youth/ Will make thee sport enough all thy life after'.⁷⁶⁰ Gnotho tries various means to hasten his wife's death, and although the presentation of their relationship is ludicrous, it generates a rather uneasy laughter, because of the truth-value underneath the farce. Relentlessly, the play hammers home the view that January-May marriages are only ever formed for money. Each of the serving men has 'laid by his widow', like capital deposited into a short-term, high interest account.⁷⁶¹ Gnotho's courtesan tells him that she will not wait five years to marry him, for 'I may bury two husbands by that time'.⁷⁶² The language unflinchingly dehumanises the old, to an extent surpassing most other contemporary plays.

Agatha, aware of Gnotho's motive for marrying her, plans to bury all her money and come back as a ghost to torment him. (Ghosts of those who had buried treasure supposedly came back to haunt the site. Thus, while Gnotho would bury his wife's body and use her money, she plans to bury the money and plague him semi-corporeally.) Lysander, however, is distressed by sexual rather than pecuniary matters – although of course, sex and money are so often metaphorically and literally interchangeable in comedies. The elderly lover, as already discussed, was stock dramatic material. In this play, however, the typical humorous device of an old man trying to be young again is altered first to humiliate youth, and then to reprehend the elderly for having sexual insecurities. Lysander is torn between piety and jealousy, and voices serious rather than comic frustration:

⁷⁵⁹ See *OED* 'third' II.2.

⁷⁶⁰ 2.2.22-5, 126-8.

⁷⁶¹ 3.1.154.

the level of personal relationships, nothing is resolved.⁷⁶⁵ Neither marriage has a future other than begrudging co-habitation, regardless of Lysander's optimism. The play conveys scepticism about the quality of marriage to be expected between partners of widely disparate ages. The 'resolution' achieved by legal imperatives is as dramatically unsatisfying as it is improbable. Nonetheless, *The Old Law* is at least highly unusual for presenting the subject of elderly sexuality so clearly from the point of view of the aged, and foregrounding personal anxieties which the comic genre usually ignores.

V. False cadences

The harmonic resolution articulated in Evander's final words (5.1.711-13) is inauthentic, despite his call for music. Several problems have been suppressed rather than actually solved. Other problems have been sidestepped, such as the place of those old people who are merely clinging to life, bereft of the physical and/or mental powers. Persuasion, having failed, is supplanted by compulsion. The false cadences closing the issues in parental and marital relationships are deliberate strategies by the playwrights to critique the simplistic glosses that contemporary comedies gave to these conflicts. Ironically, despite the fantastic nature of the play's governing premise, no fantasy intrudes to rescue the audience from the text's pessimistic undercurrent.

A final false note, however, may not have been intentional: the way that laughter is generated in the play. The text appears to support a traditional, reverential attitude

⁷⁶⁵ The tears of remorse which Lysander thinks he sees in Eugenia's eyes (5.1.672-74) are more likely to be tears of frustration and anger, as she never expresses penitence .

toward the elderly. Yet it relies exclusively upon ridicule of the old for its humour. Whether the playwrights intended this inconsistency is debatable and unascertainable, but it is worth noting how important mockery of old age is in this play, as well as in English Renaissance play-texts generally. Had an audience to listen to Cleanthes, Hippolita and Leonides declaim virtuously without alleviation, the play would hardly be entertaining. Yet it is conventional ridicule and denigration of the old which provide the comic relief. The clearest instances of this contradiction occur in the Gnotho-Agatha sub-plot and Lysander's scene of 'rejuvenation'.

Gnotho is a 'clown' in the dramatic sense. Although horrible to contemplate in reality, his attempt and frustrated failure to induce heart failure in Agatha are funny – 'What a spite's this, that a man cannot persuade his wife to die in any time with her good will!'⁷⁶⁶ Gnotho's wickedness (unlike Eugenia's and Simonides's) is difficult to take seriously, and the laughter he causes diverts attention from the fact that this laughter sabotages the play's defence and praise of the elderly. Similarly, Lysander becomes the butt of laughter when he attempts to rejuvenate himself, preening in front of a mirror and wrenching his back whilst dancing. Incidental humour also compromises the old – for example, when the Cook describes his new wife as a piece of meat, strongly seasoned in order 'to sweeten her; [for] she was tainted ere she came to my hands. What an old piece of flesh of fifty-nine, eleven months, and upwards! she must needs be fly-blown'.⁷⁶⁷ Gnotho frequently insults his wife, calling her an 'old almanac at the twenty-eighth day of December', an 'old stock-fish', a 'preterpluperfect

tense of a woman!’⁷⁶⁸ The sub-plots provide essential humour but compromise the serious moral lessons of the main plot. Even after Evander has pronounced his ‘free pardon to all’, a final laugh is extracted at the old women’s expense, as a serving man declares, ‘Ay, we have deserved our pardons, if we can live honestly with such reverend wives, that have no motion in ‘em but their tongues’.⁷⁶⁹ This is hardly reverence.

The Old Law thus conveys a less distinct and more ambivalent picture of the elderly and their roles and status in society than the rhetoric of its idealised characters would suggest. It also comments indirectly on the comic genre and on several of the dramatic role ‘types’ described and discussed in this study. Such features are a saving grace of what is an otherwise ponderous play, but one unique and valuable in the drama for those interested in the literary and social histories of the elderly.

⁷⁶⁶ 3.2.346-47.

⁷⁶⁷ 4.1.14-15.

⁷⁶⁸ 4.1.157, 166, 130.

⁷⁶⁹ 5.1.608-11.

AFTERWORD

The primary aim of this thesis, from a literary perspective, has been to draw attention to the many ways that a better understanding of elderly characterisation can enrich the appreciation of much-studied play-texts and indicate some interesting features of more obscure ones. A valuable addition to this would be a study from the perspective of performance, an angle which I could not address for reasons of space. Many of the plays would also benefit from individual, detailed examinations of their elderly characters, such as has not been possible in this wide-ranging study. Ideally, this work also indicates to social historians of old age that valuable material is to be found in theatrical texts, which with cautious analysis may assist in shedding more light on the diversity of societal attitudes towards the elderly, and the range of their experiences. Finally, it is hoped that this study will be a reminder of the potential for both tragedy and comedy in the life of the ageing individual.

APPENDIX: PLAYS CONSULTED AND DISCUSSED

Dates are those of first performance unless otherwise indicated. The source for dates and authorship, except where another is noted, is G.K. Hunter, *English Drama 1586-1642: The age of Shakespeare*. Titles in **boldface** indicate plays directly referred to or discussed in the thesis.

1.	<i>Ludus Coventriae</i>		
2.	<i>York Cycle</i>		
3.	<i>Townley Cycle</i>		
4.	<i>The Castle of Perseverance</i>	?	c.1405-c.1425
5.	<i>Mundus et Infans</i>	?	Before 1520; pub.1522
6.	<i>Nature</i>	Henry Medwall	Pub.?1530-?1534
7.	<i>Gorboduc: or Ferrex and Porrex</i>	Sackville and Norton	1562
8.	<i>Supposes</i>	Gascoigne	1566
9.	<i>The Most Virtuous and Godly Susanna</i>	Garter	Before 1569
10.	<i>Campaspe</i>	Lyly	1580-1584
11.	<i>Sappho and Phao</i>	Lyly	1582-1584
12.	<i>The Spanish Tragedy</i>	Kyd	1585-1589
13.	<i>Mother Bombie</i>	Lyly	1587-1590
14.	<i>The Wounds of Civil War</i>	Lodge	1587-1592
15.	<i>The Tragedy of Dido, Queen of Carthage</i>	Marlowe, Nashe	c.1587-1593
16.	<i>Endymion</i>	Lyly	1588
17.	<i>Doctor Faustus</i>	Marlowe	1588-1592
18.	<i>The Old Wife's Tale</i>	Peele	c.1588-1594
19.	<i>The True Chronicle History of King Leir</i>	?	c.1588-1594
20.	<i>The Jew of Malta</i>	Marlowe	c.1589-1590
21.	<i>Midas</i>	Lyly	1589-1590
22.	<i>1 Henry VI</i>	Shakespeare	1590
23.	<i>2 Henry VI</i>	Shakespeare	c.1590
24.	<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>	Shakespeare	1590-1593
25.	<i>Edward III</i>	?	1590-1595
26.	<i>3 Henry VI</i>	Shakespeare	c.1591
27.	<i>Richard III</i>	Shakespeare	1591-1592
28.	<i>The Life and Death of King John</i>	Shakespeare	1591-1598
29.	<i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>	Shakespeare	c.1593-1594
30.	<i>Titus Andronicus</i>	Shakespeare	1594
31.	<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	Shakespeare	1594-1595

32.	<i>The Tragedy of Richard II</i>	Shakespeare	1594-1595
33.	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Shakespeare	1594-1596
34.	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	Shakespeare	c.1594-1598
35.	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Shakespeare	?1595
36.	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Shakespeare	1596
37.	<i>Henry IV, part 1</i>	Shakespeare	1597-1598
38.	<i>Henry IV, part 1</i>	Shakespeare	1597-1598
39.	<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	Shakespeare	1597-1602
40.	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	Shakespeare	?1598
41.	<i>Every Man In His Humour</i>	Jonson	1598
42.	<i>As You Like It</i>	Shakespeare	1598-1599
43.	<i>Julius Caesar</i>	Shakespeare	1598-1600
44.	<i>Old Fortunatus</i>	Dekker	1599
45.	<i>Henry V</i>	Shakespeare	1599
46.	<i>Every Man Out of His Humour</i>	Jonson	1599
47.	<i>The Shoemaker's Holiday</i>	Dekker	1599
48.	<i>Antonio and Mellida</i>	Marston	1599-1600
49.	<i>Antonio's Revenge</i>	Marston	1599-1601
50.	<i>The Merry Devil of Edmonton</i>	?	1599-1604
51.	<i>The Blind Beggar of Bednall Green</i>	Chettle, Day, Haughton?	1600
52.	<i>Hamlet</i>	Shakespeare	1600-1601
53.	<i>The Malcontent</i>	Marston	1600-1604
54.	<i>Bussy D'Ambois</i>	Chapman	1600-1604
55.	<i>Poetaster: or The Arraignment</i>	Jonson	1601
56.	<i>Satiromastix: or The Untrussing of the Humorous Poet</i>	Dekker, Marston	1601
57.	<i>Blurt, Master Constable</i>	?Dekker	1601-1602
58.	<i>Twelfth Night</i>	Shakespeare	1601-1602
59.	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	Shakespeare	1601-1603
60.	<i>The Family of Love</i>	Middleton	c.1602-1607
61.	<i>A Woman Killed With Kindness</i>	Heywood	1603
62.	<i>Sejanus, His Fall</i>	Jonson	1603
63.	<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>	Shakespeare	1603?-1604
64.	<i>Othello</i>	Shakespeare	c.1603-1604
65.	<i>The Phoenix</i>	Middleton	1603-1604
66.	<i>Measure For Measure</i>	Shakespeare	c.1603-1604
67.	<i>The Dutch Courtesan</i>	Marston	1603-1604
68.	<i>If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody</i>	Heywood	1603-1605
69.	<i>Westward Ho!</i>	Dekker, Webster	1604
70.	<i>The Wise Woman of Hogsdon</i>	Heywood	?1604
71.	<i>The Honest Whore, part 1</i>	Dekker, Middleton	1604-1605
72.	<i>The Honest Whore, part 2</i>	Dekker, Middleton	1604-1605

73.	<i>Michaelmas Term</i>	Middleton	1604-1606
74.	<i>A Trick to Catch the Old One</i>	Middleton	1604-1607
75.	<i>A Mad World My Masters</i>	Middleton	1604-1607
76.	<i>Law Tricks</i>	Day	1604-1607
77.	<i>The Roaring Girl</i>	Middleton, Dekker	1604-1610
78.	<i>King Lear</i>	Shakespeare	?1605
79.	<i>Eastward Ho!</i>	Jonson, Chapman, Marston	1605
80.	<i>Northward Ho!</i>	Dekker, Webster	1605
81.	<i>The Miseries of Enforced Marriage</i>	Wilkins	1605-1606
82.	<i>Macbeth</i>	Shakespeare	1606
83.	<i>The Woman Hater</i>	Fletcher	1606
84.	<i>Volpone</i>	Jonson	1606
85.	<i>The Revenger's Tragedy</i>	Tourneur	1606-1607
86.	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	Shakespeare	c.1606-1608
87.	<i>Pericles, Prince of Tyre</i>	Shakespeare	1606-1608
88.	<i>Timon of Athens</i>	Shakespeare	c.1606-c.1608
89.	<i>The Knight of the Burning Pestle</i>	Beaumont	1607-c.1610
90.	<i>Fortune by Land and Sea</i>	Heywood, Rowley	1607-1609*
91.	<i>The Atheist's Tragedy: or The Honest Man's Revenge</i>	Tourneur	1607-1611
92.	<i>Cupid's Revenge</i>	Fletcher	c.1607-1612
93.	<i>Coriolanus</i>	Shakespeare	1608
94.	<i>Ram Alley</i>	Barry	1608-1610
95.	<i>Philaster: or Love Lies a Bleeding</i>	Fletcher	1608-1610
96.	<i>Cymbeline</i>	Shakespeare	1608-1611
97.	<i>The Maid's Tragedy</i>	Fletcher	1608-1611
98.	<i>Epicoene: or The Silent Woman</i>	Jonson	1609
99.	<i>Mustapha</i>	Greville	Pub.1609
100.	<i>The White Devil</i>	Webster	1609-1612
101.	<i>The Captain</i>	Fletcher	1609-1612
102.	<i>The Witch</i>	Middleton	c.1609-c.1616
103.	<i>The Alchemist</i>	Jonson	1610
104.	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>	Shakespeare	c.1610-1611
105.	<i>Valentinian</i>	Fletcher	1610-1614
106.	<i>No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's</i>	Middleton	1611 [†]
107.	<i>Monsieur Thomas</i>	Fletcher	1611
108.	<i>A King and No King</i>	Fletcher	1611
109.	<i>The Night Walker or the Little Thief</i>	Fletcher	1611
110.	<i>The Second Maiden's Tragedy</i>	?	1611
111.	<i>The Tempest</i>	Shakespeare	1611
112.	<i>A Chaste Maid in Cheapside</i>	Middleton	1611-1613

113.	<i>The Duchess of Malfi</i>	Webster	1612-1614
114.	<i>Henry VIII</i>	Shakespeare	1613
115.	<i>The Hogge Hath Lost His Pearl</i>	Tailor	1613*
116.	<i>Wit at Several Weapons</i>	Middleton, Rowley, Fletcher?	1613? †
117.	<i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i>	Fletcher, Shakespeare	1613-1614
118.	<i>The Scornful Lady</i>	Fletcher	1613-1614
119.	<i>Thierry and Theodoret</i>	Fletcher	1613-1621
120.	<i>Bartholomew Fair</i>	Jonson	1614
121.	<i>More Dissemblers Besides Women</i>	Middleton	?1615
122.	<i>A Fair Quarrel</i>	Middleton, W. Rowley	c.1615-1617
123.	<i>The Old Law</i>	Middleton	c.1615-1618
124.	<i>Love's Pilgrimage</i>	Fletcher	?1616
125.	<i>The Widow</i>	Middleton	1616 †
126.	<i>The Mad Lover</i>	Fletcher	1617
127.	<i>The Chances</i>	Fletcher	c.1617
128.	<i>Rollo, Duke of Normandy; or The Bloody Brother</i>	Fletcher	c.1617
129.	<i>The Fatal Dowry</i>	Massinger, Field	1617-1619*
130.	<i>The Loyal Subject</i>	Fletcher	1618 (?rev. 1633)
131.	<i>The Tragedy of Sir John van Oldenbarnavelt</i>	Massinger, Fletcher	1619
132.	<i>The Humorous Lieutenant</i>	Fletcher	?1619
133.	<i>The Double Marriage</i>	Fletcher, Massinger	1619-1623*
134.	<i>The Little French Lawyer</i>	Fletcher, Massinger	1619-1623*
135.	<i>The Custom of the Country</i>	Fletcher	1619-1623
136.	<i>Anything for a Quiet Life</i>	Middleton	c.1620-c.1621
137.	<i>Match Me in London</i>	Dekker	1621?*
138.	<i>Women Beware Women</i>	Middleton	1620-1627
139.	<i>The Witch of Edmonton</i>	Dekker, Ford, W. Rowley	c.1621
140.	<i>A New Way to Pay Old Debts</i>	Massinger	1621-1625
141.	<i>The Changeling</i>	Middleton, Rowley	1622
142.	<i>The Sea Voyage</i>	Fletcher, Massinger	1622
143.	<i>A Cure for a Cuckold</i>	Webster, Rowley, ?Heywood	?1625 †
144.	<i>The Elder Brother</i>	Fletcher, Massinger	1625
145.	<i>The English Traveller</i>	Heywood	c.1627

† Date is from the specific edition consulted for the play, listed in the Bibliography.

* Date is from Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642*.

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