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Speaking Words of Wisdom: An Analysis of the Old English "Precepts", "The Gifts of Men" and "The Fortunes of Men"

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Ai miei nonni Piera e Silvio

Introduction

Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;
love her, and she will watch over you.
The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom.
Though it cost all you have, get understanding.

(Proverbs 4: 6-7)

Wisdom is a universal concept and, as so, it is multi-faceted. It refers both to the secular and the spiritual, thus acting like a bridge between the lay and the sacred. It expresses a connection between humankind and whatever governing principle one chooses to – or not to – believe in, thus illuminating people's life paths. Wisdom is a structure hovering on the human race, and its presence has been the target of many cultural, literary and, in general, artistic traditions. Arguably, a certain sense of wisdom pervades the totality of human experience and, throughout the course of the centuries or even the millennia, it has sought numerous ways to express itself. The core principle has remained the same, but its forms of expression have varied considerably, depending on the tradition, on the period of time, on the context and on other primary factors as well. What is sure is that wisdom has always found a fertile ground to grow and to deeply characterise the course and the history of humankind.

Wisdom literature is an expression that constitutes the common denominator for a wide array of literary traditions, starting from the far-flung past and echoing in the ultra-contemporary present. Some of the most traditional manifestations of wisdom may be found in the Holy Writ. In particular, wisdom is considered to make its appearance and to notably shape the literary atmosphere of the so-called Sapiential Books, which include The Book of Proverbs, Job, The Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, The Book of Wisdom, The Wisdom of Sirach and the Psalms. However, it would be simplistic to claim that the Bible is the only source of wisdom. It would be safer to say that, quite clearly, it has played a considerable role in shaping a number of wisdom-infused literary genres and cultures. In spite of that, other traditions have been found to display – more

or less explicitly – a variety of different influences, with each and every one of them contributing to the final outcome, which very often has many peculiarities that set it apart from other similar products.

With particular regard to the Old English literary tradition, wisdom literature "is a term used by modern scholars to denote a wide range of Old English poems that have certain affinities with Near Eastern wisdom texts best exemplified by the Old Testament books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes" (DiNapoli, 2014d: 505). Based on this definition, some could be tempted to conclude that Old English wisdom poetry derives solely from the Bible. A partial derivation from the Bible, and, specifically, from the Sapiential Books and the patristic and homiletic traditions, are not to be questioned, yet other models are evident in the perfect literary mechanism known as wisdom literature. Contamination may be the most suitable word to describe what the Holy Writ, and other sources as well, have done in the birth and subsequent development of Old English wisdom literature. The result can be interpreted as syncretic or even blasphemous, given that the Christian can coexist with the heathen in this literary genre. However, the two are combined masterfully, clearly signalling the intention of the anonymous writers to reach a large audience – virtually the whole humankind – through words of wisdom that sound true and universal to everyone.

Old English wisdom poetry is a subgenre of the macro-category of wisdom literature, and it represents – with a high degree of ingenuity on the part of its poets – the variety that is typical of the whole literary genre. It does so employing conventions and features that are specific of poetry, as well as making clear use of a powerful, evocative language that is capable of exploring human nature, feelings and attitudes in depth. Doing so, it produces a reliable sense of wisdom on which people can base their lives.

Old English wisdom poems have often been addressed as "uninspired and platitudinous" (Greenfield, 1965: 202), not capable of giving a worthy contribution to literature, let alone of conveying and teaching something useful. Several claims that have emerged over the course of the years with regard to them are merciless and, arguably, biased. The present dissertation aims to acknowledge and weigh some of the critiques and arguments that were advanced and then try to overcome or, at least, counterbalance them, adopting alternative perspectives on the matter. The background

of a selection of three poems – namely *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* – will be dealt with and tackled in relation to the influences that were found in them. Their main points and issues will be considered and contextualised, while seeking to draw a parallel with lines from the poems themselves and with other texts as well – whether belonging to the Early English literary tradition or not.

Prior to considering the three poems specifically, offering a comment of them and conducting a linguistic analysis focused on their vocabulary, the present thesis will examine the context and the main historical events that influenced them. Furthermore, particular attention will also be devoted to the study and the understanding of the codex in which *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* are included, namely the Exeter Book. All of this will be instrumental in providing the literary and cultural background knowledge necessary to have a proper understanding of the three poems.

At least two of the poems – in particular *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* – have likely been composed during, or shortly before, the English Benedictine Reform, which will be covered in Chapter 1, 1. (The English Benedictine Reform), dedicated in particular to the understanding of the historical and social context of the Reform, and to its consequences as well. Also known with the name of Monastic Reform, it constituted a major watershed in Early English history, especially due to the consequences it managed to produce at a religious, cultural, linguistic and artistic level. It took place during King Edgar's period on the throne of England, that is from 959 to 975, and it aimed to provide England with a new layout from a religious and cultural point of view. As a matter of fact, a decay in such categories was evident at least since 8th century, as reported by Venerable Bede first and then by King Alfred the Great. Both of them were critical towards the drastic drop in the knowledge of Latin that was attested both in lay people and inside the Church. Such decline prevented people from reading and learning from the Holy Writ and the wisdom books King Alfred mentioned in his preface to Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*. Only a small fraction of such books was available in vernacular language, something that led King Alfred to promote a translation campaign aiming to restore the knowledge of the principles of Christianity.

King Alfred's action had a profound impact, and his will to educate people and to increase his people's quality of life was carried on by a number of figures in the second half of 10th century. In particular, King Edgar and three clergymen that went

down to history as the first generation of Benedictine Reformers – Saint Æthelwold, Saint Dunstan and Saint Oswald – distinguished themselves in the social experiment that came to be known as English Benedictine Reform. It faced the decay that had hit the Church and that had caused the clergy to become more and more secular. In other words, the English Church had lost track of the highest standards and principles of faith that had characterised the settlement and the diffusion of the Christian religion in England – outcome of the action carried out by Benedictine monks sent there by Pope Gregory the Great at the end of 6th century. The Monastic Reform had the aim of recovering a glorious past that had been endangered and it did so through the combined action of monarchy, the Church and aristocracy as well. Even though a return to a kind of golden age was not fully achieved, the Reform still had many relevant consequences on the cultural, linguistic and artistic context of 10th century England, and on the following periods as well. To provide an esteem of such effects, one could consider the many translations of several fundamental texts of Christianity – and not only – such as the Rule of Saint Benedict, translated in Old English by Saint Æthelwold. Moreover, the numerous codices that were abridged during that period can give us many insights as for the cultural animation that was achieved because of the Reform.

The following section of the first chapter (2: The Exeter Book) will focus on one of the leading codices of 10th century England, that is Exeter Cathedral Library, MS. 3501. Though it has no illuminations, it has been recognised as chiefly important in the definition of English literature. It is a work of art that has provided with plenty of relevant material to enlarge our understanding of Old English literature, as well of Early English society. A description of the defining features and of the appearance of such codex will constitute the first part of 2.1, and it will be followed by a discussion of the main events connected with the manuscript and with the period of time in which it was likely put together. The Codex Exoniensis has stood the test of time quite well, and the way it looks allows several assumptions concerning its provenance to be made. The section will then proceed to validate such hypotheses discussing them in relation with some historical events and exploiting the documentation – albeit scarce – in our possession.

The Exeter Book was likely abridged between 950 and 990, as argued by several studies and a number of palaeographic and codicological analyses conducted since the

end of 19th century. It is the quintessential product of the Monastic Reform, something that is demonstrated also by the unmatched diversity of genres among its contents. The lay finds its place alongside a wide majority of religious-inspired material, and they animate the numerous poems of the Exeter Book, which, in spite of the presence of some records and legal documents in the first folios, is an utmost example of a poetic anthology.

The Liber Exoniensis is a plain codex that survives in almost all of its integrity, even though some folios got removed, lost or damaged. Its structure is somewhat unclear as for the borders of the compositions inside them, something that has created major difficulties in analysing them. Some 90 riddles, numerous heroic poems, a great deal of saints' lives, gnomic verses, elegies and wisdom poems have been found to form part of the Exeter Book, and they characterise it as an extremely varied and multifaceted artifact. All of the above is masterfully combined in it, and everything, from the heathen to the sacred, coexists and 2.3. (Genre variety in the Exeter Book) in particular will deal with it in order to have an understanding of the actual contents of the book.

The Exeter Book manages to tie all the different contents and genres together by providing a "common monastic denominator". In other words, the Liber Exoniensis may be interpreted as the perfect example of a codex belonging to the so-called monastic poetics. This label, first introduced by Pranger (2003) and then developed by O'Camb (2009), is a powerful poetic tool that allows us to enlarge the understanding of virtually the totality of codices produced in a monastic milieu, as well as to shed even more light on Early English history and on the development of its local literature. Monastic poetics enables, through a careful reading of multiple sources, to draw useful parallels with other texts of the same or other traditions and cultures, something that really contributes to push literary analysis and critique further. Because of the wide variety of compositions attested in the Exeter Book, it represents one of the preferred "targets" for this very method, which reveals itself extremely useful when considering wisdom poetry in particular.

There is a number ranging from fifteen to twenty of wisdom poems in the Exeter Book. Chapter 2, 1. (Old English Wisdom Poetry) will be devoted to the study of the main and shared features of wisdom poems, which tend to revolve around simple sayings of various length – often in a gnomic form – to convey universal teachings and

a certain sense of wisdom. The focus of most wisdom poems is on learning and on the value of human experience, which constitutes the most effective way to gather gifts and principles coming from God and to live a blessed life. Wisdom poetry often makes use of catalogues or of enumeration, as explicitly shown in *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*. Such devices are exploited to deal with various issues, including the gifts granted by God to humankind and the punishments or the blessings one may find in life, depending on which attitude he/she decides to maintain. All of the above is instrumental in the process of human learning, centred around various teachings, precepts, talents and skills.

Old English wisdom poetry appears to be more focused on content rather than on form and, indeed, its structure has varied considerably over the course of the centuries in order to better match the specific social and cultural requirements and standards of a certain period. In spite of this, wisdom poetry has always remained alliterative, meaning that it uses alliteration as the principal ornamental device to help indicate the underlying metrical structure, as opposed to other devices such as rhyme. The second chapter will provide us with the possibility of appreciating this kind of poetry through the reading of three poems in particular, namely *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*.

The remaining and most substantial part of Chapter 2 will be dedicated to the presentation and the analysis of the three compositions. Krapp & Dobbie (1936)'s edition of the Exeter Book will be the one referred to for the verses and the titles of the poems. With regard to the titles, the present dissertation will stick to them as they are still the most employed ones in the literary critique of three poems. However, alternative titles that appear in other editions (Muir, 2000a: vii; Bjork, 2014: v), in books and in articles will be listed and commented. Some of the reviews dealing with *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* will be acknowledged and employed as a starting point to base alternative comments and perspectives on. The three of them display many literary merits and they are work of arts. They are the product of three competent poets that charged their texts with universal values, making use of a number of topoi that shed some light on what was valued in Early English society. The three poems will be tackled in the most objective way, trying to consider their features, and guessing what the possible intentions of their poets could have been. Some considerations about the age and the context in which they may have been

produced will also be advanced, as to have a broad view of them, in relation to each other and to other texts as well.

Old English sources will be taken into account in order to draw some useful parallels with them and to help trace a profile of Old English poetry and literature in general. Furthermore, other literary traditions and sources will be referred to through direct quotations, starting from the Holy Writ and including a number of Latin and Norse texts. With regard to the latter, Chapter 2 will try to underline the many similarities existing between this small poetic corpus in Old English and some Norse texts, especially several Eddic poems from the *Poetic Edda*. The existence of such similarities is interesting, and it allows us to better understand the scope of the contacts between the Norse and English people, as a consequence of the Danish raids in England that began towards the end of the 8th century when several Norse riders chose some Christian monasteries as their target. Moreover, this enables us to imagine the presence of a substratum that is common to different cultures. This will be carried out in the whole chapter through constant references to lines from *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* and, in some cases, to texts belonging to other traditions, as in the case of *Hávamál*. A comment of them in relation to the points emerged in the analysis will also be offered, as to be more thorough.

Chapter 2, 1.1. (*Precepts*), 1.2. (*The Gifts of Men*) and 1.3. (*The Fortunes of Men*) will focus on a specific poem in particular, but comparisons with the other two will not lack. As a matter of fact, the three compositions form part of the same codex and, moreover, they belong to the same genre. This allows us to see several shared elements in them, other than the features that contribute to set them apart. A brief comparative analysis of *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* will be carried out in 1.4. (*The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*: a brief comparison), which will try to highlight the similarities between two poems that have often been interpreted by scholars as the two faces of the same coin. The comparison will be quite short, and it will focus on shared or, at least, akin features as for structure and concerning the didactic aim of both poems. Neither of the two can be interpreted as superior to the other, even though a number of critics have advanced different claims on the matter. The comparisons between the three poems carried out especially at the end of Chapter 2

will provide the basis for the linguistic study of Chapter 3, which will deal with the themes and the vocabulary of each of the three compositions.

Chapter 3 will be divided in four sections. The first one will present the aim and the direction followed by the part in general. The remaining sections will cover one poem in particular, presenting some of its themes and then conduction a study centred on vocabulary, making large use of the Bosworth Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online (Bosworth, 2014) and of the Dictionary of Old English (DOE). Another key resource that will be exploited is the website put together in 2008 by Professor Giuseppe Brunetti of University of Padua. It is divided in sections, and the one that will be mainly referred to is called "gnomic poetry". Among the other purposes, it allows to have access to useful glosses and to "interact" with the texts itself, accessing statistics and much more. The three tools will be mostly used together, as to have a more complete "image" of the three poems and, especially, of the vocabulary they display. For example, a given word will be considered on Brunetti (2008) first, in order to clearly see the form to look for on the two dictionaries and to develop some basic and initial assumptions about them. Then, the lemma will be searched on Bosworth (2014) and on the DOE, with the latter being the preferred dictionary for words starting with a letter comprised from A to I, which are the letters currently covered by the DOE. The present work has also benefitted of the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus in Electronic Form* (DOEC) as to the combined search of words all through the Old English literary corpus.

A selection of themes will be made with regard to each poem, choosing from the most representative ones, but also having in mind the vocabulary of the compositions themselves. In other words, the themes that will be favoured are the ones that display the greater number of words related to them. The fact of having only a few themes from every piece of poetry will allow to be more thorough and to better underline the defining features of each poem. Each of them deals with manifestations of wisdom, which is passed from a father to his son and/or from God to His offspring. What sets them apart – or, at least, contributes to do so – lies in the lexical choices carried out by the poets. The linguistic features of the three texts – thus including the vocabulary, which is arguably the most "living" and "lively" part of them – enable, for example, to speculate the context to which a give poem was directed. One could imagine *Precepts*

as making sense in a monastic context, *The Gifts of Men* as a poem addressed to an already Christian milieu and *The Fortunes of Men* as a composition that stresses the value of good deeds, juxtaposing them with deadly situations one can encounter, as to remember people not to lead a sinful life. There is much more we could hypothesize through the adoption of a lexical approach when dealing with the texts, such as finding similarities with other texts, as a number of scholars including have done. Moreover, a lexical study could also shed some light on the provenance and on the period in which a certain text was likely composed. In other words, the possibilities are (almost) endless, and it is up to us to decide which path to follow.

The three poems are clearly didactic in purpose, as typical of wisdom poetry. Yet, there are some differences concerning their themes, how they are dealt with, and the lexical choices carried out by their poets. 1.1. (*Precepts*) will focus on the father-son relationship that is exemplified in *Precepts*, trying to understand how the two figures that are involved in the process of transmission of wisdom are characterised and connotated in particular through the use of certain adjectives. The analysis will also centre on some noteworthy virtues that are passed from the wise father to his precious and valuable son, and they will allow us to enlarge our understanding of what was valued more from a social and cultural perspective in Early English society. Particular attention will also be devoted to the verbs that characterise the process of teaching wisdom that animates the lines of *Precepts*. Such verbs will enable us to comprehend how teaching was carried out and to establish some relationships of power in the process.

1.2. (*The Gifts of Men*) will take into consideration the poem that is most centred – at least among the three of this small corpus – on the celebration through a catalogue of the gifts that God has granted to humankind. This section will not focus on the totality of talents that are described, but rather on the ones that reflect the power of the mind the most. Some critical interventions considering the role and the perception of the mind and cognition in Early English society will be employed as a starting point on which basing a lexical analysis of terms related to the two dimensions. As a matter of fact, the term *mod* ('mind') appears several times in the poem, thus characterising it and making a study of its importance quite interesting. This part will also deal with the celebration of God's power and the description of His nature by the poet of *The Gifts of*

Men, in order to offer a comment of how He was considered in Early English society and how His might was perceived by believers.

The last part of the third chapter – 1.3. (*The Fortunes of Men*) – will deal with the poem that has been often addressed as the superior of the three – *The Fortunes of Men* – from the point of view of the contents but also from a stylistic perspective. Its highly-evocative vocabulary animates the two catalogues that are present in the poem. The first is centred on images of pain and of gruesome deaths, while the second offers a celebration of the skills that God has given to people and which they can exploit, much akin in spirit to *The Gifts of Men*. The alternance between life and death that is displayed by the two contrasting catalogues will be taken into account from a linguistic point of view. This will be instrumental to demonstrate the fact that there are two paths one can go by in life, deciding whether to commit sins and thus likely dying in a violent way or living a blessed existence, enjoying the gifts of God even in old age. The linguistic study will try to assess and challenge the message of helplessness allegedly present in the poem, stressing, on the other hand, the fact that *The Fortunes of Men* conveys a powerful statement of promotion of human agency.

Finally, the conclusion wil summarise the main points that emerged through the course of the thesis. Some critical considerations on the general aim of Old English wisdom poetry will be offered, and there will be a brief discussion of some of the further possibilities of study that could originate from the present dissertation.

Chapter 1:

Reforms, Manuscripts and "Monastic Poetics"

The English Benedictine Reform that took place during the reign of King Edgar (959-975) constituted a major watershed in Early English history. It determined a great deal of changes in England – not only limited to religion and ecclesiastical organization – which would heavily characterise the following periods. The Reform had a profound impact on Old English, contributing to raise it to the cultural language status. It also transformed it in a very appreciated and powerful means of expression, about education, but also concerning literary productions such as poetry.

The attestations of poetry written in Old English in the monastic contexts of the scriptoria increased dramatically as a positive outcome of the Reform, thus allowing several magnificent and highly significant codices to be produced, leaving a permanent mark on English literature, and, overall, on art and culture.

One of the pivotal manuscripts of Early English culture, the Exeter Book stands as one of the supreme products of the scriptoria during the 10th century, the quintessential example of the cultural vivacity established and promoted by the Reform, which gave the vernacular language a vitality never-experienced-before, even more than the one it began to acquire thanks to King Alfred's literacy campaign.

The Exeter Book is nowadays as relevant as before, or maybe even more, as it continues to give, through the variety of genres to be found in it and due to the objective beauty of its poetic language, information about so many aspects of Early English society, contributing to our understanding and appreciation of such a central period of English history.

Monastic poetics is a phrase employed by Marinus B. Pranger (2003) and by Brian O'Camb (2009). It takes into account the wide variety of influences that merged into Early English literature and that played a crucial role in its development from a

thematic, linguistic and stylistic point of view. Moreover, it constitutes an extremely valuable poetic tool that allows to enlarge our understanding of the Exeter Book and of the whole Old English poetic corpus, which is doubly tied to the monastic context that became prevalent in England as a result of the Christian missionary activity and of the English Benedictine Reform as well. Furthermore, monastic poetics allows to shed some light on Early English society as a whole.

1. The English Benedictine Reform

Before taking into account the English Benedictine Reform, also known with the name of Monastic Reform, its effects and its likely consequences on the literary production in monastic context (3: Monastic Poetics) – which will be analysed more in depth later in this part (2: The Exeter Book), as well as in Chapter 2 ("Wisdom and its Different Manifestations") – it is essential to consider the role played by Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons from 871 to c. 886 and King of the Anglo-Saxons from c. 886 until his death in 899.

As a matter of fact, King Alfred had a reputation as a very cultivated and merciful man who encouraged education for the sake of his own subjects. He proposed it to be conducted in Old English rather than in Latin, to make it more available, widespread, and effective. Moreover, he also operated to improve the legal system and the military structure, as well as, in general, his people's quality of life and culture, which flourished during his kingdom.

His literacy campaign – concerning education and promoting the use of the local language – took place during the 29 years of his reign (871-899), quite likely during the 880s when attacks coming from the Danes had diminished as a probable consequence of their defeat in the Battle of Edington of 878 (Smyth, 2002: 26-27). This reform was based, and subsequently modelled, on his personal beliefs that secular and spiritual authority were not distinct categories, as we learn from the well-known preface of his translation of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* (Sweet, 1871: 1-9; Ranft, 2012: 78-79; Fulk, 2021: 4-11). From King Alfred's viewpoint, they intertwined with each other, and this led him to produce a series of changes promoting both the temporal and

the spiritual welfare of his subjects, convinced as he was that a strong connection between "earthly" affairs and religious ones constituted the key for one to live a blessed life and, ultimately, to gain access to Heaven and be in God's grace. Indeed, during the Middle Ages, there was a strong link between education and religion; such aspects were perceived as the two faces of the same coin and the quintessential sign of God's presence in the world and in the daily lives of His believers.

Regarding the legal reform he promoted, the very structure and the enforcement of the Law under King Alfred was clearly modelled on his beliefs and on his persona, both heavily influenced by his Christian faith. According to Pratt (2007: 215), about a fifth of the whole law code directly comes from Alfred's translation[1] into Old English of the Ten Commandments, some chapters from the Book of Exodus, and the Apostolic Letter from the Acts of the Apostles. The fact of having a solid connection between the Holy Writ and his contemporaneity traces the continuity between God's gift of law to Moses to Alfred's own issuance of law to the West Saxon people. By doing so, it linked the biblical past to the historical present (Abels, 1998: 248). This gave solidity to his claim of having the most valuable laws, which was also reinforced by the fact that he was convinced that his genealogy traced back to Adam, providing him with a valuable biblical ancestry and making him a king chosen directly by God himself (Gransden, 1996: 34-35). Alfred's law system has been recognised to owe a big debt towards the Mosaic law – including the fact of being divided into 120 chapters[2] (Wormald, 2001: 417). It was taken and employed as a model to give solidity, as well as a certain sense of wisdom and tradition to his laws, whose meaning rang "true" and "universal", thanks to the fact they derived from the Book itself.

As for his literacy campaign, to pursue his will to make his people learned and conscious of the Christian principles governing every aspect of their lives, Alfred planned to make basic education available – and, indeed, highly advised – for *gif we ða stilnesse habbað, ðætte eall sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angelcynne friora monna* – meaning "the present English youth of the class of freemen who have the wherewithal to commit to it" (Fulk, 2021: 8-9). He understood the knowledge of Latin was decaying, not only about the "common people" but also to the clergy – which was supposed to know,

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[1] See Godden (2007) and Bately (2009).
[2] This number is endowed with religious meaning. 120 was the age at which Moses died and, in the number-symbolism of early medieval biblical exegetes, 120 stood for law (Wormald, 2001: 417).

understand and consciously use it – and he opted for basic education to be made available in English (Keynes & Lapidge, 1983: 125-126). Such a decision had a profound impact and, alongside the Monastic Reform which took place some 80 years later, it led the West Saxon to a notable development and allowed it to gain a high degree of dignity, converting it in a "cultural language".

King Alfred also established a court school for the education of his own children, those of the nobility, as well as the ones of less noble births (but still of noble heritage). There, they studied books both in Old English and Latin and "devoted themselves to writing […] they were seen to be devoted and intelligent students of the liberal arts" (Keynes & Lapidge, 1983: 35-36). He recruited scholars from the Continent and from Britain to aid in the revival of Christian learning in Wessex and to provide education to himself and to the circle of people closer to him.

King Alfred promoted the importance, or rather even the necessity, of having an education openly starting from the principles, the precepts, and the teachings of the Bible. Nevertheless, at the time of his reign, there was only a very limited number of so-called "wisdom books"[3] in Old English available, as Keynes & Lapidge (1983: 125-126) argue. Hence, there was some real need to translate the existing material directly from Latin. The following excerpts – taken from the preface of King Alfred's translation into Old English of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* and here presented in the original Old English text as well as in Fulk's translation into contemporary English – clarify King Alfred's view on the cultural situation at that time and gives some insights on the direction he intended to give to his country through several reforms (Fulk, 2021: 7-9):

> […] ond ða swiðe lytle fiorme ðara boca wiston, forðæm ðe hie hiora nanwuht ongiotan ne meahton for ðæm ðe hie næron on hiora agen geðiode awritene, swelce hie cwæden, "Ure ieldran, ða ðe ðas stowa ær hioldon, hie lufodon wisdom ond ðurh ðone hie begeaton welan ond us læfdon. Her mon mæg giet gesion hiora swæð, ac we him ne cunnon æfterspyrigean, ond forðæm we habbað nu ægðer forlæten ge ðone welan ge ðone wisdom, for ðæm ðe we noldon to ðæm spore mid ure mode onlütan." Ðā ic ða ðis eall gemunde, ða wundrade ic swiðe swiðe ðara godena wiotona ðe giu wæron giond Angelcynn, ond ða bec ealla be fullan geliornod hæfdon, ðæt hie hiora ða nænne dæl noldon on hiora agen geðiode wendan. Ac ic ða sona eft me selfum andwyrde ond

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[3] Wisdom literature is a literary genre common in the ancient Near East. It consists of statements by sages and the wise that offer teachings about divinity and virtue. A detailed study of the defining features of wisdom literature and wisdom poetry will be carried out in Chapter 2, 1. (Old English Wisdom Poetry).

cwæð: "Hie ne wendon ðætte æfre menn sceolden swæ reccelease weorðan ond sio lar swæ oðfeallan. For ðære wilnunga hie hit forleton, ond woldon ðæt her ðȳ mara wisdom on londe wære ðy we ma geðeoda cuðon." […] For ðy me ðyncð betre, gif iow swæ ðyncð, ðæt we eac suma bec – ða ðe niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne – ðæt we ða on ðæt geðiode wenden ðe wr ealle gecnawan mægen

[…] and they derived very little profit from those books, because they could comprehend nothing of them, since they were not written in their own tongue, as if they were to say, "Our elders, who once inhabited these parts, loved learning, and through it they amassed wealth and left it to us. Here their track can still be seen, yet we cannot follow it". When I remembered all this, I was wholly astonished that the good scholars who once walked among the English, and who had studied all those books in full, did not care to turn any share of them into their own tongue. But then I answered myself promptly, saying, "They did not suppose that people would ever grow so negligent and learning so decayed. On purpose they left it undone, since they expected that there would be the greater erudition in the country the more languages we knew." […] Therefore it seems to me better, if it seems to you, that we turn certain books – those most essential for people to know – into that tongue that we can all comprehend, and arrange

King Alfred has been traditionally recognised as the translator of a large deal of the pieces of wisdom literature, but, in recent years, his personal involvement in the practice has been questioned (Godden, 2007: 1-2 and Bately, 2009: 189-190), while the fact that he translated the *Pastoral Care* into vernacular remains undisputable. Despite the rise and spread of the just-mentioned claim, his role in favouring a diffused cultural and linguistic awareness remains unquestionable, even at the present day.

King Alfred's strong views on religion, and on its importance in relation to every aspect of his life and those of his subjects, played a considerable role and would have a pivotal impact as regards the English Benedictine Reform. As a matter of fact, his open dissatisfaction with the decline of monastic life and of learning as well convinced him to promote education through a series of ground-breaking reforms, through which he greatly influenced Early English society of the last quarter of the 9th century and of the times to come.

By the mid 10th century, clergy had slowly become notably "secular" – seeming to have lost the original spirit of Christianity – with priests who were most of the times married. Moreover, a clear distinction between secular clergy and monks was not present any longer (Stephenson, 2009: 105-106), something which contributed to lead to a decline of the monastic principles of living humbly, without considering the earthly

tangible goods. King Alfred's critical attitude towards the situation was instrumental in setting the basis of the Monastic Reform, which dramatically influenced the literary and, in general, the whole cultural outcome of the period following the late 10th century.

The English Benedictine Reform characterised itself as a religious and intellectual movement in the later Early English period aiming to replace the secular clergy with celibate contemplative monks following the Rule of Saint Benedict. Thanks to its own nature, its simplicity and because of the universally-shared principles of *pax* ('peace') and of *ora et labora* ('pray and work') on which it was based, the revival of the Benedictine Rule found widespread popularity, up to the point of becoming the standard rule to be strictly followed by all congregations of monks.

The wisdom of the Rule or, in other words, the main factor that contributed to its success lies in its flexibility, its tolerance for individual differences, and its openness to change. Since the time Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-550) introduced it, almost 1500 years ago, it has remained a powerful and relevant guide for those who would seek God in the ordinary circumstances of life. The Rule of Saint Benedict and its adoption in the context of the English Benedictine Reform managed to establish the solid ground necessary to establish once again religious awareness and create a climate of cultural vitality in the late 10th/early 11th-century England[4], which would condition the following centuries as well, leaving a permanent mark. Here some excerpts of the original text of the Rule (Pricoco, 1995: 118-124), as well as a contemporary English translation from Latin (Parry & de Waal, 2000: 1-4), useful to give a practical idea of which aspects of life it dealt with and deemed valuable:

> Et quid dicit? Venite, filii, audite me, timorem Domini docebo vos. […] «Quis est homo qui vult vitam et cupit videre dies bonos?» Quod si tu audiens respondeas: Ego, dicit tibi Deus: si vis habere veram et perpetuam vitam, «prohibe linguam tuam a malo et labia tua ne loquantur dolum; deverte a malo et fac bonum, inquire pacem et sequere eam» […] Succinctis ergo fide vel observantia bonorum actuum lumbis nostris, per ducatum evangelii pergamus itinera eius, ut mereamur eum, «qui nos vocavit in regnum suum» videre. In cuius regni tabernaculo si volumus habitare, nisi illuc bonis actibus curritur, minime pervenitur. […] Processu vero conversationis et fidei dilatato corde inenarrabili dilectionis dulcedine curritur via mandatorum Dei

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[4] A considerable amount of academic literature has dealt over the course of the years with the Rule of Saint Benedict. See Derrick (2002) and Kleymann & Malloch (2010).

[…] And what does the Spirit say? "Come, my sons, listen to me; I shall teach you the fear of the Lord. […] "Who is the man who desires life and is eager to see Good Days?". If you hear this and reply, "I do", God says to you "If you want to have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from speaking evil, and your lips from uttering deceit. Turn aside from evil and do good; seek peace and follow after it". […] Let us therefore make for ourselves a girdle out of faith and perseverance in good works, and under the guidance of the Gospel let us pursue our way in his paths, so that we may deserve to see him who has called us to his Kingdom. […] there will be no getting there unless we run towards it by good deeds. […] through the continual practice of monastic observance and the life of faith, our hearts are opened wide, and the way of God's commandments is run in a sweetness of love that is beyond words

The Monastic Reform took place, or rather began to spread, during the reign of King Edgar (959-975), known as the Peaceful because of his political attitude of trying to maintain the peace established in England by kings who came before him (Blair, 2000: 51). Much like King Alfred, Edgar was against the decline of spirituality in the secular clergy. Because of his strong feelings towards said decline, he dedicated himself to the encouragement of the Monastic Reform. Indeed, he valued its extreme necessity as a possible solution to the profound crisis that monasticism following the Rule of Saint was living at the beginning of the 10th century. According to Blair (2000: 53), this was partly due to the Danes having destroyed many ministers and because of the remaining ones deciding to opt for a less spiritual behaviour in favour of a more secular and profitable one, thus abandoning their background as monks and losing track of the cloister teachings of living simply and humbly to honour God.

King Edgar sought remedy to it taking inspiration from the great European reform movement. He was deeply convinced that an adherence to strict monasticism constituted the ideal way to govern his kingdom while, at the same time, carrying on the will of King Alfred and of the latter's grandson King Æthelstan (924-939) (Keynes, 1999: 456-484). With the aid and the financial support of the aristocracy and several churchmen, over the course of the years, he managed to spread the Benedictine monastic values, reversing the situation of spiritual and cultural decay existing at the time. The church-related figures who distinguished themselves the most in the application, the promotion and the development of the Reform are to be found in Saint Æthelwold, Saint Dunstan and Saint Oswald (Blair, 2000: 53).

The English Benedictine Reform began to find its way during King Edgar's period on the throne of England, mainly because of the King's open support towards it. However, it is noteworthy that the Reform did not originate in England and that the first clear signs of it in Europe – of whose context the English reform is part of, even though with some particularities which will be examined later – can be traced back to 910, when the Benedictine Abbey of Cluny in Burgundy was founded by Duke William I of Aquitaine (Wormald, 2006: 14). Several historians, including Dumville (1992: 200), go even further, localising very early signs of the English Reform during King Alfred's kingdom, arguing that his cultural programme had the goal of favouring the resurrection of monasticism. On the other hand, alternative sources, most notably Abels (1998: 243) and Pratt (2007: 348), tend to be more cautious as for King Alfred's involvement in the matter. They argue that it cannot be ultimately proven, and they reject the view, thus giving more importance to what happened under King Edgar. King Alfred's role is clearly not to be underestimated, especially taking into consideration his beliefs and the aims of the cultural reforms he promoted during his kingdom. Yet, the first King openly and explicitly in favour of a revival of monasticism was, indeed, King Edgar, as he perceived it as the means *par excellence* to encourage a return to a kind of "golden age".

King Edgar had full support of a significant number of influential churchmen, who came to be known in history as the Benedictine Reformers (Gretsch, 2008: 1), or rather as their first generation. That group was led by Saint Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester from 963 to 984, Saint Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury between 959 and 988, and Saint Oswald, bishop of Worcester (961-992), as well as archbishop of York from 971. They distinguished themselves as the spiritual leaders of the reform, influencing their time and the subsequent ones as well (Blair, 2005: 350).

Dunstan and Oswald had the occasion to reach maturity and a certain degree of awareness of the cultural and religious situation of the time in Æthelstan's cosmopolitan court (924-939) – open to a large degree of different influences and offering a fertile ground for cultural exchange (Zacher, 2011: 82). The cultural environment of England at the time gave Dunstan and Æthelwold the occasion to become acquainted with the intellectual currents of the 930s, thus allowing them to spend much of the next decade developing monastic life at the old Minster in Glastonbury, developing clear ideas on the direction they would later give to the Reform. According to Blair, "Glastonbury was

the first centre from which reformed monasticism would be disseminated in southern England" (2005: 350), and it was just as important as Abingdon, at the time a decayed minster, which King Eadred (whose reign lasted from 946 to 955) gave to Æthelwold, possibly in 953. Oswald was the nephew of Archbishop Oda, who introduced him to the reformed Fleury, where he was ordained and where he spent most of the 950s. At around the same age, during the two-year period between 956 and 958, Dunstan was exiled in Flanders, observing the Benedictine practices of St Peter's Abbey in Ghent, which is known, together with Fleury, as possibly the most important centres of emanation of the Benedictine Rule, a source of inspiration for other countries.

The religious climate spreading in Europe at the time and the ascension to the throne of England of King Edgar in 959 represented a very convenient opportunity for Oswald and Dunstan to act as promoters of the continental reform. With the aid of Æthelwold, a learned man with a vision and a sense of nostalgia of England's own monastic past and who came to be recognised as a true champion of monasticism[5], they managed to set the basis for the upcoming Monastic Reform. Despite deriving from a series of reforms happening roughly at the same time in the Continent, it characterised itself as relatively different from them – such as concerning the little papal influence on the Reform in England (Farmer 1975: 12; Barrow 2014: 359).

As a matter of fact, the English Benedictine Reform of the 960s and the 970s was openly supported and, in a sense, driven by the court (Blair, 2005: 350). The King played a fundamental role as one of its strongest promoters, thus making it more centred around the court than other similar reforms happening in Europe during the same period (Blair, 2000: 55). The fact that it was explicitly welcomed by the court allowed it to take place quite rapidly and efficiently, unlike other countries where reformers had to confront resistance to a considerably greater extent than in England.

Once the King and his court identified the ideal figures to help him establish the Reform, it was time to spread it and, of course, this could not be done using Latin as the vehicular language, given the decline in its use. Therefore, in order to teach the principles of the Rule of Saint Benedict in a language that could be understood more easily by the people (and by the clergy as well) and to promote the quicker and easier

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[5] Various scholars, including Blair (2005: 351), state that Æthelwold was more enthusiastic and determined about the Reform than Dunstan and Oswald, up to the point of only wanting monks in England.

diffusion of the Reform, a translation of the Rule from Latin into Old English was commissioned from King Edgard and his wife Ælfthryth to Æthelwold, widely accepted as the translator of the work (Riyeff, 2017: 12). Here the declaration by King Edgar and his wife, translated into English from Latin starting from the *Liber Eliensis*[6] (Riyeff 2017: 12; taken and adapted from Fairweather, 2005):

> Ædgarus rex et Alftreð dederunt sancto Æðelwoldo manerium, quod dicitur Suðburn, et cyrographum quod pertinebat, quod comes, qui dicebatur Scule, dudum possederat, eo pacto ut ille regulam sancti Benedicti in Anglicum idioma de Latino transferret.

> King Edgar and Ælfthryth gave to the holy Æthelwold the estate called Sudbourne (which once belonged to a certain comes named Scule) and the chirography pertaining to that estate on the condition that he translate the *Regula S. Benedicti* from Latin into English.

There is not universal agree concerning the precise year in which Æthelwold operated the translation, but it appears that it can be traced after King Edgar's marriage (964-965, *terminus post quem*) but before his death, that occurred in 975 (*terminus ante quem*), since the above quote makes explicit mention of King Edgar's wife and it also does not refer to his death (Riyeff, 2017: 12-13). That translation played a leading role, favouring the establishment of high liturgical, pastoral, and spiritual standards.

However, despite the monastic renovatio promoted through the action of the king and the Benedictine Reformers, not everyone received and interpreted it in the same way. King Edgar was particularly concerned with the strict adherence to the principles of the Reform and was afraid of possible dangers deriving from divergent interpretations of the Benedictine Rule in different monasteries in his kingdom. Therefore, to avoid the unfortunate and unwanted possibility, he proceeded to impose uniform rules to be followed by everyone.

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[6] The *Liber Eliensis* is a 12th-century English chronicle and history, written in Latin. For an edition of the text, see Blake (1962).

(Riyeff, 2017), adapted from Foot (2006)

Such rules were established in possibly the most relevant document of the whole English reform, that is the *Regularis Concordia*, written by Æthelwold sometime during the 960s (Barrow, 2008: 11-12) – or, according to Kornexl (2014: 399-400), in 973 – with the collaboration of monks from Ghent and Fleury Abbeys (Lapidge, 1988: 98). The *Regularis Concordia*, whose aim and whose major outcome was the regularisation of the form of church services, was adopted by the Council of Winchester in around 970 (Barrow, 2008: 211-212), or after that year (Kornexl, 2014: 399-400). As a proof of its validity, it became the new "gold standard" followed by many minsters and monasteries shortly afterwards.

Alongside the strong support by King Edgar, whose reign is generally presented "as a golden age which transformed the English Church" (Blair, 2005: 351), the *Regularis Concordia* favoured an increase in the number of the monks, that is one of the most immediate results of the Monastic Reform. As a matter of fact, by 1000 many

bishops embraced monastic life (Blair, 2000: 55). Blair (2005: 350) states that this was made possible by the contribution of monks coming from Glastonbury, Abingdon, and Oswald's Westbury-on-Trym. They took the monastic rules from different European sources, and they adapted them to the English context. By doing so, they managed to colonize a considerable group of old minsters, pushing them to abandon their secular views and to embrace a new standard of life and spirituality.

However, despite the important results achieved, it is necessary to circumscribe and evaluate the impact of the Monastic Reform. It mainly concerned already-existing minsters, as there are only few instances of new foundations during the Reform. That is the case of a restricted, although relevant, group of monasteries which were established in Wiltshire and Hampshire. From a geographic point of view, "the Benedictine Reform was restricted to old Wessex and to the zones in the west and east midlands where Oswald and Æthelwold held property" (Blair, 2005: 351). Moreover, concerning the Benedictine female houses (the so-called cloisters, term that underlines the gathering and the activity of work, reflection and meditation conducted by nuns in isolation), their presence was attested only in the West Saxon heartland (Blair, 2005: 351). In addition to this, a significant number (hundreds) of secular minsters were likely still in place and still had much importance, meaning they survived alongside the reformed communities. As for them, Blair (2005: 351) underlines that, quite possibly, they "never comprised more than 10% of the total". Quite clearly, this is only an esteem, and it is not possible to have any certainties on the matter, but it represents, in any case, an interesting piece of data to understand the scope of the Reform.

The Monastic Reform managed to influence the very structure of the Early English Church, making it appear "more uniform, hierarchical, and centralized than it ever really was" (Blair, 2005: 354). This belief was spread by the reformers' propaganda, which claimed that England had been unified because of the wide acceptance of the Benedictine Rule and made possible also by King Edgar who had played a major role in the unification process (Salvador-Bello, 2008: 262). In a sense it is true, even though such a unity could be somewhat downgraded. Despite that, a certain degree of newly acquired solidity cannot be easily questioned, something which was instrumental in influencing the culture of the following periods.

It is possible to argue that most of the Reform took place during King Edgard's reign, due to his explicit support and to the aid he received from very prominent churchmen. However, it is necessary to consider who – the kings and the reformers – and what came after him, to get a coherent and comprehensive overview of the aftermath of the Reform, as well as of its context in general.

After the death of King Edgar in 975, aristocrats who had lost land and family religious houses to the reformed monasteries – the ones approved by the King – exploited the fact that succession between Edgar's sons was disputed to claim back the properties that had been subtracted to them, giving life to an "anti-monastic reaction". Before dwelling on it, it is essential to consider the aristocrats' attitude during the initial phases of King Edgar's campaign. The financial support by the aristocracy had undoubtedly played a crucial role in promoting the Reform. It was recognised as a key element in the success of the Reform, so much that Wormald (2006: 36) and Pope (1994: 175) state that aristocratic support was more effective than royal or papal sponsorship. However, not all aristocrats sympathised with said Reform. Between the ones who did not view it favourably, in particular Ælfhere of Mercia has to be mentioned. He became the leader of the anti-monastic reaction, fighting against the supporters of the reformed houses who were led by Æthelwine of East Anglia and Byrhtnoth (Abels, 2004: 1; Blair, 2005: 354). The former reaction did not last long but it caused trouble and damage to the reformed monasteries, which went into a long-term decline.

After the death of those champions of the monastic *renovatio* – the first Benedictine Reformers – other two generations of reformers emerged. Cooper (2015: 6-7) identifies the first of the two in the one led by Ælfric and Wulfstan, who tried their absolute best to "honour" the great efforts that Æthelwold, Dunstan and Oswald put into the Reform. Their example was then followed by the third generation of reformers, whose most eminent members were Æthelnoth, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1020 to 1038, the scribe Eadwig Basan and the schoolmaster and colloquist Ælfric Bata (Cooper, 2015: 79).

Those two generations managed to achieve some results, albeit not comparable to the major ones achieved through the efforts of the first Benedictine Reformers operating in the 960s and 970s. However, their example was destined not to be followed

and replicated. As a matter of fact, no spiritual leaders of the church who could compete with Æthelwold, Dunstan and Oswald and with the following generations as well, emerged in the 11th century, and the role of monks in terms of political and religious affairs diminished. The influence of the *Regularis Concordia*, which had played a vital role in spreading and making the principles of the Reform coherent and universal, declined following the deaths of its promoters. Moreover, the 11th century was dominated by a strong tendency to "localism, with few links between monasteries" (Gransden, 1992: 59-60).

Despite the decline of the Reform and although an actual return to a certain kind of golden age was not achieved, the period between the Benedictine Reform and the Norman Conquest in 1066 saw several generous donations of land to monasteries, more than any other period in Early Medieval England. This allowed the leading reformed foundations to acquire considerable wealth, maintaining their importance even after the Conquest (Gransden, 1992: 60-61; Ryan, 2013: 319).

The situation of prosperity and of well-being, ultimately conquered by monasteries founded during the Reform and by the already-existing ones that embraced the Benedictine principles, led to a climate of cultural animation. Its outcomes proved to be extremely relevant, and they defined the context of 11th-century England. Such a fertility had, indeed, very positive consequences, namely the evolution and the "renewal" of the status that Old English had acquired during King Alfred's kingdom. In the 9th century, King Alfred had established and promoted a programme of translating Latin texts into the vernacular, and almost a century later the monastic reformers revived the project of producing texts in English for teaching. Æthelwold's school at Winchester aimed to establish a standard West-Saxon literary language, a programme probably initiated by Æthelwold himself. His most illustrious pupil, Ælfric (c.950 – c.1010), aimed to write in accordance with a consistent grammar and vocabulary, and was instrumental in favouring the standardization of the writing system. From the moment King Alfred started to encourage the use of the local language both in education and in literature, Old English began to be highly esteemed and to become a "cultural" language. This is especially true concerning its vast prosaic production mainly dealing with religious texts and secular law.

This had positive consequences on the production of manuscripts in the scriptoria, whose importance notably increased. As a matter of fact, "a number of the magnificent, illuminated books survive" (Blair, 2000: 55), representing a source of immense worth for scholars. Between the manuscripts that best characterise the Monastic period, though it has no illuminations, the Exeter Book is a precious codex which epitomizes the spirit of such a cultural milieu. Artistic production in general, during and after the Reform, increased, and reached far greater heights than any other time before. Indeed, several scholars, including Blair (2000: 55) and Gneuss (1972: 70), have considered the impact of the Reform, especially under Kind Edgar, on English literature, art, and architecture. Unfortunately, only a minimal part of the artistic achievements of 10th-century England has survived. As a matter of fact, buildings were reconstructed after the Norman Conquest (Blair, 2000: 55), thus leaving to contemporary interpretation the task to imagine how marvellous they were, just like the manuscripts and the illuminated codices which got lost and/or destroyed.

2. The Exeter Book

The Exeter Book is one of the four surviving major Early English literature codices – along with the Vercelli Book, the Nowell Codex and the Cædmon manuscript. It is also known as Codex Exoniensis or Liber Exoniensis and was produced in the context of the English Benedictine Reform. Furthermore, the Exeter Book constitutes a major tool thanks to which it is possible to enlarge the understanding of Early English society of the time. However, since some of the poems therein are certainly older than the Exeter Book itself, by reading them one can also know more about the habits and some linguistic features which prevailed before the abridgment of the manuscript. Hence, the Exeter Book is a key source in the study of the early Middle Ages, especially when it comes to Early Medieval England, and it is still relevant even at the present time. Its importance is such that, in 2016, UNESCO recognised the book as "the foundation volume of English literature, one of the world's principal cultural artefacts" (Flood, 2016: 1).

The history of the codex is fairly obscure, but some key passages can still be identified. The present section will try to establish a chronology and to provide some considerations through the help of several pieces of academic literature on the matter. A physical description of the manuscript will also be provided. Its layout can already give many details concerning its history throughout the centuries, leaving to contemporary scholars the difficult – but still extremely satisfying – task of understanding the codex. The Exeter Book presents a large variety and complexity as to literary genres. It contains a wide array of masterfully-written compositions dealing with different matters and different literary influences.

2.1. Description of the Exeter Book

Thanks to the possibilities offered by modern technology, it is possible to see and to experience the Exeter Book in a whole different and innovative way. Muir & Kennedy (2006) edited and compiled a digital reproduction of the Exeter Book that contains interactive facsimiles, a page viewer, a codicological report, historical and cultural materials, as well as short audio readings of selected poems. Furthermore, the University of Exeter has produced a high-quality digital copy of the codex, allowing its leaves to be viewed in high resolution, thus enabling readers to see in close-up how the parchment was made from different animal skins, and all of its particularities. This tool allows the viewer to "experience" the manuscript, with the possibility of enjoying a magnificent codex made up of accurately-written letters, runes and drypoint images, as well as corrections and editorial additions by its scribe. Thanks to technology, scholars have now the chance of studying the manuscript in detail, paying attention to any single signs and to its codicological features. Prior to this, in order to conduct such an analysis of the codex, one had to physically go to Exeter to see it, though Old English manuscripts had been printed in facsimile.

For the purposes of this part, a "mixed approach" has been followed. On the one hand, I benefitted from academic literature on the manuscript – especially the full description of the codex by Förster (1933a: 55-67) and its study by Krapp & Dobbie

(1936: ix-xxv) and Muir (2000a: 1-41); on the other hand, I studied the manuscript in its digital version[7].

Exeter Cathedral Library, MS. 3501, is a plain codex. It presents itself as fairly well preserved, although it has suffered some damages, such as scorches, stains, burns and damps. Furthermore, it also got deprived of a number of folios. The marks left by the passing of time are evident, just like the ones due to inappropriate use of the manuscript, including acting as a press for gold and silver leaves, a cutting board and a glue stand[8]. It is made of 131 parchment leaves, with folios from 8 to 130 constituting the bulk of the book, which is an utmost example of a poetic anthology. These folios are the original ones, meaning that they were already present in the codex that bishop Leofric donated to the Cathedral of Exeter (Conner, 2001: 302-303).

A number of studies, including Pope's (1978: 64-65), have managed to prove and conclude that the manuscript as it stands is not complete. As a matter of fact, the poem *Christ I*, at the very beginning of the Exeter Book, lacks its first part, thus leading to the conclusion that at least a folio got lost or destroyed. As for the leaves prior to folio 8, that is from the front flyleaf to folio 7, they are thought to constitute a 11th or 12th century addition. This might be proved by the fact that their nature and the issues they deal with are unrelated with the poetic content of the rest of the book (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: x). Furthermore, on folio vi_r, it is possible to read an inscription that is accepted to be the product of someone writing in the 16th or 17th century: *Liber Decani et Capituli EXONIENSIS* ('Book of the Dean and Chapters of Exeter') and *3501*, that is the library classification number[9], something not present in the original version of the book (Cocco, 2019: 19). As for folios between 1 and 7, they consist of legal documents and other records dealing with different matters, in Latin or in vernacular. They are believed to have been written and added in the 11th and 12th century, thus characterising them as posthumous additions (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: x).

Over the course of the centuries, The Exeter Book appears to have remained quite the same, in spite of the aforementioned alterations and damages it experienced. In

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[7] See *Manuscript Viewer*, © 2021 Exeter Cathedral Library and Archives & University of Exeter Digital Humanities Lab. Available at https://theexeterbook.exeter.ac.uk/viewer.html (Accessed: 2 April 2022).
[8] See *About the Exeter Book*, © 2021 Exeter Cathedral Library and Archives & University of Exeter Digital Humanities Lab. Available at https://theexeterbook.exeter.ac.uk/ (Accessed: 2 April 2022).
[9] See *Manuscript Viewer*, © 2021 Exeter Cathedral Library and Archives & University of Exeter Digital Humanities Lab. Available at https://theexeterbook.exeter.ac.uk/viewer.html (Accessed: 2 April 2022).

addition to those, an 18th century binding which was added to it, in the very first years of the century (Wanley, 1705: 80). The codex went through a major structural modification in the 1930s, namely its rebounding by the British Museum in the 1930s. This happened after the first facsimile edition of the Exeter Book was published in 1933[10], as, for its purposes, the original bound was removed making it necessary to have a new and more solid cover, able to stand the test of time (Förster, 1933a: 55).

The Liber Exoniensis is made up of 17 gatherings of varying length – with each one comprising a number between 5 and 8 of folios – suggesting that one or more folios have been lost (Muir, 2000a: 11-12). The gatherings have been assembled without any internal partition whatsoever. Each folio has a size of about 12.5 x 8.6 inches and from 21 to 23 lines of text, and such lines present a spacing of about 0.5 inches apart. The poems in the Exeter book have no titles, thus making a clear identification of the compositions not easy. To complicate things even more, the first few words of the work are not always treated by the scribe in a special way to indicate a new text. However, there are a few clues which can help in identifying the texts. They include having a plain initial to indicate a beginning and, in most cases, a separation of few lines between the compositions. Moreover, some of the poems are divided into sections (Cavill, 1985: 156-159), generally characterised by a large initial capital. It can also happen that the whole first line is written in small capitals (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: xvi-xix; Muir, 2000a: 16-25).

2.2. History of the Exeter Book

The Exeter Book is not simple to locate in time, place and history. What is sure is that it is often recognised to be one of the great works of the English Benedictine revival of the mid-10th century. The exact date of its compilation is unknown, although different hypotheses – some of which will be briefly dealt with – have been made. As a matter of fact, over the course of the years a not-exactly-negligible number of scholars have tried, with different degrees of success and of

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[10] See Chambers, Förster & Flower (1933).

approximation, to trace the history of the manuscript, or rather some key events, including both the *terminus ante quem* and the *terminus post quem*.

A key year when it comes to the later history of the Exeter Book is 1705, as it allows us to have some certainties about it. In that year, Wanley printed the inventory known with the name of *Enumeratio terrarum, ornamentorum, vestimentorum, atque librorum quos sexcentis abhinc annis, Ecclesi Exoniensi contulit Leofricus Episcopus* (1705: 80), that is 'List of the lands, the decorations, the clothes, and the books which Bishop Leofric donated to the Church of Exeter six hundred years ago'. Such a document had the aim of listing the donations by Leofric, bishop of Devon and Cornwall, to the Cathedral of Exeter before his death in 1072. The document holds a capital importance because it testifies the donation of a codex that seems to meet the criteria of appearance and, especially, of content of the Exeter Book. This provides us with an extremely valuable absolute *terminus ante quem*, which is 1072. As a matter of fact, the donation, reported in Förster (1933b: 18-30) among a series of others, makes explicit reference to *amycel Englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leoð-wisan geworht*, which could be roughly translated as 'a large English book of poetry dealing with different matters'. That description is commonly accepted to perfectly match the defining features of the Exeter Book, as suggested by a number of scholars (Shippey, 2017: 299-302). After Leofric's donation to the Cathedral, tracing the history of the manuscripts becomes much easier, since it has been kept in Exeter ever since that year.

With regard to the *terminus post quem,* the issue gets considerably more complicated. As a matter of fact, establishing the precise year or at least the period in which the Exeter Book was written and compiled represents an almost unattainable aim. Unfortunately, nowadays, we do not possess any document that can help us in the reconstruction of the early history of the codex. A number of hypotheses have been made over the course of the years; it seems that the period in which the Exeter Book was most likely produced ranges between the second half of the 10th century, as suggested by a number of paleographic analyses, and the 11th century, as hinted by the codicological studies conducted in the 19th century, with probably the most well-known one being Schipper (1874: 327). Other codicological analyses have been made since then and they have reached similar conclusions; one of the most recent was conducted by Rambaran-Olm (2014: 11-30).

What is sure is that the codex seems, with some degree of certainty, to be a product of the cultural revival promoted by the Monastic Reform during Kind Edgar's reign (959-975), thus establishing a fairly precise *terminus post quem* roughly in 960. Several scholars have advanced different hypotheses, starting from the very early 20th century. Keller (1906: 40; 1911-1913: 102) was one of the first to argue that the Exeter Book was written between 960 and 980, and most likely prior to 975, when Kind Edgar died, thus giving importance to what happened under his rule at that time. Conner (1993: 76-77) argues that the Exeter Book has probably been abridged between 950 and 970, and most likely before 975 (Conner, 2001: 301), which represents a *terminus ante quem* stressing the importance of the monastic *renovatio*. Gameson (1996: 179) locates the period of production in the decade between 960 and 970, making a consideration similar to Conner's (2001: 301). Other two interesting contributions were provided by Muir (2000a: 1) and by Flower (1933: 89), who advanced, respectively, 965-975 and 970-990.

Other scholars have expressed further insights on the matter over the course of the years, but the period they have suggested tends to remain the same. To conclude the discussion on the dating of the manuscript, the period in which the Exeter Book was plausibly produced ranges between 950 and 990, thus considerably backdating the *terminus ante quem* of 1072, which can be inferred from Leofric's death. Such a backdating could be due to the fact that, given the widespread consideration of the Exeter Book as the quintessential product of the monastic *renovatio* promoted by the Reform, it is quite unlikely that it belongs to a period after 998. Indeed, in that year Saint Dunstan – member of the first generation of the Benedictine Reformers alongside Saint Æthelwold (✝ 984) and Saint Oswald (✝ 992) – died, and with him the Monastic Reform (Lapidge, 2004: 1). Moreover, England became, once again, the target of several Scandinavian incursions (Richards, 1991: 24), something which reduces the probabilities of the Exeter Book having been crafted after the 10th century.

The anonymous nature of Old English poetry further complicates the attempt at reconstructing the exact period of writing of the manuscript. A similar assumption cannot be made as to the scribe(s) of the Exeter Book – though paleographic analyses seem to confirm the hand of one scribe only. Moreover, the codex is incomplete, and it shows some signs of damage. However, the Exeter Book still holds an incalculable

value as one of the oldest, largest and best-preserved books of English literature in the world.

2.3. Genre variety in the Exeter Book

Concerning the literary genres that characterise the Exeter Book, aside from its first eight leaves which were added to the codex after it was written, the manuscript is a poetic anthology. Unlike the Cædmon manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Junius 11), which is dedicated solely to biblically inspired items, the Exeter Book is noted for the unmatched diversity of genres among its contents. Within such variety of texts, the present dissertation, especially Chapters 2 and 3 ("Wisdom and its Different Manifestations" and "Digging Deeper: at the Core of Wisdom"), will focus on three specific poems, which have been called *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* by Krapp & Dobbie (1936: vii), or through variations of these names since they are only conventional (Isaacs, 1975: 363; Swenson, 1991: 123; Muir, 2000a: vii; Bjork, 2014: v)[11]. Such poems have been generally thought to belong to the poetic genre known as wisdom poetry.

The following chapter will be devoted to a study of the most notable and relevant features of wisdom poetry and to a scrutiny of the three aforementioned poems. More specifically, a comment will be offered, alongside some critical considerations with regard to the genre(s) they could be ascribed to. Particular attention will be also paid to the items composing said poems, thus opening a path to Chapter 3 ("Digging Deeper: at the Core of Wisdom"), whose main focus will be a linguistic investigation of the themes and of the vocabulary.

However, before moving on to the second chapter, it is necessary to examine, from a macroscopic perspective, the variety of the compositions making up the Exeter Book, and to take into account the different literary genres which critics pointed out in the manuscript. This is certainly useful as it can guide us, providing some solid tools and reference points that are essential for the reading, the analysis and for an overall appreciation of the book.

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[11] See Chapter 2, 1.2. (*The Gifts of Men*) and 1.3. (*The Fortunes of Men*) to read alternative titles of the same compositions, pp. 77 and 87.

A relevant number of poems in the Exeter Book are clearly the result of Christian, monastic culture, as hagiographic or Christological materials are present therein. Yet, one also finds more secular or lay material, better represented by gnomic or wisdom literature. The Exeter Book is also characterised by the presence of 95 riddles (Krapp & Dobbie: 1936: lxv)[12]. Such texts stand as clear evidence of the conflation of two different traditions; in fact, their themes and solutions can concern both earthly and religious, spiritual matters. A tentative division of genres has been carried out by several scholars and critics, such as Battles (2014: 1-3) and Bjork (2014: viii), and it includes gnomic poetry, elegies and wisdom poetry. Due to the levels of difficulty discussed so far, it is also hard to define with complete certainty the genre some poems may belong to. In fact, there is still debate among scholars as to the genre of some poems.

As Szarmach (1993: 44) argues, "any attempt to purse genre criticism in Old English poetry is really an invitation to climb a slippery slope". Moreover, even though the beginning of the genre division derives from Aristotle (Fishelov, 1999: 51), contemporary view is more influenced by the modern genre theory, which dates back to the European Romantic movement, when the concept of genre itself began to be questioned because it was deemed as inefficient in describing literature, as well as inherently "problematic and unstable" (Duff, 2000: 1). Giving labels is something which helps any kind of reader to have some preliminary certainties, but, at the same time, it can be quite pointless, as it is too limiting towards literary productions. Besides, one also ought to consider that "genre theory has generated little interest in Anglo-Saxon studies. The tradition of assessing vernacular literatures in terms of classical genres has served the OE corpus poorly" (Frantzen, 2012: 118).

With regard to the riddles, some of them are a fragmentary collection of lines in Old English. They are generally considered to be more than ninety, even though scholars have long debated concerning their exact number of riddles inside the codex. Krapp & Dobbie (1936), Baum (1963) and Williamson (1977) have all proposed a different numbering. At times, this is caused by a specific difficulty in clearly understanding the end of a poem – and its alleged genre. Hence the plurality of interpretations spoken of.

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[12] It must be noted that the numbering varies depending on the different authors that analysed such riddles.

As for their form, riddles often end with the formula "Saga hwæt ic hatte"[13], for example in *Riddle 3* (Krapp & Dobbie: 1936: 183), roughly meaning 'say what I am called'. They are usually particularly engaging and challenging enough for whoever approaches them, up to the point that at times, for some of them, there is no universal agree on their solutions (Murphy, 2011: 7). With regard to their context and the topics they deal with, they can concern earthly matters but, for the most part, they have religious themes (and answers). Such earthly and spiritual categories can even intertwine; hence, something "low" can symbolise and stand for a higher referent (Black et al, 2015a: 55).

The riddles in the Exeter Book constitute the majority of Old English riddles; they have been edited twice as a separate collection by Tupper (1910) and Williamson (1977). Furthermore, a large deal of critical studies on them have been produced and published over the course of the years. Tupper (1910: esp. xxxvii-xliii), Krapp & Dobbie (1936: lxv-lxvii) Bitterli (2009: esp. 13-34) and Orchard (2021: esp. 'Introduction') have focused particularly on the interdependence between the Latin riddles and those in Old English. The Old Norse tradition is also strictly linked to verse riddles[14], with *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* ('The Saga of Hervǫr and Heidrek')[15] being one of the chief texts in which they appear.

Early English riddles are so highly-valued that several writers have turned to them to different extents and with varying degrees of success. Among them, J.R.R. Tolkien, whose "Exeter-Book-inspired riddles" told by Bilbo Baggins and Gollum animate the fifth chapter ('Riddles in the Dark') of *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 2011), clearly displaying Tolkien's considerable appreciation of the Old English poetic corpus.

As for gnomic poetry, it is often interpreted in conjunction with proverbial poetry, given the absence of a clear separation between them; for Bjork, they convey "pithy sayings or observations about fundamental truths" (2014: xi). Much like the so-called Metrical charms suggest how to deal with ordinary issues and problems such as illnesses and diseases. They are a source of reliable wisdom whence one can take inspiration from to live a good life, as well as a blessed one in compliance with God's

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[13] Variations of the injunction are also attested, such as "Saga hwa mec þecce, oþþe hu ic hatte" (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 180), meaning 'Say what covers me or how I am called'.
[14] See Mitchell (2020).
[15] See Tolkien (1960).

will (Bjork, 2014: xi). What really contributes to set Metrical charms apart from Gnomic poetry is that the latter generally displays higher poetic forms. From this perspective, due to their relative simplicity, metrical charms are a "fine starting place for beginning to appreciate the other poetry, the other sounds and songs and rhythmic and spiritual ruminations, of the Anglo-Saxons" (Bjork, 2014: ix).

Gnomic poetry conveys "practical wisdom" of the world and how to live in it. They are based on the principles of common sense, morality and religion. Moreover, they reflect the values of the culture that produced them; hence, they give us precious notions on different people, contexts, uses and customs. Gnomic poetry is "the repository of the wisdom of the tribe as it relates to the natural world, the preoccupations of the social world, and the verities and lasting realities of the Christian world" (Bjork, 2014: xi).

Gnomic poetry holds its name because the sayings which are expressed in it take the name of gnomes, a term signifying "a short pithy statement of a general truth; a proverb, maxim, aphorism, or apophthegm. Also spec. with reference to Old English verse" (OED Online). The word gnome derives from the Ancient Greek γνώμη meaning 'thought, judgment, opinion, maxim' (Grote, 1846-1856: 363), thus suggesting ancient origins. In particular, a gnome is an aphorism or a maxim designed to provide instruction in a compact form (usually in the form of hexameter), and it represents a rhetorical device coming from the New Testament of the Bible (Berger, 1984: 1). This implies the universal validity – as well as the possibility of being adopted in any kind of situation – of the gnomes, the source of wisdom *par excellence*.

Most of the Old English gnomic lines are found in *Maxims I* and *Maxims II*. Such poems are respectively transcribed in the Exeter Book and in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.i. They convey similar themes, leading to the possible assumption that they were conceived as a whole and produced in the same (monastic) context, even though there is no way yet to verify these hypotheses.

The functions and the aims of gnomic poetry are not always clear and there is not universal agreement among critics. Some speculations have been made over the course of the years; Williams (1914: 113) argues that gnomic poetry was conceived with an educational context in mind. In this sense, gnomic poetry was used to teach spiritual and earthly but also the most employed poetic forms. Many critics agree on the

didactic function of gnomic poems, but there are several scholars, for example Cavill (1999: 106-117), who states that the use of gnomes was not only confined to school and that they had a social function as well. As a matter of fact, the teachings inherently present in the gnomes could hold a universal validity, thus making them useful in a variety of different situations and contexts.

One of the most attested features of gnomic poetry is its strong tendency to resort to the so-called catalogues, although this does not always apply. It is particularly evident especially in *Maxims I* and *Maxims II* as well in some other Old English poems belonging to different genres, including *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* (Howe, 1985: 13 and 104-165). A catalogue can be defined as a literary device used in poetry and prose to give a list of things and create a rhetorical effect – thus creating a list of multiple thoughts in a unified form. A list is deliberately inserted to make the audience enjoy the conventional style of poetry[16].

Elegies are the most represented literary genre in the Exeter Book to have been analysed in academic literature on Old English poetry. Defining the term *elegy* is not a simple task due to various cultural issues. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary states, "In Greek and Latin poetry: a poem written in elegiac metre" and, with regard to *elegiac* "Esp. of Greek and Latin poetry: written in a metre consisting of a hexameter followed by a pentameter" and, as for the Victorian age, "A song or poem of lamentation, esp. for the dead; a memorial poem" (OED Online). As to the elegies in the Exeter Book, this term can be widened to include "any serious meditative poem" (Black et al, 2015b: 39). The Old English elegies are not grouped together in the Exeter Book; yet, they tend to share certain themes, issues and concerns. Many of them often stress "the passage of time and the transience of earthly things, the pain of exile and separation, the ache of absence and longing – as well as certain images and scenes such as ruined and abandoned buildings, desolate landscapes, storms at sea, darkness, and the chill of winter" (Black et al, 2015b: 39). Elegies generally have the tendency to convey a strong sense of nostalgia and to make implicit use of the *ubi sunt* ('where are they?') theme, which expresses a meditation on mortality and life's transience as well as a mourning over a loss (Bjork, 2014: xvii). It is possible to argue that a certain "elegiac" feeling is inherently present in the totality of Old English poetry (Harris, 1983: 46-47).

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[16] See *Catalog*. Available at: https://literarydevices.net/catalog/ (Accessed: 3 March 2022).

This is especially true in the case of the Exeter Book and in its poems influenced the most by the Holy Writ and by the principles of Christianity itself. Just like the riddles, the elegies in the Exeter Book have left a considerable mark on literary history and culture.

Among the wisdom writings in the Exeter Book there stand out *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*. The following chapter will consider their content, as well as their analogies and differences. Prior to this, O'Camb's views of monastic poetics in the Exeter Book (O'Camb: 2009) will be treated in the last part of Chapter 1, in order to offer a literary and cultural background to the analysis of the poems.

3. Monastic Poetics

'Monastic poetics' is a phrase coined by Marinus B. Pranger (2003: especially 1-14), who referred to it also as 'poetics of monasticism'. His interpretation of the concept argues that monasticism "has both incorporated and transformed the liberal arts into a reading culture, the poetical nature of which has been hitherto insufficiently appreciated" (Pranger, 2003: 1). Monastic poetics can be viewed as a means, as a poetical tool – derived from monasticism – "that can be used to decipher the literary structure of religious texts" (Pranger, 2003: 2).

Pranger (2003: 2) centred his analysis on monastic reading, "focused on leisure and immobility and characterized by a perfect blend of rationality and affection" (Pranger, 2003: 2). Quite clearly, it is not confined solely to the reading and the critique of texts produced in a monastic context. It could potentially be used in relation to plenty of texts influenced, at some degree, by the monastic culture but produced in a lay environment. For Pranger (2003), monastic poetics highlights the role of the reader, who "does not himself dwell outside the text. He is at its very core, not as an implied reader, but as its very soul. This is what the ultimate structure of monastic poetics is about" (Pranger, 2003: 8). Monastic poetics stresses the importance of active interpretation on the part of the reader, as an effective and practical way of questioning specific issues, of expressing faith and, ultimately, of growing.

Such expression has also been employed by Brian O'Camb in his PhD dissertation (O'Camb, 2009: especially 221-243). He intended it a means to analyse and circumscribe a great deal of literature produced in the milieu of Early English society. The two authors assigned similar values to the same expression, yet O'Camb employed it with a higher degree of specificity. In further studies, O'Camb expanded on his view on monastic poetics (O'Camb, 2014: 409-433; O'Camb, 2016: 171-202). The present work follows O'Camb interpretation.

O'Camb made use of it to deal specifically with *Maxims I* in the Exeter Book, describing it "a single example of monastic poetics" (O'Camb, 2009: 4)[17]. Such a definition does not apply solely to *Maxims I*, but rather to all Old English wisdom poetry, given its likely "contamination" with Christianity within the scriptoria. O'Camb (2009: 4-5) writes:

> With this phrase, I do not wish to suggest that *Exeter Maxims* and other poems of the Exeter Book were solely composed for or produced by members of the professional ecclesiastical group known to the Anglo-Saxons as *munucas* 'monks.' Rather, I use "monastic poetics" to refer to how Anglo-Saxon poets, such as the ones whose works are included in the Exeter Book, borrowed, adapted, and applied ecclesiastical discourses and monastic rhetorical modes when crafting Old English poems.

In a later essay, O'Camb further defined monastic poetics "an innovative mode of poetry that adapted monastic rhetorical models to cultivate contemplative, visionary experiences in its readers" (O'Camb, 2014: 411). Hence, monastic poetics may be understood not exactly like a genre. It is rather a poetic mode of combining different models through a "common monastic denominator". It aims to achieve certain effects on the readers and on their minds, by transmitting them sensations, and teachings. In other words, monastic poetics is a way of passing monastic-related knowledge to people, in compliance with the spirit of the campaigns promoted earlier by King Alfred and, in King Edward's reign, within the context of the English Benedictine Reform.

Early English monks living in the late tenth century had a number of social values in common with aristocratic laypeople; it is possible that they also shared similar interests with respect to vernacular literature. Arguably, they had access to similar sources, both in Latin and in Old English. Monks and learned lay people referred to a

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[17] In O'Camb PhD's dissertation, the phrase 'monastic poetics' is between double quotations marks.

"common repertoire", which possibly resulted in the creation of shared standards in terms of books to take inspiration from, of issues to deal with, as well as of style. This led to a series of images and commonplaces that can be found in several compositions, thus making it possible to draw some interesting parallels and advance some critical considerations.
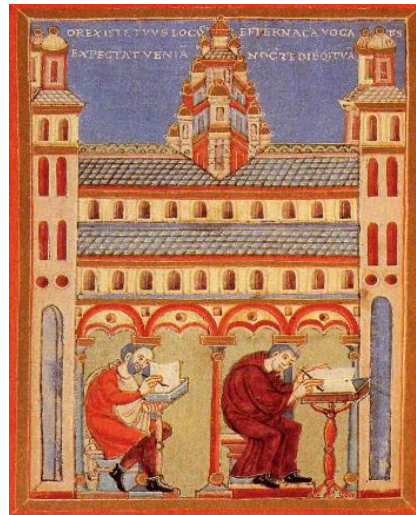
Lay person and monk jointly making books in an Echternach Abbey (Bremen, Universitätsbibliothek, MS. 217, 11ᵗʰ century)

This image is taken from a richly-decorated Gospel Book made in Echternach (Luxemburg) in the 11ᵗʰ century. It was conceived as a precious gift for Holy Roman Emperor Henry II. It portrays a peculiar blend of both the spiritual and lay worlds, suggesting that the two "contaminated" and intertwined with each other. On the right side, a monk is copying a text – an activity that requires the ability to read and to interpret. On the other hand, on the left, a layman is in charge of producing the decoration – an activity requiring many skills in drawing and illustrating. The image holds a particular value because it shows two people working together, combining their skills – the "gifts" given to them by God[18] – to achieve the best possible result. The image well portrays the idea that both churchmen and laypeople had access to similar sources and to a common repertoire.

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[18] This is an expression that constitutes one of the recurring themes in many poems of the Exeter Book, in particular in *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*. See especially 2.1.2 and 2.1.3.

The existence of an intellectual background founded on monastic culture is strictly related to a number of theological issues which are part and parcel of Old English literature – especially poetry, with regard to the area of interest of this study. Thus, to fully grasp the quintessence of the literary production of the late Early English period and, in particular, of the Exeter Book, scholars need to consider first the religious decay that England was living in 9th and 10th centuries, the Alfredian cultural programme and the *renovatio* of learning promoted by the unbreakable bond of the Crown and Monasticism, which resulted in the groundbreaking English Benedictine Reform. Yet, one ought to distinguish between the ideals and the actual realities of monastic life. In particular, it is necessary to define their main features and to understand the impact that they had on Early English history, culture, and its literary outcome.

Only few studies concerning the role of the Benedictine culture on the formation and development of a wide share of Germanic literatures have been made, as pointed out by Pàroli (1982: 701):

> Se è comunemente riconosciuto all'ambiente monastico il merito di aver conservato e trasmesso testi fondamentali per la cultura classica, non meno rilevante appare, a mio avviso, il ruolo svolto dai Benedettini nell'alto medioevo nei confronti di una letteratura scritta in idiomi volgari.

The social context and the environment of cultural *renovatio* produced by monasticism is not to be underestimated. The cultural action promoted by monks following the Rule of Saint Benedict began towards the end of the 6th century. Monks went to Britain with the aim of "christianizing" it. It had been occupied by Angles, Saxons and Jutes after the departure of the Romans (Campbell, John & Wormald, 1991: 20 and 240) – who brought their own traditions, customs and religious beliefs – and such monks sought to fix the "religious decay" that was present. The first group of monks sent by Pope Gregory the Great arrived in Britain in 596 (Pàroli, 1982: 701) and, as expected, they found many difficulties in dealing with the local population. In his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (I.xxiii), Bede the Venerable writes:

> Qui cum iussis pontificalibus obtemperantes, memoratum opus adgredi coepissent, iamque aliquantulum itineris confecissent, perculsi timore inerti, redire domum potius, quam barbaram, feram, incredulamque gentem, cuius ne

linguam quidem nossent, adire cogitabant, et hoc esse tutius communi consilio decernebant.

Which obeying the bishop's commandment, when they began to take the said enterprise in hand and had already travelled some small part of the way, being stricken with sluggish cowardice bethought themselves it should be better for them to return home again than to go unto that barbarous, savage and unbelieving nation whose language even they knew not, and this by common consent they determined to do, as being the more sure way. (King, 1930: 103)

This means that the processes of transmission and of integration were not easy at the beginning, and, indeed, some centuries were necessary in order to achieve an integration and to arrive to the English Benedictine Reform. However, it is undoubtable that monasticism exerted a strong influence on the birth and on the development of local literature:

L'esperienza Cristiana muta, quindi, nella cultura anglosassone i rapporti fra i parametri temporali e dilata la dimensione dello spazio, secondo un processo che si riflette nella produzione poetica. L'inevitabile e anzi opportuna gradualità nella conversione permette però la conservazione di alcuni caratteri etnici Pàroli (1986: 407).

A profound change in the features of local literature was achieved. It got considerably more complex and capable of dealing with more themes, due to the contact with the monastic culture. Yet, at the same time, it maintained its peculiarities. Such process was not easy. As a matter of fact, many linguistic difficulties arose, and this led to several communication issues. Different linguistic realities favoured multilinguism: on the one hand there was the Latin language of the missionary monks and, on the other, the Old English dialects of local people. Pàroli (1982: 704):

L'esigenza dell'azione missionaria condusse quindi a un bilinguismo tra latino e inglese antico […] quando, con la istituzione di centri conventuali e la formazione di monaci locali, l'inglese costituì la lingua di partenza e il latino quella di cultura […], il cui apprendimento risultava indispensabile per la conoscenza dei testi fondamentali della nuova religione, per l'uso liturgico, per il mantenimento di rapporti con gli altri centri monastici e con la Chiesa romana.

Although it would be perhaps more appropriate to identify the linguistic situation present at the time as one of diglossia[19], this is all the same indicative of a cultural ferment that led the two languages to come into contact with each other, resulting in a process of mutual conditioning. This would explain many parallels existing between the two dimensions.

It was necessary for local monks to know both Old English and Latin (Farmer, 1963: 87-103). As a matter of fact, Old English, which at the beginning served to communicate with continental monks, kept being useful in order to talk to common people. Latin was the language of culture, and it was necessary to access higher forms of knowledge, like the ones to be found in the Holy Writ. Knowledge of Latin was held in high consideration, and many key figures in the spread of the language and the culture insisted on the necessity for Christian believers to know some key-prayers such as the *Pater Noster* ('Our Father') and the *Apostles' Creed* by heart (Pàroli, 1982: 705). Christian people had, at least, to be able to understand, read and know such prayers in their own language (Grocock & Wood, 2013: 123-161). This testifies the importance of the monastic culture, which, however, began to fade away over the course of the 8th and 9th centuries, as reported by the Venerable Bede and then by King Alfred (Pàroli, 1982: 705-706; Fulk, 2021: 4-11).

With regard to this, the English Benedictine Reform has aimed at revitalising and renewing the monastic component of the clergy. King Edgar and the Benedictine Reformers played a major role in its outbreak and subsequent development and promotion. They were highly instrumental in favouring a return to a kind of golden age, something that also King Alfred intended. The latter sovereign went down to history as the sovereign who had a personal and strong involvement in the promotion of culture and, in general, of his subjects' quality of life. In a sense, the mission of King Edgar and of the Benedictine Reformers – whose most distinguished champion was Saint Æthelwold – was a serious attempt to keep the beliefs and the cultural campaign started by King Alfred alive.

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[19] Diglossia is a situation in which two dialects or languages are used by a single language community. In addition to the community's vernacular language variety, a second language is used in certain situations such as literature, formal education, or other specific settings, but not used normally for ordinary conversation (Ferguson, 1959: 325-326).

The knowledge of Latin was scarce or, at best, average in the Early English society of 9th and 10th centuries. This linguistic decline was not only confined to common people, but, in some cases, also to the clergy, who was also becoming more and more secular rather than spiritual and contemplative. King Alfred's words in his preface to Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* are highly indicative in this sense (Fulk, 2021: 6-7): […] *ond ða swiðe lytle fiorme ðara boca wiston, forðæm ðe hie hiora nān wuht ongiotan ne meahton for ðæm ðe hie næron on hiora agen geðiode awritene* ('[…] and they derived very little profit from those books, because they could comprehend nothing of them, since they were not written in their own tongue').

In order to face such decay and to promote a return a "golden age", it was necessary to act quickly and efficiently. One of the most effective strategies that were adopted consisted in the massive translation campaign first led by King Alfred. He focused his efforts on the spread of the vernacular language, which he viewed as the best way to save monastic culture from an otherwise inevitable decay (Knowles, 1963: 33; Knowles & Hadcock, 1971: 10-11). King Alfred's will was then kept alive and further promoted by its successors. Among them, King Edgar and Saint Æthelwold lived during the period of the Monastic Reform, and, indeed, they were its strongest supporters. Many translations were produced during that period, alongside numerous manuscripts and other artistic milestones, as a consequence of the climate of cultural *renovatio* achieved thanks to the Reform. Towards the end of 10th century, a number of grammatical works came out, including a *Grammar*[20] by Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955 – c. 1010) – an English abbot and a disciple of Saint Æthelwold. Ælfric was a prolific homilist, translator, and was fond of metrical hagiographies. Some scholars speak of him as "a man comparable both in the quantity of his writings and in the quality of his mind even with Bede himself" (Blair, 2003: 257) and as "the highest pinnacle of Benedictine reform and Anglo-Saxon literature" (Leonardi, 1999: 191). He was a man with a profound knowledge of multiple matters and with an educational aim in mind. He wrote his *Grammar* to teach Latin, but he decided to employ the Old English language so that it could be understood more easily by local people. The *Grammar* is the earliest surviving textbook written in Old English. Its structure derives from an existing Latin compilation, but it includes numerous innovations, hence signaling its utmost

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[20] See Throop (2008).

importance. This work, together with Ælfric's *Glossary* and *Colloquy*[21], was evidently intended to increase Latin learning and literacy.

The translations and manuscripts – both in Latin and especially in Old English – that were put out during the monastic revival came to influence the perception and the sensitivity of Early English society. In particular, it is interesting to consider how poets developed some views on certain matters after having been inspired by several sources they managed to have access thanks to the Monastic Reform. With regard to the Exeter Book, O'Camb (2009: 221-223) has pointed out some lines of likely influence between the poetry attested in such book and a number of texts and manuscripts produced roughly at the same time. More specifically, a corpus of five main texts can be identified and considered:

1. Æthelwold's Old English translation of the Rule of Saint Benedict. There is debate over the year or the period in which Æthelwold composed such translation, but it can be situated between 964-965 and 975 (Riyeff, 2017: 12-13). Æthelwold's Old English Rule influenced the lexical content of *Christ in Judgment* (verses 555b-57a) and *Maxims I* (lines 45-50);

2. Æthelwold's *Edgar's Establishment of Monasteries*. This item, preserved in a unique 12th-century copy in London, BL, MS Cotton Faustina A.x, was composed by Æthelwold between 970 and 984 (Ker, 1990: 194-196). It probably served as a prologue to his translation of the Rule of Saint Benedict, and, of course, it was added after the composition of such translation. Æthelwold's text seems to have influenced the lexical content of *Maxims I*, in particular lines 50-55, to some degree;

3. London, British Library, MS. Additional 49598, also known as *The Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold*. This Winchester manuscript was produced between 971 and 984 (Brown, 1991: 71) by a monk named

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[21] See Garmonsway (1991).

Godeman, supervised by Bishop Æthelwold[22]. One of the miniatures in such text is likely to have had some influence on the poetic description of Christ's crib in *Christ in Judgment* (verses 55-59), as well as on *Maxims I* (lines 48-49);

4. London, British Library, MS. Cotton Vespasian A.viii, known with the name of *Edgar's Privilege to New Minster*. This Winchester manuscript, dated 966 (Brown, 1991: 17), may have influenced the poems *Advent Lyric XI* and *Vainglory*, in particular verses 52-74. Some traces of it may be found also in *Widsith* (lines 11-13) and *Maxims I* (lines 59-62);

5. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Rawlinson C. 697. This manuscript – produced in the 9th century (Wieland, 1987: 215) – circulated widely throughout England's reformed monastic centers during the 10th century, constituting a possible model for the Reform. The manuscript possibly exerted some influence on the lexical and thematic content of *Maxims I* (lines 195-204).

O'Camb's (2009: 221-223) analysis is thorough and text-based, and it manages to highlight several interesting elements and parallels between those manuscripts and some poems of the Exeter Book. The importance of such texts is pivotal because it favoured the diffusion and the subsequent knowledge of the same principles that Saint Benedict inserted in his Rule. The Rule of Saint Benedict had an enormous influence on Early English society, and it constituted one of its most eminent models, especially through its translation in Old English by Saint Æthelwold. Such translation played a prominent role in allowing monks in particular to have access to the literary culture of Benedictine monks. The Rule of Saint Benedict seems to suggest that his fellow monks were extremely learned in Latin and in its culture. Lentini (1982: 699) writes:

> Benedetto dunque, saggio e coerente, deve supporre che almeno in massima
> parte la sua comunità possiede una ben forte conoscenza della lingua letteraria

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[22] The name of the monk is known because he is explicitly mentioned in a Latin inscription at folios 4r and 5v of the *Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold*. For a facsimile edition, see Prescott (2002).

[…] Dobbiamo allora supporre nel monastero un apprendimento della lingua molto continuato e profondo. […] i monaci fanciulli vi si saranno addestrati fin dalla tenera età […] essi saranno stati sotto la guida di esperti per imparare così bene la grammatica […] Lo stesso dovrà pensarsi per i candidati venuti in monastero da grandicelli o anche da adulti, benché per questi le difficoltà saranno state più gravi.

Most of the sources examined by O'Camb (2009: 221-223) revolve around the name of Saint Æthelwold, or at least, they appear to show a certain connection with his figure. It appears several times when considering texts likely to have influenced the contents of different codices produced in the context of the Monastic Reform. This is hardly surprising, since he was one of the most important Early English clerics. He was a writer, teacher, politician, and clergyman, and, as one of the Benedictine Reformers, he contributed to the shaping of Early English society from a religious, cultural, social and literary point of view. Æthelwold's importance in this context was so great that it would be "tempting to conclude on the basis of the first four works listed above that Æthelwold had a direct hand in the Exeter Book's production, [however] there is no direct evidence to support such a conclusion" (O'Camb, 2009: 224). All things considered, this claim would be excessively bold, and, indeed, it would be safer to say "that the scribe and/or poet(s) of the Exeter Book drew from Æthelwoldian texts and resources available to them" (O'Camb, 2009: 224). "Æthelwoldian" may be the most cautious, yet at the same time particularly appropriate, term to describe the intellectual milieu in which Liber Exoniensis has been crafted.

The texts considered by O'Camb (2009: 221-223) are also particularly relevant because they allow us to have a better understanding of the time, the place and context in which the Exeter Book was likely drafted. O'Camb (2009: 224-229) has taken them into account from a linguistic point of view, but also focusing his attention on the years or the periods in which they have been written. Given the existence of some parallels between them and some of the poems of the Codex Exoniensis, some assumptions about its origins can be made, thus further narrowing the uncertainties still existing concerning such codex. In particular, *Edgar's Privilege to New Minster* and the *Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold* appear highly useful and indicative in this sense. It is generally assumed that the *Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold* was produced sometime between 971 and 984 (Deshman, 1995: 212-214). In particular, it is possible that the *Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold* was completed in 973, as suggested by Deshman

(1995: 260-261) who based his hypothesis on the iconographic elements of the *Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold*. For Deshman (1995: 260-261), they revealed themselves necessary for the coronation of King Edgard that happened in the same year. The fact that the manuscripts *Edgar's Privilege to New Minster* and *The Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold* exerted a certain degree of influence on multiple Exeter Book poems is highly relevant. As a matter of fact, the production of the Exeter Book did not likely start until at least 966-971, the years in which the manuscripts taken into account by O'Camb (2009: 224-225) were finished.

The five items listed by O'Camb (2009: 221-223) are also worth considering because they could shed some light on the provenance of the Exeter Book. The Codex Exoniensis has been kept in Exeter since 1072, the year in which bishop Leofric died, after having donated the manuscript to the cathedral. However, we do not know for sure when and where the codex was produced. We ought to consider some major monastic centers which displayed a connection with the figure of Saint Æthelwold and imagine them as possible locations for the production of the manuscript. Since the *Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold* and *Edgar's Privilege to New Minster*) were both produced in Winchester, the fact that the Exeter Cathedral Library MS. 3501 appears possible as well. If it was not put together in Winchester, it probably was in a monastic centre having a solid connection with the city and with its ecclesiastical institutions.

Another possibility is that the Exeter Book was – at least in part – a product of the monastic centre of Abingdon. In his study, Hussey (2009: 681-683) takes into account Oxford, Bodleian Library Bodley 319, that is one of the three manuscripts – the other two being Lambeth 149 and Exeter Cathedral Library MS. 3501 – thought to have been written by the same scribe. In particular, while reviewing Chambers, Förster & Flower (1933), Ker (1933: 230) noted that Oxford, Bodleian Library Bodley 319 and the Liber Exoniensis were in the same script. Since Oxford, Bodleian Library Bodley 319 is generally accepted to be from Abingdon and that its scribe is possibly the same of the Exeter Book, it likely holds a connection with Abingdon. O'Camb (2009: 227) argues "that the most appropriate historical window for a production scenario for the Exeter Book at Abingdon was between 957 x 963, the years when King Edgar left his tutor at Abingdon to become King of Northumbria and Mercia, and when Æthelwold was consecrated as bishop of Winchester". Furthermore, an Abingdon provenance for

the Exeter Book could also be justified "because certain paleographical features of the hand of that book's scribe better fit that circle" (O'Camb, 2009: 227). Several scholars have advanced different hypotheses concerning the period of time in which the Exeter Book was abridged, with most proposals ranging from 950 to 990[23]. In particular, Conner (1993: 76-77) suggests the period ranging between 950 and 970, based on his thorough analysis of the scribe's hand in its paleographical context. His hypothesis seems to fit quite well with an Abingdon provenance of the Exeter Book, given its relationship with other events taking place roughly at the same time.

Saint Æthelwold possessed patient nature and he used to plan his moves with due advance (Gretsch, 1999: 226-260). Because of this, it is possible to imagine that he or one of his associates had already prepared some materials which would later merge into the Winchester-made *Edgar's Privilege to New Minster* and *Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold*, before moving to Winchester, where Æthelwold was ordained bishop in 963 (Blair, 2005: 350). Since the two texts have been found by O'Camb (2009: 222-223) to display some textual parallels with the Exeter Book, it is possible that the preparation of the latter had already started in Abingdon and that it was finished at a later time in Winchester.

Thus, no definitive assumptions concerning the provenance of the Exeter Book can be made. In spite of this, the analysis of the cultural milieu of Early English monastic centres that were most active in the production of codices constitutes a possible path to take, in particular when dealing with manuscripts whose history is fairly obscure, as in the case of the Exeter Book. In other words, monastic poetics may reveal itself a privileged process to follow, in order to enlarge our understanding and to have more certainties concerning the texts produced in a monastic context, or simply related to it:

> The Exeter Book […] is a deeply learned production, designed for a vernacular reader trained in the monastic craft of thought and memorial meditation. It does not necessarily follow, however, that this readership was exclusively monastic or ecclesiastical O'Camb (2009: 238-239).

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[23] For a brief discussion on some of the hypotheses of dating of the Exeter Book, see Chapter 2, 2.2. (History of the Exeter Book), pp. 35-36.

The phrase 'monastic poetics' really means that monasticism contributed to shape the themes, the style and the imagery conveyed by manuscripts – thus including the Exeter Book. However, this does not exclude other contexts of readership. What seems sure is that the individuals participating in social circles that had access to reading shared some ideas. This very fact is likely the outcome of a process of unification promoted by the monastic culture in England.

All things considered, monastic poetics – both in Pranger (2003: especially 1-14) and O'Camb (2009: especially 221-243)'s views – can be interpreted as a poetic tool useful to read and to interpret poetry and other issues, both literary and not. Furthermore, according to O'Camb (2014: 425):

> The interplay of words and images recurring throughout the Exeter Book's diverse contents provides us with a rhetorical example of how monastic poetics might have been used to train an active memory in the rhetorical work necessary for crating poems and prayers. It also allows us to better understand the relationship between the anthology's tripartite collections of versified maxims and riddles and their poetic community's inspiration: the theological mysteries of Christ's nativity, ascension, and impending judgment. In this light, the Exeter Book was, will, and continues to be a coherent anthology of exemplary mysteries capable of inducing visionary experiences in its readers.

Monastic poetics can be linked to the idea of an interplay of theological and political ideas informing many of the contents of the Exeter Book of Old English Poetry (O'Camb, 2009: 115), which reflect a certain substratum that influenced the production of manuscripts in the scriptoria. Monastic poetics combines several issues and currents, all coming from different sources but coexisting in harmony between themselves, tied together by the fact of referring to the (English) monastic context. It is likely that the people who assembled the Exeter Book had a precise aim in mind when choosing and preparing the poems that would constitute the Codex Exoniensis. Their choice possibly reflected the existence of certain shared values, which allow us to guess what such values and features were. According to O'Camb (2009: 167), "the Exeter Book of Old English poetry is an ideological production, inspired by the social and spiritual concerns that dominated the intellectual lives of powerful political players involved in the social reformation of England".

O'Camb's intuition is in many ways particularly inspired, and it allows us to put a good deal of poetry in Old English under the extremely useful and representative

umbrella phrase of 'monastic poetics'. Such label could really open new scenarios not only in the study of the Exeter Book and of other major sources, but also, more in general, in the field of the literary, social, cultural and religious analysis of the Early English period. With particular regard to the literary domain, monastic poetics epitomises the syncretism that is typical of Old English literature, which combines different influences resulting in something totally unprecedented[24]. This at-least-partly syncretic label could be exploited as a means of unifying Early English literary production and of representing its uniqueness in the most appropriate way.

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[24] For a discussion on the syncretism typical of Old English wisdom literature in particular, see Chapter 2, 1. (Old English Wisdom Poetry), p. 68.

Chapter 2:

Wisdom and its Different Manifestations

The origins of wisdom poetry are ancient. They are found in the biblical tradition and in its aim of instructing people, providing them with solid bases to build their lives on. Wisdom poetry is a genre combining the earthly and the spiritual, since both aspects are necessary to live a blessed life in compliance with the moral principles coming directly from God. It holds a major importance in Old English poetry, and it has some distinctive features. Nevertheless, the so-called wisdom poems of the Exeter Book have not enjoyed much critical popularity, unlike the elegies from the same codex or epic poems such as *Beowulf*.

Among the many wisdom poems present in the Exeter Book, one finds *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*. Although they have been scarcely addressed by critics, they all have notable merits, and they show a high degree of poetic craftmanship, a masterful use of the alliterative verse and a remarkable complexity of different influences from several cultural traditions.

Precepts is possibly the most explicitly didactic poem among the three. It was clearly conceived in a monastic context, and it was probably written by a cultivated monk with a certain knowledge of the Bible and of the Mosaic Decalogue in particular. It presents a short but poignant series of principles – in a similar fashion to the Ten Commandments – coming from an unnamed father and directed to his nameless son. Such principles aim to teach him and humankind in general how to live, avoiding ordinary dangers and respecting the others, while operating good deeds.

The Gifts of Men stresses the importance of the many skills and talents God has so generously donated to people as to allow them to gain access to the heavenly kingdom. Such gifts, which concern many aspects of life, are listed through the means of a catalogue, a literary device that is typical of this literary genre, and of the entire Old

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English poetic corpus as well. Considering the many presents humankind has been endowed with, we get to understand what Early English society valued more and its relationship with religion.

The Fortunes of Men is another poem that employs catalogues. It stands in stark opposition to *The Gifts of Men*. The contrast between the two is evident, as the former conveys in its first catalogue a much darker atmosphere dealing with death and other vivid, dreadful images. They serve to warn humankind against the dangers of living a sinful life. Such life inevitably leads to perpetual damnation, something which Christian believers want to avoid, thus pushing them to act and behave righteously, according to what the second catalogue of the poem expresses.

1. Old English Wisdom Poetry

Harbus's statement well portrays the topic of this chapter (2002: 81): "The well-informed person is one who knows the true nature of things and is equipped to interpret the world". This sentence summarises – perhaps in the most concise and effective way – the truest and highest aim of wisdom literature in general and of wisdom poetry in particular. Old English wisdom poetry was conceived with education in mind. It aimed to teach people not only how to live according to the sacred principles of Christianity but also how to deal with the earthly and spiritual aspects of the everyday world. Before dwelling on the defining features of wisdom poetry produced in the monastic context of Early English society, it is necessary to have an overview of wisdom literature and of the traditions mostly associated to it.

Wisdom literature is an extremely broad literary genre that aims to offer observations and instructions dealing with the world and with the wisest and rightest ways to live in it. Wisdom literature is not confined to a specific cultural tradition or to a single language. Indeed, it could be argued that it features in virtually all societies belonging to any age.

Quite clearly, there are many traditions in which wisdom literature features prominently. For example, it is a very common phenomenon in the Old Testament, where it is most notably represented by the so-called Sapiential Books. They include the

Proverbs, Job, the Song of Songs, the Ecclesiastes, the Book of Wisdom, the Wisdom of Sirach and the Psalms[1].

In spite of being strictly associated to the biblical tradition, wisdom literature has not remained confined to its context. It has indeed echoed in other traditions, and it has likely inspired Old English wisdom literature. Other traditions commonly associated to the concept of wisdom literature – or any variation of it – are to be located in both pre-Islamic poetry and in Islamic literature, as well as in Western Renaissance one. With regard to the latter two, this is especially the case of the literary genre known as 'mirrors for princes'.

Mirrors for princes constitutes a literary genre fairly diffused during the Middle Ages and, particularly, the Renaissance. It aimed at educating people enjoying privileged positions in the social hierarchy, providing them with teachings on how to maintain high standards of behaviour and of governance. Generally speaking, mirrors for princes was useful in giving the clues and the tools necessary to live according to certain principles that were deemed valuable and considered essential. It can be interpreted as a subgenre of the broader genre known as 'speculum literature', which, partly like the encyclopaedia, has the purpose of diffusing general knowledge and instructions on a certain issue (Franklin-Brown, 2012: 273).

Besides, it is also necessary to refer to the wisdom-like literature produced in old civilisations such as in Egypt and Babylonia, as well as in Acient Greece. As for the latter, it is especially true if we consider the didactic poems composed by the Greek poet Hesiod, which constitute a significant part of the so-called Hesiodic corpus (Cingano, 2009: 91-130).

Moving specifically to the Old English context, it is not easy to provide a single and incontrovertible definition of what Old English wisdom poetry actually is. Its borders are not always clear and, indeed, a certain degree of wisdom pervades virtually all of the Exeter Book, as well as a large degree of other codices. As a matter of fact, when dealing with metrical charms, gnomic poetry and also elegies, wisdom poetry is inherently present, as it embodies "the accumulated knowledge of the Anglo-Saxons on certain subjects" (Bjork, 2014: xiii). Moreover, further enlarging this perspective, it would be possible to claim that "Generally speaking, […], all poetry can be considered

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[1] However, not all Psalms are considered to belong to the genre of wisdom literature (Estes, 2005: 141).

an expression of wisdom, because every poem instructs us in some way" (Bjork, 2014: xiii). A working definition of wisdom poems could be "poems which aim primarily neither at narrative nor at self-expression, but deal instead with the central concerns of human life" (Shippey, 1976: 1). It functions as a good reference point to start enjoying Old English wisdom poetry and its defining features, as well as to have an idea of which poems best convey a certain feeling of wisdom.

There is not universal agreement among critics on the exact number of poems belonging to the genre of wisdom poetry – given the degree of wisdom expressed in the entire Old English poetic corpus. Wisdom poetry is not an exact term, and opinions differ as to whether particular poems belong to the genre, although certain fairly-precise assumptions and hypotheses on the matter have emerged. However, there seems to be a wide-spread and accepted consensus in stating that the number of Old English wisdom poems ranges from fifteen to twenty (DiNapoli, 2014d: 505). Most central to the corpus of wisdom poems are, among the many poems that compose the Exeter Book, *Maxims I*, *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Gifts of Men*, *Precepts, Alms-Giving*, *Pharaoh*, *Vainglory* and *The Order of the World* (Ashurst, 2010: 125; Battles, 2014: 14).

As for wisdom poems that do not belong to the Exeter Book, notable examples are *Maxims II*[2], *The Rune Poem*[3], *Solomon and Saturn I*, *Solomon and Saturn II*[4], *The Menologium*[5] and *Bede's Death Song* (Ashurst, 2010: 125), with the latter being the Old English poem that survives in the largest number of manuscripts, ranging between 35 (O'Donnell, 2010: 112) and 45 (Scragg, 2014: 62).

The presence of wisdom poems in several Old English manuscripts is relevantly high and it suggests that this class of poetry was culturally valued. As a matter of fact, wisdom poetry – just like gnomic poetry as discussed in chapter 1, 2.3. (Genre variety in the Exeter Book) – stresses the importance of certain issues and of different matters. It suggests what was valuable and deemed important in Early English society, thus characterising itself as a privileged and highly-considered means of poetic expression.

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[2] It is found in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.i.

[3] It was present in Cotton Otho B.x (B.x.165), but, unfortunately, the manuscript was destroyed in Cotton Fire in 1731 (Murray, 2009: 163).

[4] *Solomon and Saturn I* and *Solomon and Saturn II* can be found in MS. Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (CCCC) 422, as well as in MS. CCCC 41 (only *Solomon and Saturn I*).

[5] It is found in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.i.

Due to the flexibility of its form and structure, it influenced the literary outcome of several poets.

Scholars offered several perspectivrd as to wisdom poetry. As Larrington (1993: 1) advises, "A wisdom poem may be defined as a poem which exists primarily to impart a body of information about the condition of the world". For Bjork (2014: xiii), instead, wisdom poems "tend to be nonnarrative treatments of general and universal truths that reveal the wisdom and learning of the speaker". The overall intention of wisdom poetry may be to give advice and guide on the basis of experience. However, other possible aims cannot be excluded given the many differences existing between wisdom poems. Although finding two perfectly equal wisdom poems in terms of structure and themes is not easy, some shared features can still be identified. They often display "a common concern with the fundamentals of human existence and experience, with the articulation and communication of great and universal truths, and many adopt the fictive persona of a wise sage offering instruction to a younger disciple" (DiNapoli, 2014d: 505).

Other recurring elements can be identified. Their presence is generally attested at the very beginning of a certain poem, that is the so-called "traditional opening" as Battles (2014: 1) names it. The traditional opening characterises a good deal of poems and it is instrumental in informing the readers of the features they will likely find in a certain composition. The recurring elements identified by Battles (2014: 14) include:

1. An introductory element, useful to draw attention;
2. A reference to the speaker, that is the person transmitting wisdom to a less-expert person;
3. A mention of the subject matter;
4. The specification of time and/or place (it can be very vague, but generally it is present);
5. A description of how the subject matter is learned;
6. The mention of wisdom, in particular of the teachings that get transmitted.

The opening of *Vainglory*, a wisdom poem often interpreted either as gnomic or homiletic[6], is highly representative in this sense. Below an extract of said poem in its original Old English version and in a contemporary translation as well:

Hwæt, me frod wita on fyrndagum
sægde, snottor ar, sundorwundra fela.
Wordhord onwreah witgan larum
beorn boca gleaw, bodan ærcwide,
þæt ic soðlice siþþan meahte
ongitan bi þam gealdre godes agen bearn,
wilgest on wicum, ond þone wacran swa some,
scyldum bescyredne, on gescead witan.

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 147)

Yes, a wise sage in days gone by,
a prudent messenger, told me many special wonders.
The man skilled in books through the teachings of the prophet
unfolded his word hoard, the former speech of the herald,
so that I could then truthfully
by means of that teaching perceive God's own son,
welcome guest in the habitations, and could distinguish
the weaker one as well, deprived through sins.

(Bjork, 2014: 39)

According to Battles (2014: 14), *Vainglory* perfectly embodies the defining features generally found in the traditional opening. Indeed, an introductory element (*hwæt*, which can mean 'listen', although it is not its only possible translation) is present, just like a reference to the speaker. The subject matter is explicitly mentioned: *sundorwundra fela* ('special wonders'), and a time setting is provided *on fyrndagum*, ('in days gone by'). There is a clear focus on how wisdom is transmitted (through the wise words of a sage), and the whole opening deals with what kinds of teachings are present. The opening is a highly-important section of wisdom poems in general, because it contributes to set the general atmosphere and to provide a solid basis on which the discourse gets constructed.

Defining the typical length of wisdom texts in Old English is not a simple matter, because of the variety that has been attested. Poole (1998: 7) states that Old

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[6] "Homiletics is the science that treats of the composition and delivery of a sermon or other religious discourse. It includes all forms of preaching, viz., the sermon, homily, and catechetical instruction" (Beecher, 1910).

English wisdom poems can be quite long and extend for as much as four hundred lines. However, the opposite case can also be true. Two notable examples of short wisdom poems are the ones of *Alms-Giving* and *Pharaoh*, only comprising nine and eight lines, respectively (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 223). The quality of wisdom poems and the fact of conveying an important message are not strictly influenced by length, thus signifying that every wisdom poem can potentially transmit deep and meaningful teachings.

The longer wisdom texts – including mainly gnomic ones such as *Maxims I* – have the tendency to be divided into smaller components, something which allows to consider the fragments as single poems existing on their own (Poole, 1998: 7). As a general rule, they consist of a series of brief but powerful gnomic statements on one certain topic. Such statements vary in length, and, indeed, some can be extremely brief (as little as one single line, or maybe even half-line), while, on the other hand, some can take the form of a longer metrical charm. Classification of wisdom poems based on their length and function(s) is not easy. As Poole (1998: 8) puts it, "any attempt […] to 'totalize' a wisdom poem as serving one function and one function alone is rendered perilous by the slippery evanescence of their topics and concerns".

Sometimes, wisdom poetry has been compared to other more well-known genres, namely epic and elegy (Battles, 2014: 1). Battles has produced a thorough and interesting analysis on Old English poetry as a whole, because "genres exist in relation to each other, examining several together yields valuable insights" (Battles, 2014: 1). In some ways, the literary genres taken into account share some similarities, and their features often intertwine, thus making genre identification uneasy.

Some of the most evident common aspects concern their openings – see Battles (2014: 1-33, especially 17) – that are often alike and deal with similar issues. For example, wisdom poetry often emphasises the role and the importance of the speaker's persona and attitude. This aspect is also evident in epic – although not as much – as well as in elegy, which is the literary genre conveying the persona more than the others. Wisdom is based on a twofold dimension; it is both private and public, like in the case of elegy and epic, respectively (Battles, 2014: 14). The public aspect is due to the fact that wisdom does not totally originate in the speaker's experience, meaning that it derives from the teachings of wiser people and/or from valuable books. The private feature derives from the fact that this kind of wisdom can only be accessed by few

individuals who form part of a cultural élite. The traditional opening of wisdom poetry perfectly represents the duality between private and public, the two sides of the same coin. As a matter of fact, in the Middle Ages, a strong connection between the two categories was very much present and evident.

Concerning metrical aspects, wisdom poems, just like the vast majority of Old English poetry, generally employ the so-called alliterative verse. It is a form of verse that makes use of alliteration to signal the metrical structure, as opposed to other devices such as rhyme. Alliteration is defined as the repetition of identical initial consonant sounds in successive or closely associated syllables within a group of words, and it is often employed with a rhetorical aim, as well as to help memorisation. Alliterative poetry is the very broad literary genre that resorts to this literary device to achieve some artistic aims. Many common features can be identified in it, with the essential and generally-present ones being (Terasawa, 2011: 3-26):

1. A long line is divided into two half-lines. Half-lines are also known as verses; the first is called the a-verse, while the second the b-verse.
2. A heavy pause called cæsura separates the verses;
3. Two heavily stressed syllables (lifts) are present in each verse;
4. The first lift in the a-verse alliterates with the first lift in the b-verse;
5. The second lift in the b-verse does not alliterate with the first lifts.

Alliterative poetry is extremely common in Old English. The standard verse of this type of poetry consists of two verses, with alliteration connecting them. This means that a syllable or even a word in the second verse alliterates with a more important syllable (or word) in the first one – thus creating a thematical, metrical, sound-based connection between the two. It is typical of the alliterated parts of verses to have a pronounced stress, which serves a metrical function (Cassidy & Ringler, 1971: 276). There are specific rules governing the operating principles of alliteration, with the main ones being that consonants will always alliterate with the same consonant and vowels being free to alliterate with any other vowel. The words that contain alliterated syllables are not to be underestimated, because not all syllables can undergo alliteration. As a matter of fact, Old English poetry displays a hierarchy of alliteration. The parts of

speech that are most likely to alliterate include nouns and verbs, because they convey most of the meaning. On the other hand, parts of speech such as pronouns and prepositions are seldom alliterated (O'Donnell, 2009: 1; Terasawa, 2011: 12-26).

Alliteration is a key process because it helps the reader to identify the words needing stress. Stress is usually placed on a syllable containing a long vowel, which are usually pronounced in a clearer and louder way. The stressed syllables are ordered along the same basic hierarchy of alliteration. Indeed, it rarely occurs that prepositions or pronouns are used in a stressed syllable or word. Words such as *god* ('God'), *cyning* ('king'), and proper nouns are very frequently stressed, thus signalling their importance in a poem and/or in a certain context (Terasawa, 2011: 6-7). Unstressed syllables are clearly present in alliterative poetry, and they accompany the main stressed ones. They are usually short and, generally, they are part of words belonging to parts of speech that occupy a lower position in the hierarchy of alliteration and stress (Hutcheson, 1995: 26-31).

Alliterative poetry is a powerful instrument of poetic expression that has characterised a good deal of other Germanic traditions, mainly the Old Norse one with the composition of the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*. The particularity of the alliterative verse makes it difficult to adapt it to contemporary English. With regard to *Beowulw,* the interwoven structure of Old English poetry makes its translation a considerable challenge from many points of view (Magennis, 2011: 1-25). In spite of that, many translations of *Beowulf* exist, both in verse and in prose (Orchard, 2003: 329-330). In general, writing in modern English employing alliterative verse is not easy. Nevertheless, a number of writers have tried to do that; that is, among the others, the case of J.R.R. Tolkien, who has written *The Fall of Arthur*, an alliterative poem extending to nearly 1000 verses imitating the metre of the Old English *Beowulf* and drawing inspiration from the so-called Matter of Britain on King Arthur (Tolkien, 2013).

Since the origins of wisdom poetry can be traced back to ancient times, this has caused it to develop some particularities according to the different cultural traditions employing it. It also had the effect of generating a certain degree of "unevenness and inconsistencies" (Larrington, 1993: 2). They include problems of vocabulary that often lead to issues of interpretation. Indeed, it can happen that wisdom poetry lacks

consistency between different uses of the same word, which can acquire a certain meaning not only depending on the context and on the period of time. Furthermore, wisdom poems – especially the longer ones – are often agglutinative in form. They can include a group of gnomes tending to gather others, without necessarily being thematically-linked (Larrington, 1993: 2).

Consistency and coherence also lack from a formal point of view. Wisdom poetry tends to prioritise the recognisability of a saying conveying wisdom over the poetic form in which it is expressed. In other words, the actual content holds more importance than the form. This can lead to issues of poetic *decorum* – 'poetic rightness' – which is sometimes lacking in this class of poetry (Larrington, 1993: 2). Together with the fact that gnomes themselves virtually know no boundaries and their length can range considerably, such aspects make wisdom poetry "infinitely elastic" (Larrington, 1993: 2). In a certain sense, wisdom poetry is based on an inherently-present structural freedom, something which contributes to characterise it as extremely expressive, but, at the same time, hard to study and define as a whole.

The difficulty of classifying wisdom poetry is also due to its openness to external influences. The wisdom tradition was constantly revised and refreshed so that it could better match the social and cultural "requirements" and expectations of a certain period. Verses that were based on archaic linguistic forms and/or conveying outdates ideas did not last long in wisdom poetry. Indeed, such a genre evolved more rapidly and in a deeper way than other more conservative genres. It continually gathered and integrated in itself new trends and inspirations. That is evident especially considering the impact of Christianity on it. As a matter of fact, several aspects coming from the biblical and patristic[7] traditions quickly became an integral part of it. "The problems of coherence and unity which characterize the reading of wisdom verse are largely problems inherent in the genre itself", as Larrington (1993: 2) puts it. Again, this makes wisdom poetry difficult to receive a single and unifying label, but, on the other hand, that also stimulates the reflection on its features and on its merits.

Old English wisdom poetry was, most likely, held in high consideration in the context of the Monastic Reform. In spite of that, such literary genre has not received much consideration in the academic world, and it has also attracted major critiques.

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[7] Patristics or patrology is the study of the early Christian writers who are designated Church Fathers (van Geest, 2018).

Some of the main ones concern the structure of its poems. An apparent lack of structure has been a common reason for criticism in a number of publications on the matter. Structure-wise, Old English wisdom poetry often involves the presence of catalogues[8] – as in the poems which will be analysed in the chapter – which, at times, may be perceived as incoherent, inorganic and badly ordered (Howe, 1985: 12). It can be argued that such comments contributed to lead the genre to be ostracised and to enjoy scarce critical consideration and appreciation.

The present chapter will now proceed to take into account three specific poems that have not been received with adequate consideration. In some cases, this led to disdainful comments on them. Accordingly, Shippey (1976: 4) commented, "Even more annoying is the poets' habit, when all else fails, of making lists", while Howe (1985: 104) stated, "The best one can say of them is that they are didactic poem which no longer have anything to teach us". One the most well-known critiques is perhaps the one presented here, concerning in particular the three poems that will be examined:

> There are a number of other short homiletic poems of a fairly commonplace kind in the Exeter Book, as well as some miscellaneous poems, which may be mentioned here briefly. Whatever the motives of the compiler of the Exeter Book (or its original) he clearly had a less rigorous sense of his mission than the executors of the Vercelli and Junius MSS. He includes material which can only be regarded as the debris or spoil-heaps of the monastic tradition – catalogues of attributes (*The Gifts of Men*, *The Fortunes of Men*), collections of *Precepts*, gnomic poems, fragments of a bestiary, sets of riddles. It is the raw material of poetry rather than poetry itself (Pearsall, 1977: 51)

Pearsall's position is surely very strong, and some could be led to believe that such "minor poems" do not have any particular merit and, therefore, they do not deserve proper consideration. His opinion is that *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*, among the others, cannot be considered as examples of proper poetry, but merely as "raw material of poetry" (Pearsall, 1977: 51) or, at best, as mediocre poetic exercises. The words and the expressions to describe such poems – and to express a subtle but, at the same time, fierce critique towards the unknown compiler of the Exeter Book – leave no room to other perspectives on the matter.

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[8] See catalogue poems in Chapter 2, 2.3. (Genre variety in the Exeter Book), p. 41.

The aim of this work is to highlight alternative – and less trenchant – views on such poems and add some personal considerations as well, in order to give them the recognition they deserve, as they "have enough intrinsic merit to be worth the linguistic effort" (Shippey, 1972: 9). Indeed, not only they are testaments of the language, the culture, the tradition and the customs of Early English society, but they are also work of arts and, as so, they need to be acknowledged. They are much more than simple and standard catalogue poems, provided that one keeps an open mind. Their study could shed some light on Early English society and on its way of imagining its syncretic literature combining both the sacred Christian and the heathen, in compliance with the emblematic question Alcuin of York posed to Bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne as to a rumor of monks reading heroic poetry, *Quid enim Hinieldus cum Christo?* meaning 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?' (Greenfield & Calder, 1986: 3; Mitchell & Robinson, 1998: 225)[9]. Old English literature is based on and conveys the two of them into something that, at first glance, might be interpreted as profane and blasphemous, but that actually shows the high degree of craftmanship of the Early English poets in creating something totally unprecedented.

All of them would deserve a proper critical edition[10], but, for now, it is vastly beyond the scope of the present thesis, and it would require more time, skills, as well as a carefully-thought project.

As for the analyses of the following three poems, the texts present in Krapp & Dobbie (1936) will be used for quotations. The same applies for the titles that will be referred to, which are the ones employed by Krapp & Dobbie (1936: vii), since they are the most used in academic literature on the matter. As already briefly discussed in Chapter 2, 2.3. (Genre variety in the Exeter Book), the titles are only conventional[11] and this has led to the appearance of alternative ones, which will be listed later to be thorough. Some of the alternative titles display a more gender-neutral perspective, for example making reference to mortals and humankind rather than men, something, in principle, more coherent with the Old English word *mann*, meaning "a human being of

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[9] Ingeld or Ingjaldr was a legendary warrior who appears in early English and Norse legends. His figure is useful to symbolise the heroic flavour of an otherwise mostly monastic and Christian literary tradition.

[10] A critical edition of *The Gifts of Men* has been produced by Douglas Dean Short in 1973 for the purposes of his PhD dissertation. However, to my knowledge, it has not been published yet. See Short (1973).

[11] See p. 37.

either sex"[12]. However, because the editorial titles proposed by Muir (2000a: vii), Bjork (2014: v) and others are still relatively new, and since scarce academic literature has been produced on the three poems, there is no guarantee that the new titles will replace the traditional ones.

1.1. *Precepts*

Precepts, or *Paternal Precepts* (Stanley 2018), is a 94-line composition from the Exeter Book (80r – 81r). It is the only poem making up this small corpus that does not have its own entry in Lapidge *et al.* (2014). As a matter of fact, such composition is listed on page 384, but its entry refers to the wider category of gnomic poetry, thus suggesting that DiNapoli (2014c: 215-216) interprets *Precepts* mainly as a gnomic poem – because of the number of gnomic passages attested in it – and not as an example of wisdom poetry like Bjork (2014: xv). The lack of an entry for *Precepts* in Lapidge *et al.* (2014) is highly informative because it reflects the scarce interest and consideration towards this poem by a considerable share of academic literature on the matter. Over the course of the years, *Precepts* has been the target of several disdainful critiques, including Pearsall who portrayed it in a negative light (1977: 51)[13]. His not-so-gratifying comment, alongside others, caused *Precepts* not to be often taken into account for the purposes of critical analyses and studies of the poem. Only quite recently, an interest in it has risen, leading several scholars to give it some well-deserved recognition.

Hansen (1981) is one of the very first critics to have examined *Precepts* adopting a less-biased perspective, less influenced by previous commentaries on it. According to her, "*Precepts* skillfully exploits the conventions of the instruction genre and the resources of Old English verse to do something quite different, and perhaps less humdrum and uninspired, than modern expectations would immediately lead us to believe" (Hansen, 1981: 2). This poem could be interpreted as reflecting and celebrating the set of skills each good person ought to possess as a result of the education and the instructions received by one's own parents (Hansen, 1981: 2). This would make

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[12] Bosworth (2014).
[13] See above (Pearsall, 1977: 51) in Chapter 2, 1. (Old English Wisdom Poetry), p. 67.

Precepts representative of the Near Eastern and Old Irish instruction genre (Hansen, 1981). Adapting a definition first given by Brunner (1952: 1), Whybray (1965: 53) speaks of the genre defining:

> the literary type of those works which contain an instruction of a teacher to a pupil (often in the form of an instruction of a father to his son) or the fiction of such an instruction. The teacher guides his pupil to a right attitude towards his life on the basis of his own experience, and above all on the basis of knowledge that has been transmitted to him.

Such a definition perfectly matches what *Precepts* is about, catching its true essence. As a matter of fact, its explicit content is represented by a series of principles and teachings dealing with different aspects of life. Among the others, they stress the importance of loving and respecting one's parents, "choosing good friends and advisers, avoiding drunkenness, foolish words, and other such vices, and, in general living a moderate life" (McEntire, 1990: 243). The principles themselves are short and they appear to owe a debt towards the Book of Proverbs, as they are "most alike in demonstrating the inevitable diffuseness of form which results from collecting numerous short statements" (Howe, 1985: 138). They tend to accumulate themselves, in compliance with the word of the Lord descending and spreading upon humankind, thus leading to a reinforcement of the principles and of the truths expressed:

> So then, the word of the Lord to them will become: Do this, do that, a rule for this, a rule for that; a little here, a little there – so that as they go they will fall backward; they will be injured and snared and captured. (Isaiah 28: 13)

Such principles come directly from a generic and nameless father, and they are transmitted to his son. The two figures are presented in the first three lines of the poem, providing us with the addresser and the addressee, as well as with some context: *Đus frod fæder freobearn lærde, modsnottor, maga cystum eald, wordum wisfæstum, þæt he wel þunge* (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 20), meaning "Thus the wise father, the man prudent in mind, experienced in the virtues of the kinsmen, taught the child of gentle birth" (Bjork, 2014: 21).

Hansen (1988: 55) argues that *Precepts* is one of the two Old English poems belonging to the sub-genre of instruction poems. The second poem of the pair is

Beowulf, more specifically lines from 1700 to 1784, represented by king Hrothgar's sermon to the Geatish prince Beowulf. According to Hansen (1988: 55), "Hrothgar is specifically characterized as the wise father of Beowulf, that is speech is carefully structured on themes and techniques commonly used by wise speakers in Old English poems, and that what he says plays an integral part in the dramatic structure of the poem". Hrothgar's discourse could be interpreted as embodying the gnomic aspects attested in *Precepts*, thus allowing us to draw a parallel between the two poems and find some similarities between wisdom poetry and epic, as suggested by Battles who claims that "most Old English poems are generic hybrids, combining the characteristics of several genres" (2014: 1). Furthermore, a comparison between *Precepts* and *Beowulf*, contributes to give some well-deserved dignity to the former, matching it with an outstanding model, even though it has many merits in itself.

Concerning the structure and the content of *Precepts*, it may be interpreted as the poem conveying wisdom in the most explicit and direct way, even more than *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*. In a way, it appears more traditional than them, as suggested by the fact that it was probably composed before the other two (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: xliii; Amos, 1980: 33-34), hence manifesting more connection with the ancient times and their poetics and displaying an earlier state of the Old English language. *Precepts* operates with the wisdom of King Solomon in mind, derived directly from God and transmitted to the humankind in a continuum:

> God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else […] And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom. (Kings 4: 29-34)

The origins of *Precepts* are biblical, and it is quite safe to say that the poem must have been influenced by the Mosaic Decalogue (Exodus 20: 1-17), that is the most renowned model for the category of admonitory catalogues (Muir, 2000b: 518). As a matter of fact, the number of principles appearing in this wisdom poem is ten, which contributes to support the previous claim. *Precepts* is a poem that reveals a definite concern for structure, revolving around the number 10, which is well-represented in

Christianity[14] and in other religions as well, thus highlighting its importance. The ten utterances or pieces of advice it presents, which can be interpreted in the context of the typical relationship between father and son (with the former teaching principles and ways of behaving to the latter), appear to have been arranged according to the three ages of life. This very fact underlines the importance of constantly having a fatherly figure acting as a guide throughout the whole life, beginning with youth and ending with old age (Howe 1985: 145–51).

Regarding the principles in *Precepts* very likely deriving from the Mosaic Decalogue, they do not present a direct correspondence with the ones of the Ten Commandments, but in one case, namely verses 9-14:

> Fæder ond modor freo þu mid heortan,
> maga gehwylcne, gif him sy meotud on lufan.
> Wes þu þinum yldrum arfæst symle,
> fægerwyrde, ond þe in ferðe læt
> þine lareowas leofe in mode,
> þa þec geornast to gode trymmen
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 140-141)

> Love your father and mother with your heart,
> each kinsman, if the measurer is in their love.
> Always be respectful to your elders,
> fair speaking, and in your heart let
> your teachers be dear in mind,
> those who most eagerly exhort you to the good
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 21)

The two passages make specific reference to the Fifth Commandment of the Mosaic Decalogue[15], that is "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20: 12). Such Commandment also finds its place in Deuteronomy (5: 16), thus characterising this book of the Torah[16] as another likely model of *Precepts*. The fact that a correspondence with the Fifth Commandment can be identified is interesting, because it puts great

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[14] Other than the Ten Commandments, one also ought to remember the ten Plagues of Egypt.
[15] It must be noted that Catholics and Lutherans count this Commandment as the fourth one.
[16] The Torah is the compilation of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. They include Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

emphasis on the necessity to respect one's parents. Indeed, they are the quintessential sources from which some fundamental values originate.

Precepts also stresses the importance of doing good works, which, according to the principles of Christianity and as we learn from the Rule of Saint Benedict, constitute the key through which one can gain access to Heaven. The two passages – taken from the original version of the Rule (Pricoco, 1995: 118-120) and from Parry & de Waal's (2000: 1-2) translation in English – clearly display the intrinsic value of good deeds:

> In primis ut quidquid agendum inchoas bonum, ab eo perfici instantissima oratione deposcas. […] Succinctis ergo fide vel observantia bonorum actuum lumbis nostris, per ducatum evangelii pergamus itinera eius, ut mereamur eum, «qui nos vocavit in regnum suum» videre. In cuius regni tabernaculo si volumus habitare, nisi illuc bonis actibus curritur, minime pervenitur

> First of all, whenever you begin any good work, you must ask God with the most urgent prayer that it may be completed by him. […] Let us therefore make for ourselves a girdle out of faith and perseverance in good works, and under the guidance of the Gospel let us pursue our way in his paths, so that we may deserve to see him who has called us to his Kingdom. […] there will be no getting there unless we run towards it by good deeds

As mentioned above, *Precepts* stresses the importance of showing due respect to the figures of the father and the mother. In particular, the relationship between father and son can be interpreted adopting a perspective focused on monasticism, as proposed by McEntire (1990: especially 243-244). As a matter of fact, the relationship which is exemplified in *Precepts* holds strong parallels with the one existing in the monastic context between young, inexperienced monks and a leading figure, such as an abbot and/or a spiritual father (McEntire, 1990: 244). Her view is elegant and interesting, not only because it manages to give some due merit to *Precepts*, but partly because it manages to provide it with a high and spiritual context, lessening the weight of the many critiques it received, including one coming from Greenfield (1965: 202) who defined its teachings "uninspired and platitudinous". Moreover, her analysis perfectly exhibits the Benedictine substrate *Precepts* is likely to have drawn inspiration from and to put the poem in a monastic-poetics perspective (O'Camb, 2009). As a matter of fact, in the prologue of the Rule of Saint Benedict we can read (Pricoco, 1995: 118; Parry & de Waal, 2000: 1):

Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri et inclina aurem cordis tui et admonitionem pii patris libenter excipe et efficaciter compie, ut ad eum per oboedientiae laborem redeas, a quo per inoboedientiae desidiam recesseras. Ad te ergo nunc mihi sermo dirigitur

Listen my son to the instructions of your Master, turn the ear of your heart to the advice of a loving father; accept it willingly and carry it out vigorously; so that through the toil of obedience you may return to him from whom you have separated by the sloth of disobedience. To you, then, whoever you may be, are my words addressed

The Rule of Saint Benedict refers to the importance of having a spiritual figure to gather the teachings and the rules of living morally from. This could be perfectly embodied by an abbot sharing his knowledge on monastic life with his herd of novices. In this sense, the relationship between father and son acquires a highly symbolical and metaphorical value, which arguably elevates the content of the composition, giving it considerable prestige. Two fragments (line 4 and lines 93-94) of *Precepts* seem to be particularly coherent with the monastic setting the poem likely belongs to according to McEntire (1990: 244):

Do a þætte duge, deag þin gewyrhtu […]
Swa þu, min bearn, gemyne
frode fæder lare ond þec a wið firenum geheald

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 140 and 143)

Always do what's virtuous, your works will avail […]
Thus, my son, remember
the wise teachings of your father and always hold yourself against sins

(Bjork, 2014: 21 and 27)

Adopting this perspective, the poem becomes considerably more spiritual than secular, potentially characterising itself as the conscious product of a learned, cultivated monk who knew Latin. The poet who composed *Precepts* is unlikely to have taken inspiration from the Old English version of the Rule of Saint Benedict, translated by Æthelwold between 964-965 and 975 (Riyeff, 2017: 12-13)[17], since it appears – mainly on metric and linguistic bases – that it has been composed between the 8th and the early 9th century (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: xliii; Amos, 1980: 33-34).

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[17] See Chapter 1, 1. (The English Benedictine Reform), p. 26.

Another text that displays some similarities with *Precepts* is the Old Norse *Hávamál* ('Words of Hár[18]'), which is present in the Codex Regius, that is the manuscript containing the *Poetic Edda*. *Hávamál* hardly constitutes a model *Precepts* took inspiration from because the former appears to have been written in 10th or 9th century, thus making it subsequent to the latter. In spite of that, some interesting considerations as to the content of the two can still be made, and some hypotheses can be advanced.

Hávamál is a long poem formed by 164 stanzas[19] (Larrington, 1999: 14-38; Crawford, 2015: 42-72). It is a combination of numerous shorter poems, largely gnomic in character, and characterising themselves as a source of wisdom coming directly from Odin himself in the form of pieces of advice on how to live holding a proper conduct. Through his wise words, the father of the Norse gods speaks to the whole humankind, which can be interpreted as his offspring. This allows us to interpret the relationship as a father-son(s) one. Odin characterises himself as a loving father who, because of his own life experiences that made him acquire the ultimate knowledge[20], has more wisdom, as well as more moral and spiritual qualities than the humanity itself, which can only take benefit from his worthy teachings (Larrington, 1993: 15). The whole humankind can be interpreted as the receiver of Odin's wisdom, even though it must be noted that a certain Loddfáfnir is the addressee of stanzas from 111 to 138, which constitute the so-called *Loddfáfnismál*, meaning 'Loddfáfnir's discourse'.

Just like the ones appearing in *Precepts*, Odin's pieces of advice in *Hávamál* deal with both earthly and spiritual issues, which, just like in Old English poetry, constantly intertwine, signifying that one can be found in the other and both of them are necessary to have a chance to reach in the next world: Heaven in the case of Christianity and Valhalla[21] in the Old Norse tradition. Odin and the nameless father of *Precepts* both aim to allow their sons to take full advantage of their lives, elevating themselves,

[18] Hár means 'the High One' (Odin).
[19] In spite of this, Bellows (1936: 28-67) proposes a division of *Hávamál* in 165 stanzas.
[20] According to different mythological sources, including both the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*, Odin gave one of his eyes (the right one, in most texts) in return for wisdom (consisting in the knowledge of the runes), thus underlining how he had to pay a considerable price in order to reach a higher state. See *Vǫluspá* ('Prophecy of the Seeress') in Dronke (1997: 14) and Larrington (1999: 7).
[21] Valhalla is the kingdom of the warriors chosen by Odin himself. After their death, those who are worthy can go there and fight and drink for all eternity alongside Odin, in preparation for *Ragnarǫk* ('fate of the gods'), an unlucky and tragic event characterizing itself as a kind of "Norse Apocalypse". *Ragnarǫk* is dealt with in, among the other poems, *Vǫluspá*. See Dronke (1997: 40-61).

becoming heroes or learned and merciful churchmen. Furthermore, another similarity between the two poems consists in the use of enumerations and catalogues, something common in wisdom literature and that allows us to draw a solid parallel between the Old English and the Norse cultures. This is especially true when it comes to wisdom literature and poetry, of whose genres the two traditions are considered extremely representative (Larrington, 1993: 1-2; Canevaro, 2014: 99-100).

A direct contact between the two cultures which have produced these wisdom poems is certain, as a consequence of the numerous Danish raids in England that began towards the end of the 8th century when several Norse riders chose some Christian monasteries as their target (Blair, 2003: 63). Larrington (1993: especially 1-12) is one of the most eminent scholars to argue that Christianity and its principles were instrumental in influencing the Old Norse culture and therefore its literary outcome. Poems that could have absorbed a certain degree of "Christian wisdom" could include *Hávamál* and other Eddic ones that the author considers in her analysis, namely *Vafþrúðnismál* ('Vafþrúðnir's discourse') and *Grímnismál* ('Grímnir's discourse) (Larrington, 1993: 1).

Concerning such contacts, they were very likely subsequent to the period in which *Precepts* was written – 8th century or, at best, early 9th one. Some similarities can be seen and they could lead us to consider the scope of the contact between the two cultures, trying to have an understanding on how much they influenced each other. Furthermore, it could make us hypothesize the existence of a series of images and themes belonging to a common Indo-European substratum, as shown by the numerous wisdom traditions in Europe and in Asia and by the numerous studies on the matter.

Given the derivation from the Decalogue and since the content of the poem is highly didactical and that its form is accurate, Krapp & Dobbie (1936: xliii) have no doubt when they state that *Precepts* "is the work of a Christian poet, probably a cleric, who had definite pedagogical purposes in view". Nevertheless, partly because the principles *Precepts* deals with do not one have, but in one case, a total correspondence with the Ten Commandments and due to the overall too general content of *Precepts*, some scholars have criticised the poem as too general and vague.

Some have argued that its content is obvious and completely uninspired and that the "advice given is relatively bland and colourless" (Ashurst, 2010: 130). As a matter

of fact, such advice does make explicit reference to common knowledge, but it does not signify that it is uninspired. Indeed, it does not take anything away from the universal validity and to the utmost justness of the principles themselves, which ring true because of the references they make to several great wisdom books. Furthermore, they also contribute to increase our awareness of what Early English society considered noteworthy, as well as our comprehension of the social and cultural environment of that period.

In particular, two specific merits could be found in *Precepts*. Firstly, it can shed some light on how proverbial lore was used in Early English society, as well as its cultural significance (Bjork, 2014: xvi). Then, it could reveal itself as extremely precious and instrumental in enlarging our understanding of the main changes in society of the late 10th century, outcome of the monastic renovatio promoted by the English Benedictine Reform, as argued by Drout (2006: 255-264).

In conclusion, *Precepts* may not characterise itself as evocative as *The Gifts of Men* and, especially, *The Fortunes of Men*, but still, it does not lack any literary and artistic merits whichsoever. Only little academic literature has been produced with regard to it, and there still are several troublesome issues about it, none of which really got resolved. This contributes to make it interesting and relevant, as well as a useful tool to access other kinds of poetry. Indeed, it functions as a great starting point to appreciate more complex wisdom poems that revolve around less-accessible and more-metaphorical images. Overall, it constitutes a powerful means of interpretation of the great monastic literary production of the times of the English Benedictine Reform, and, as so, it should not be overlooked.

1.2. *The Gifts of Men*

The Gifts of Men is a 113-line poem from the Exeter Book (78r – 80r), titled *God's Gifts to Humankind* in Muir (2000a: 220) and *The Gifts of Mortals* in Bjork (2014: 12). On the surface, it is a catalogue poem in the tradition of Old English wisdom poetry. Its most evident feature consists in the enumeration of the many skills and talents that God has granted to individuals. The role played by God in this process is so highlighted by the author of the poem that it becomes easy to understand why

some critics have proposed to change the name originally given by Krapp & Dobbie (1936) in *God's Gifts to Humankind*. The main issue conveyed by the poem is that God has distributed His gifts in such a way that no one will have too many or too few of them. Indeed, the poet stresses God's merciful nature and will to give equal opportunities to His offspring (DiNapoli, 2014b: 209).

Just like *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* has received little attention in contemporary scholarship. It has been scarcely addressed, and most of the times it has been labeled only as a simple catalogue poem, based around "a technique whose apparent simplicity is belied by sometimes unexpected depths and complexities" (DiNapoli, 2021: 124). Indeed, it could be interpreted as such, but a reading on a deeper level seems to reveal other interesting features of the poem. As a gnomic and, at the same time, Christian religious text, the poem is most likely a composition that found influences in both Germanic and patristic traditions.

This is a poem noted for its structure. Three main sections can be recognised in the poem, namely:

1. Introduction (lines 1-29); it stresses the fact that human talents come directly from God, who has provided them to humankind making sure that a coherent distribution was carried out, thus leaving no one without gifts or with too many;

2. Middle section (lines 30-96); it lists the various gifts humankind has been endowed with, taking into account the skills of the mind as well as the physical ones;

3. Conclusion (lines 97-113); it is thematically linked to the introduction, and it reiterates the fact that God distributes His gifts according to a certain logic.

Being only 113 lines long, the poems does indeed possess a compact length. This makes it for reading or reciting as a lone piece or as part of a larger programme. It is possible to imagine that it was read in a monastic context, with the aim of prompting younger monks to enjoy and be grateful for the gifts God has provided them with.

The Gifts of Men opens presenting the powerful and merciful nature of God as a father who distributes talents to humankind (DiNapoli, 2021: 125):

Fela bið on foldan forðgesynra
geongra geofona, þa þa gæstberend
wegað in gewitte, swa her weoruda god,
meotud meahtum swið, monnum dæleð,
syleð sundorgiefe, sendeð wide
agne spede, þara æghwylc mot
dryhtwuniendra dæl onfon.

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 137)

Many new gifts are visible
on earth, those that soul bearers
carry in their minds, according as the God of hosts,
the measurer strong in might, deals them out to human beings
gives special gifts, sends them widely
by his own power, a portion of which each
of those living among the people may receive

(Bjork, 2014: 13)

God is the supreme agent who makes sure that a coherent distribution of gifts is carried out. In particular, he acts to compensate the ones who are poor with a good deal of notable skills – both physical and mental – that help them to survive in the world. God's many gifts are listed through the means of a catalogue, which, apparently, is based on a completely random structure. As a matter of fact, the catalogue displays the different talents in a seemingly casual order, so casual that critics have had a hard time in finding a hypothetical pattern in that list.

The talents that are mentioned include "physical strength, beauty, poetic skill, eloquence, skill in hunting, the ability to charm a wealthy man, martial ability, wisdom in counsel, architectural ability, musicianship, skill in penetrating mysteries, skill at archery, a good singing voice, swiftness of foot, and nautical ability" (DiNapoli, 2014b: 209). There are also many others, as shown in the lines of the poem and each of them is essential in creating a "survival kit" that is useful in virtually any situation, as DiNapoli (2021:124) puts it.

These skills embrace different categories, all of which appear to be mixed in the catalogue. In particular, it makes reference to the physical and the mental dimensions of the human life and to practices and activities concerning the two fields. Moreover, the talents that are listed are also linked to the secular and the spiritual, which were often thought to intertwine in Early English society, and also to the private and the public. All

of the above apparently holds the same importance and this could suggest that every aspect was perceived as equally necessary and valuable in Early English society. In particular, concerning the mental endowments, they seem not to be excessively prioritised over physical abilities. This is surely an interesting issue, because mental skills are often interpreted as the highest among the ones possessed by humankind. In other words, most of the times, they are thought as the ones which contribute the most to determine the human nature as well as its alleged superiority over the one of the other creatures.

The fact that they are listed in a random, yet, at the same time, perfect combination with other "lesser" abilities – the more physical and earthly ones – is coherent with the general atmosphere of the poem. Indeed, God provides His offspring only with abilities and talents that are useful and that everyone needs to share, in a spirit of collaboration with one's siblings. However, some scholars have carried out linguistic analyses concerning the terms referring to the perception of the mind in Early English society, taking examples from poems including *Precepts* and *The Gifts of Men* (Godden, 2002: 284-314). Godden's analysis suggests that the *mod*, an Old English word signifying "the spiritual as opposed to the bodily part of man"[22], played a considerable role in Early English society and, because of that, it was referred to through interesting lexical choices. The present chapter will not examine the matter in depth, since a linguistic study of vocabulary is the focus of Chapter 3, 1.2 (*The Gifts of Men*).

Again, with regard to the allegedly random sequence of God's gifts, it is maybe possible to argue that a certain mixture between earthly and spiritual – low and high in a sense – is perfectly coherent with the common spirit and mentality of the Middle Ages. This is especially true when it comes to the Early English social context, in which the many campaigns promoted by King Alfred the Great and then the Monastic Reform – stressing the necessary coexistence between the dimensions of working and praying – deemed the intrinsic value of the blend between the material and the spiritual categories.

The Gifts of Men can be interpreted according to the principles and the requirements of a community. As a matter of fact, the gifts that are listed are instrumental in performing a number of tasks that are necessary to guarantee the subsistence of a social group. The poem refers to "heroic skills like military prowess or

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[22] Bosworth (2014).

political leadership […] alongside more ordinary, though not more common, skills like carpentry, music, and acrobatics" (Black et al, 2015d: 1). They constitute the numerous and varying skills that a society should possess, value and nurture, as they are fundamental to make up a solid and long-lasting community, capable of withstanding even the direst situations. The main message it conveys is one of cooperation and of promoting the necessity of avoiding haughtiness. The gifts granted by God need not to be amassed, because, as DiNapoli (2021: 127) puts it "Like gold in a mead hall, such a blessing can remain a blessing only if it circulates. When individuals pursue only private good, all will suffer". Such gifts – "neither achievements of solitary genius nor marketable commodities" (DiNapoli, 2021: 126) – need to be passed to other people to contribute to the common good, thus promoting social advancement as well as increasing one's chances to gain access to Heaven.

Considering the stress that the poet puts on abilities that are particularly useful in a community context, it is possible to infer the likely aim and the beliefs of the author. Arguably, he thought that conveying a powerful message of cooperation and of respect for the other people – perfectly coherent with Mark (12: 31) "The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'. There is no commandment greater than these." – was necessary. In this sense, the poem promotes the necessity of living in peace and in harmony with everyone, because only through this one can hope to gain the right to live alongside God in Heaven. Imagining *The Gifts of Men* as a poem recited in a monastery, it could express a message of loving one's brothers – whether those sharing monastic quarters or those living in nearby areas – and respecting their own abilities, as they are all necessary to have access to Heaven after having lived a blessed life of *ora et labora*, as promoted by the Benedictine Rule.

The Gifts of Men can also be imagined as referring to the concessions granted by a king or a lord to his loyal retainers, who take benefit from his generous and lavish donations, and they repay him by providing their services. This means that individuals have to prove themselves worthy of the privileges so generously bestowed and contribute to the good of their community. Quite clearly, a wise lord has to distribute goods according to a principle of uniformity, so that no one has too much or too little. Acting like this, a lord operates just like God who spreads "his favours widely, not concentrating ability in a privileged few, lest any grow proud" (DiNapoli, 2021: 127).

The Gifts of Men belongs to the context of the Monastic Reform, meaning it was written in a climate of notable cultural animation. One of the most positive consequences of the Reform was to make knowledge of wisdom books more available and widespread, something that managed to create a climate of monastic *renovatio* and to allow people to enjoy a higher level of education that could suit their needs. The background of the English Benedictine Reforms is evident, and it characterises the content and style of *The Gifts of Men*, giving it a certain homiletic edge.

The poem does not seem to convey a message of conversion and it does not display the dark and gruesome images of *The Fortunes of Men*. This could lead us to believe that the poem did not mean to warn against the dangers of living a sinful life and that, on the other hand, it was directed towards a social context already formed by Christian people. The poem may have been composed with a didactic purpose in mind. In particular, it stresses the importance of acknowledging one's luck in having a series of desirable talents. They allow everyone to live in peace in a community where everyone is in charge of something and contributes to the common good.

The fact of belonging to the context of the Monastic Reform is likely to have influenced the author of *The Gifts of Men* in composing the poem having in mind some texts as models for his own. A possible "candidate" would be the gospel parable of the Talents, especially Matthew (25: 14-30) and Luke (18: 11-27), which is likely to have played a role in providing the poet with some inspiration. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider that the hypothetical parallel that can be drawn between *The Gifts of Men* and its possible sources is, at best, tenuous, as there is no obvious correspondence. One also ought to consider that the human virtues that are listed are fairly general, thus making an identification difficult. Furthermore, having one or more catalogues listing the many human talents represents a common feature to be found in virtually every wisdom literary tradition (DiNapoli, 2014b: 209).

Cross (1962: 66) deals with another text that might or could have represented a possible model for *The Gifts of Men*. In particular, he makes reference to the presence of theme of God-given gifts – present in both *The Gifts of Men* and, albeit to a lesser degree, in *The Fortunes of Men* – in Pope Gregory's *Homilia IX in Evangelia*:

> Gregory did not originate the interpretation, but he is a likely transmitter to O.E. poets because of his central position for Anglo-Saxon Christianity. His homilies

on the gospels were generally known, especially to Ælfric who used his *Homilia IX* for a sermon In *Natale Unius Confessoris*, and to Cynewulf whose *Christ II* is based on another homily, (XXIX), from the same collection. Gregory explains that the man who went into a far country was Christ as Man returning to heaven. "Se mennisca Crist", […], then distributed his goods, or spiritual gifts, to his servants. To one he gave five *talenta*, or the five bodily senses; to another, two *talenta*, or "intellectus et operatio" […]. The one *talentum* given to the third servant signifies *intellectus* or *andgit*. There is some subtlety in the rating of the two-talent man above the five-talent man but fortunately that does not concern us here. For the moral teaching is pointed through the third servant, who wickedly buried his one talent in the earth, and who will be condemned at the second coming for not using the divine gift of *intellectus* in the service of the Lord (Cross, 1962: 66).

Whether or not the poet of *The Gifts of Men* had Pope Gregory's Latin text in mind, this interpretation of the parable of the Talents was likely to be widespread, so it does not come as a surprise if it really constituted a model for the poem. God-given gifts to people represented indeed a topos in the Middle Ages; its source has to be found, again, in the Bible, especially in texts such as 1 Corinthians (12: 8–10) and Ephesians (4: 8), as noted by Cross (1962: 66-70) and Anderson (2002: 207).

In a kind of follow-up to Cross (1962), Short (1976) has also argued that lines from 8 to 26 of *The Gifts of Men* owe a bigger debt towards Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* rather than to his *Homilia IX in Evangelia*. In particular, lines 8-26 display a pedagogical function, and, in this sense, they hold a striking resemblance to chapter 32 of *Pastoral Care*. Short (1976: 500) writes:

> Gregory uses syntactic parallelism and antithesis to emphasize the need for different methods of teaching the *fortruwudan* as opposed to the *lytelmodan*. The former are susceptible to the sin of pride; they *forsioð oðre men, & eac forcweðað*, as does the *mon mode swið* in *The Gifts of Men*

This would give *The Gifts of Men* two very eminent models, and it would allow us to analyse it according to some themes diffused in Latin texts, therefore understanding more of its context, content and structure.

Concerning other plausible models for *The Gifts of Men*, several alternative interpretations stressing the affinities with other contexts other than the Latin and/or the biblical are possible. As a matter of fact, all the accomplishments *The Gifts of Men* makes reference to can be interpreted as "admirable qualities, and are the attributes of kings and heroes in various Norse poems and sagas" (Black et al, 2015d: 1). Some

scholars even went as far as saying that *The Gifts of Men* "might after all be Germanic in form" (Russom: 1978: 2). Prior to him, several authors had no doubt in saying that *The Gifts of Men* clearly had a Latin origin, as proved by the group of gnomes present in it and allegedly not widely attested in early Germanic literature (Williams, 1914: 54; Greenfield, 1965: 199; Short, 1973: 183).

Russom's view is surely intriguing, and it allows many alternative interpretations to come out. For example, imagining a certain "Germanic side" in a certain share of Old English wisdom poetry and more specifically in *The Gifts of Men*, it would be possible to imagine such poem as praising an earl and his generosity towards his subjects to promote a greater and shared good. Earl as a title originates in the Old English noun *eorl*, meaning "a man of noble birth or rank". Such word has a parallel in the Scandinavian *jarl*, that is a "ruler or great noble below the rank of king" (OED Online), and it would characterise – at least in part – *The Gifts of Men* as a Germanic-influenced poem.

The Gifts of Men could characterise itself as a celebration of the diverse skills that the life of noblemen was generally based on. Indeed, it encompasses nearly all aspects of the aristocratic life, including ability in hunting and fighting, as well as in composing poetic verses. In particular, the latter can prove the fact of having acquired several notions through the reading of culturally-valued books or through the teachings of a learned master. Wisdom, strength and agility are part of the general expertise and knowledge that aristocrats were supposed to possess.

The Gifts of Men refers to them, but it does not limit itself to that, as it also adds a celebration of the Christian virtues of piety, devotion, and patience, as precious as the other ones and whose presence is fundamental in the life of a wise nobleman. *The Gifts of Men* combines aspects that refer to different contexts and traditions, thus resulting in a poem of difficult classification, since it refers to traditional Latin concepts but also to a several mainly Germanic ones.

Even though a Latin content is indeed present in *The Gifts of Men*, one must also consider that "the relation between skills and attributes […] and the self-concept of the Germanic nobleman is strikingly clear in Old Norse literature, yet so far as I know there has been no understanding of the scope of such talents, or of their crucial importance for

the study of *Beowulf*" (Russom, 1978: 2). Just like for *Precepts*, a possible text to compare *The Gifts of Men* with is *Hávamál*, more specifically stanza 69:

> Erat maðr alls vesall,
> þótt hann sé illa heill;
> sumr er af sonum sæll, sumr af frændum,
> sumr af fé ærnu, sumr af verkum vel.
>
> (Bray, 1908: 80)

> No man is completely wretched, even if he has bad luck;
> one man is blessed with sons,
> another with kinsmen, another has enough money,
> another has done great deeds.
>
> (Larrington, 1999: 23)

Such stanza particularly resembles the contents expressed by the introductive and the conclusive sections of *The Gifts of Men*, both centred around the theme of the just distribution of gifts by God to humankind, carried out so in order to promote equalness between everyone. In particular, it is impossible not to find a noteworthy parallel with lines 8-17:

> Ne bið ænig þæs earfoðsælig
> mon on moldan, ne þæs medspedig,
> lytelhydig, ne þæs læthydig,
> þæt hine se argifa ealles biscyrge
> modes cræfta oþþe mægendæda,
> wis on gewitte ond on wordcwidum,
> þy læs ormod sy ealra þinga,
> þara þe he geworhte in woruldlife,
> geofona gehwylcre. Næfre god demeð
> þæt ænig eft þæs earm geweorðe.
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 137)

> There is no person so unhappy
> on earth, nor so unprosperous,
> so lacking in courage, nor so slow thinking,
> that the giver of benefits should deprive him of all
> skills of mind or mighty deeds,
> wisdom in understanding or in language,
> lest he become despairing of all things,
> of each gift, that he made in
> this worldly life. God never decrees

that any should become so wretched.

(Bjork, 2014: 13)

Lines 97-103 of *The Gifts of Men* also offer interesting insights on the matter. In particular, they are useful to draw a solid parallel with the Old Norse tradition expressed in *Hávamál*:

Nis nu ofer eorþan ænig monna
mode þæs cræftig, ne þæs mægeneacen,
þæt hi æfre anum ealle weorþen
gegearwade, þy læs him gilp sceððe,
oþþe fore þære mærþe mod astige,
gif he hafaþ ana ofer ealle men
wlite ond wisdom ond weorca blæd;

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 140)

There is no one over the earth
So skillful in mind, nor so mighty
That all the gifts should ever be
Vested in one person alone, lest pride should injure him,
Or the heart should rise up because of that fame
If he alone above all people
Had beauty and wisdom and glory of works

(Bjork, 2014: 19)

These fragments arguably hold major importance because they contribute to make our understanding of the poem more complete, revealing a range of influences, models and features much broader than one could expect. *The Gifts of Men* cannot be reduced to the simple but not completely suitable definition of "catalogue poem". There is no doubt that it is so, but an in-depth analysis actually reveals much more.

Providing a date or even a period in which the poem was most likely composed is not easy, although some hypotheses have been advanced. According to Short (1973: 186-190), the poem appears to have been composed in the late 9th or early 10th century. In particular, he argues that *The Gifts of Men* was composed just before the compilation of the Exeter Book. His claim is linguistic-based and takes into account features of diction, metre and literary style to be found in the poem. They characterise it – just like *The Fortunes of Men* – as successive to *Precepts* (Short, 1973: 189). His conclusion is supported by the adoption of a method first suggested and devised by Menner (1951:

285-294), based on how many prose words – words typically occurring in prose rather than in poetry – appear in a certain poem. Prose words are widely attested in *The Gifts of Men*, something that suggests its belonging to a later tradition, as opposed to earlier heroic poems or catalogue ones like *Precepts* that manifested a vocabulary significantly more "poetic".

Short (1973: 189) also focuses his analysis on quantifier words such as *fela* ('many'), present in *The Gifts of Men*. Such words, defined count-words, are often stressed in the poem, something common in the later Old English poetic tradition. In general, Short (1973: 189) says that the introduction and the conclusion of the poem "show a tendency toward rhetorical parallelism and complex hypotactical relationships that has more in common with tenth century homiletic traditions than with early poetry". Stylistic and linguistic reasons are what guide Short (1973: 190) in his analysis, which appears thorough and difficult to prove wrong, but, at the same time, also not easy to validate, since there are no certainties.

The Gifts of Men is centred around the use of catalogues, something quite attested in Old English poetry, in particular in *The Fortunes of Men*. Such poem also displays lists, albeit making use of less reassuring images and conveying a darker, starker atmosphere. An in-depth study of the possible parallels existing between *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* appears in Howe (1985: 104-132). An account of such comparison, alongside some critical considerations, will be provided at the end of this chapter.

1.3. *The Fortunes of Men*

The Fortunes of Men is a 98-line poem found between folios 87r and 88v of the Exeter Book. It is also known with the titles of *The Fates of Men* (Isaacs, 1975: 363; Swenson, 1991: 123), *The Fates of Mortals* (Muir, 2000a: 244) and as *The Fortunes of Mortals* (Bjork, 2014: 56). Such variety in terms of naming is highly indicative of the difficulty in finding the most suitable title to reflect the content of the poem. Some argue that the poem mainly deals with death and other doomed and horrific possibilities, thus suggesting the necessity of using the term *fates* in its title. On the other hand, several critics understand the poem in a partial relation to *The Gifts of Men*, thus

arguing that 'fortunes' fits better in the title. The title which continues to be used the most is the one proposed by Krapp & Dobbie (1936: 154), thus the present dissertation sticks to it.

Deemed as an example of both gnomic and wisdom poetry – as the separation between the two is, most of the times, quite subtle – it is mostly considered by critics as a poem of the didactic Christian tradition (Dammers, 1976: 461) that conveys a considerable degree of knowledge from the ancient times (Isaacs, 1975: 363). "*The Fortunes of Men* makes clear by its focus why the life of the mind is a better thing to cling to than this mortal life. The mutability and instability of the world encourage us to move beyond it and eventually to the absolute in God" (Bjork, 2014: xiv). Bjork's point is instrumental in summarising the main points and the aim of the poem. Its poet may have intended it as a powerful tool to teach people how to live in God's grace, avoiding the sins that life could present, as well as its dangers. In particular, the dangers and the very unlikely circumstances that animate one of the two catalogues of *The Fortunes of Men* could be interpreted in two different, yet intertwining, perspectives. As a matter of fact, not only do they make reference to actual, physical perilous situations, but they could also stand for something else, thus conveying a higher metaphorical meaning. This is perfectly plausible, given the tendency of finding the divine and also the maleficent in the ordinary circumstances of life that was very common and widespread in the Middle Ages.

The poem comprises two catalogues. The first lists and describes in detail a variety of ways in which human beings can meet their deaths, emphasising the "horror at the fragmentation and desecration of the corpse after death" (Black et al, 2015c: 1). On the other hand, the second catalogue enumerates the many different skills and talents which God has granted to different individuals, in the manner of *The Gifts of Men*. As a matter of fact, the two could be interpreted as the two faces of the same coin, and thus be analysed as a whole in order to understand and contextualise the elements they have in common and the ones that makes them separate and distinguishable.

Among the three poems, *The Fortunes of Men* is perhaps the one that has received the most critical acclaim, albeit to a much lesser degree than other composition of the Exeter Book and of other codices. In general, it is perceived as the superior didactic poem of the three, partly due to its wise use of powerful images and of values

referring both to the salvific and horrific aspects of life and faith. As Ashurst (2010: 130) argues, *The Fortunes of Men* is not colourless as the other poems, characterising itself as superior to them in a sense, or, at least, as the most appreciated.

As one can immediately see, the poem presents itself as a list. More specifically, it operates through the means of a catalogue or rather two catalogues. The two are quite different – if not opposed – and this has created some issues of classification. According to the division proposed by Swenson (1991: 126), the poem can be interpreted as displaying a four-party structure:

1. Introduction (lines 1-9); it offers us the contrast between joy and death the poem is based upon;
2. Catalogue 1 (lines 10-57); it lists and describes – sometimes very vividly – painful ways of suffering and dying;
3. Catalogue 2 (lines 58-92); strictly related to the same contents dealt with in *The Gifts of Men*, it provides images of joyful and blessed lives;
4. Conclusion (lines 93-98); thematically linked to the previous section, it reiterates the concept of God's grace and generosity that humankind should be thankful for.

The introduction has the aim of setting the atmosphere that characterises the entire poem. Right from the very first lines, it is already possible to have an idea of the direction that *The Fortunes of Men* will follow, as well as of its complexity. We immediately understand that the poem will exploit many images, charging them with multiple meanings. At times, such meanings can even be syncretical, in compliance with the principle according to which Old English literature may be understood as a balance of the sacred and the heathen. The poem begins with a reference to two parents – a man and a woman – giving life to some children, thus honouring God's commandment "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1: 28). The composition reflects on the fundamental role played by parents in raising their children and preparing them to face any possible situation, both lucky and unfortunate. Lines 1-8 convey joyful images, but the tone of

the poem is bound to change in the ending lines of the introduction. Indeed, lines 8-9 make the first reference to a catalogue of misfortunes, completely overturning any possible idea and expectation that the reader might have had while reading the introduction:

> God ana wat
> hwæt him weaxendum winter bringað!
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 154)

> God alone knows
> What winters will bring them as they are growing up
> (Bjork, 2014: 57)

By referring to winter, a new aim of the poem becomes clear. The poet wants to discuss perilous situations and manners of death. Catalogue 1 illustrates them, sometimes with a variety of details that give *The Fortunes of Men* an extremely visual quality not always seen in other Old English wisdom poems. This arguably makes the poem the carefully-thought work of a competent writer with an interest in structural coherence, in giving a certain edge to his poem as well as keen on characterising it in a unique way. Several thematic choices also seem to display a possible knowledge of multiple traditions, something that arguably increases the artistic value of the poem.

Catalogue 1 displays a high degree of complexity, and it lists many unfortunate events through a series of powerful images. Some of them are extremely detailed and described with a notable richness in lexical terms, thus implying the ability of its poet. Some references to other sources, including biblical, folklorist and mythological ones are present. In several cases, they present a double-sided value, which one may understand by adopting different perspectives while reading some specific lines.

That is really the case of lines 10-14, which open the catalogue presenting the not-so-reassuring image of a wolf that devours a young person, putting an end to his or her life. The concept of youth holds a certain importance in the poem, as most of the tragical situations that are depicted refer to a youthful dimension. Furthermore, such concept returns later in the poem, albeit with some differences, at the beginning of Catalogue 2 (lines 58-63).

Sumum þæt gegongeð on geoguðfeore
þæt se endestæf earfeðmæcgum
wealic weorþeð. Sceal hine wulf etan,
har hæðstapa; hinsiþ þonne
modor bimurneð. Ne bið swylc monnes geweald!

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 154)

For some sufferers it happens that the end
Woefully occurs during youth.
The wolf, the hoary health stalker,
Will devour him; his mother will then mourn
His departure. Such is not under human control

(Bjork, 2014: 57)

The choice of referring to a wolf is likely not accidental because such animal conveys a variety of possible meanings, both positive and negative. With regard to the latter, in the Bible, wolves often stand for destructiveness and greed (Bright, 2006: 115-120) and, in Jesus's words, they hold a similarity with the so-called false prophets, meaning people who falsely claims the gift of prophecy or divine inspiration to speak for God or with some evil aims in mind (Marvin, 2011: 43-47). Moreover, in Aesop's Fables, wolves are commonly associated to danger, malice, hypocrisy and duplicity (Marvin: 2011: 38-40). With these images and features in mind, it is easy to understand the twofold meaning of lines 10-14. They can be interpreted in a literal way, referring to a possible actual danger one might find while walking without paying much attention. However, the meaning is arguably also highly metaphorical, since the wolf can be associated with the concept of sinful life. If one lives carelessly in sin, there is some serious possibility of being devoured by the jaws of Hell. Avoiding sin is not easy as stressed by line 14, yet at the same time it is fundamental, and thus the poem could serve as a warning. Overall, Catalogue 1 seems to have this very purpose.

Catalogue 1 goes on briefly mentioning some misfortunes that lead people to a painful death, but without taking them into proper account. Vivid descriptions of some unlikely fates are provided starting from lines 21-26. In particular, this fragment describes with a certain degree of grim irony how one falls from a high tree. These lines make explicit reference to a *wæstm* ('fruit') hanging from a *wudu-beam* ('tree'). Such fruit can be easily interpreted as a direct reference to the forbidden fruit, which is the fruit growing in the Garden of Eden which God commands Adam and Eve not to eat.

Again, it is possible to argue that these lines hold two meanings, a literal one that creates a parallel between the human life and that of a fruit, and perhaps a more relevant and metaphorical one suggesting that humankind should not be against God's will and ought not to embrace the Original Sin again after having washed it away through the sacrament of baptism.

Catalogue 1 seems mostly focused on disasters, which are described with many piquant details that further enrich the visual quality of the poem (Ashurst, 2010: 130). As Jurasinski (2007) argues that "it is plain that this catalog reflects a taste for gloomy subjects not shared by subsequent eras and perhaps peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon period. Nor is it impossible that this poem preserves to some extent some of the more harrowing sights that were known to early medieval people" (245). The first half of *The Fortunes of Men* describes through a series of images a grim, almost otherworldly, landscape in which horrible deaths occur. Apparently, they cannot be avoided, as stressed by line 14: *Ne bið swylc monnes geweald*, meaning "Such is not under human control" (Bjork, 2014: 57). As Raw (1978: 73), Larrington (1993: 143) and Brady (2014: 335) argue, this would highlight a certain sense of helplessness on the part of people. Nevertheless, it is also true that human agency plays a role in the poem. The horrific deaths taking place in Catalogue 1 are arguably the result of a human sinful behaviour. Because of excessive *hubris* ('pride, insolence, outrage'), mortals can be tempted by the possibility of overreaching, which generally results in their own death. In a sense, people can control their own fate, and it is their own responsibility to choose whether to live a blessed life or not. God does not directly cause death and He also does not prevent it from happening, thus leaving to humankind the task of avoiding dangers and sins. In this sense, *The Fortunes of Men* seems to warn and, at the same time, empower humankind, and it does so through the evocative images of Catalogue 1, which may be interpreted as instrumental in starting a process of catharsis and spiritual purification.

The following section is Catalogue 2, which is just as interesting as the first one, even though it does not display the same visual, vivid and horrific images. On the other hand, one of the main focuses is on the gifts granted by God to humankind, something which allows to interpret *The Fortunes of Men* in relation to *The Gifts of Men*. The second catalogue may seem less evocative and more conventional than the first one, but

it does not lack any merits whichsoever. Just like the previous one, "the list of activities engaged in by those whose lives turn out well is vivid and delightful in the abundant details it gives" (Ashurst, 2010: 130), thus revealing the craftmanship of the poet in the creation of an intriguing contrast in terms of contents with the first catalogue.

Catalogue 2 opens with some lines dealing with youth, which resemble the opening ones of Catalogue 1 (10-14). In particular, lines 58-63 read:

> Sum sceal on geoguþe mid godes meahtum
> his earfoðsiþ ealne forspildan,
> ond on yldo eft eadig weorþan,
> wunian wyndagum ond welan þicgan,
> maþmas ond meoduful mægburge on,
> þæs þe ænig fira mæge forð gehealdan.
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 155)

> One during youth through God's might will
> waste the whole time of hardship,
> and in old age again become blessed,
> dwell in joyous days and partake of prosperity,
> treasures and the mead cup among his family,
> in as much as anyone can hold on to such things
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 61)

Here, youth is treated differently from the opening of Catalogue 1, in which the image of a greedy and hungry wolf is used to mean the tragic and painful end of youth before having the chance to atone for one's sins and thus probably ending up in Hell. Catalogue 2 begins with the description someone who has endured a dangerous youth but has managed to survive it. The perilous youth could stand for all the hardships of life, which, once having been overcome, can lead to a blessed life in old age. Old age offers the possibility to celebrate the joys of life alongside family, as well as to share wisdom, the teachings and the gifts that originally came from God with one's offspring. The introduction marks the general tone of the remaining part of the poem, and, indeed, Catalogue 2 mostly conveys images similar to the ones present in *The Gifts of Men*.

Following the catalogue of gruesome misfortunes, the poem transitions into a survey of positive outcomes and accomplishments that extend from line 58 to 92. Even though the accounts of lives that are blessed may appear less evocative and poetically inspired than the gruesome deaths of the first catalogue, details do not lack here.

Moreover, references to well-known and defining figures of Early English society and of its lore are present. Particularly interesting is the fragment comprising lines 72-76, dealing with the figure of a goldsmith:

> Sumum wundorgiefe
> þurh goldsmiþe gearwad weorþað;
> ful oft he gehyrdeð ond gehyrsteð wel,
> brytencyninges beorn, ond he him brad syleð
> lond to leane. He hit on lust þigeð.
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 156)

> To one wondrous gifts
> in goldsmithing are granted;
> very often he will harden and ornament well,
> the man of the powerful king, and he will give him broad
> land in reward. He will gladly accept it.
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 61)

The legendary Germanic figure of Weland the Smith[23] seems to echo in these lines that deal with a goldsmith who lends his craftmanship – which derives from God as hinted by *wundor-giefe* ('wonderful gifts') at line 72 – at the service of a king and he gets rewarded with a large share of land. It is impossible not to take into account Weland, who however, unlike his counterpart of *The Fortunes of Men*, does not enjoy the same privileged treatment from king Niðhad. As a matter of fact, he is hamstrung by Niðhad who forces Weland to serve him without giving anything in return to the blacksmith. Ultimately, he manages to get revenge, as testified by the account of his story in the sources in which he appears[24]. The image is surely powerful, and it seems to testify a certain heathen Germanic substratum, something which has led Swenson (1991) to ask himself:

> Has a Christian poet awkwardly re-worked and colored a heathen fragment, or
> has a Christian poet written a unified poem which uses Germanic coloring to
> heighten its evocation of the power of Christ over Fate? (Swenson, 1991: 124)

---

[23] Weland in Old English and Vǫlundr in Old Norse to quote just two of his names in two eminent Germanic traditions (Gillespie, 1973: 142). He is a master blacksmith originating in Germanic heroic legends.

[24] The three most famous ones are perhaps *Deor*, an Old English poem from the Exeter Book, *Vǫlundarkviða* ('The lay of Vǫlund') from the *Poetic Edda*, and the *Velents þáttr smiðs* ('The lay of Velent the smith') in the Old Norse chivalric saga *Þiðrekssaga af Bern* ('The saga of Þiðrekr of Bern').

The sacred and the heathen dimensions are often considered as two incompatible categories, yet *The Fortunes of Men* seems to locate itself at the crossroads of the two, combining the Germanic, the Celtic and the Latinate, as well as the Christian and the lay. This is representative of Old English literature, which may be viewed as an:

> extraordinary corpus which emerged from the encounter between an unlettered Germanic tribal aesthetic and the remnants of the classical tradition, itself transformed by the Christian religion. Old English literature is a palimpsest, and few periods in the history of English literature offer the literary historian a greater challenge to comprehend and appreciate the layers as they accumulated over many centuries, understanding its historical context and yet using modern critical techniques. (Greenfield & Calder, 1986: 3)

Old English literature exhibits an emphasised syncretic component, which represents an added value (Swenson, 1991: 125). Indeed, it encourages the exploration of the ways in which a given poem works and of the influences it presents. This allows the traditional monolithic unity of poetry to fall, thus opening the path to many new possibilities of analysis. For example, Catalogue 1 can be interpreted as reflecting a "partially submerged memory of Germanic initiatory rites, possibly the residuum of an earlier pre-Christian poem" (DiNapoli, 2014a: 197). Swenson (1991: 126) argues that the poem "shows evidence of having been created through a process of accretion and interpolation". She also states that it contains some archaic references to "Germanic ritual deaths" (Swenson, 1991: 127), namely Odin's death after having hanged himself on the tree *Yggdrasil* ('Odin's horse, gallows'), as written in stanza 138 of *Hávamál*, from the *Poetic Edda*:

> Veit ek, at ek hekk vindga meiði á
> nætr allar níu, geiri undaðr
> ok gefinn Óðni,
> sjalfr sjalfum mér,
> á þeim meiði, er manngi veit
> hvers af rótum renn.
>
> (Bray, 1908: 102)

> I know that I hung on a windy tree
> nine long nights
> wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
> myself to myself,
> on that tree which no man knows

from where its roots run.

(Larrington, 1999: 34)

Through his sacrifice, Odin gained access to the runes, hence to a higher knowledge. It is impossible not to notice a parallel with lines 21-26 and 33-42 of *The Fortunes of Men* dealing respectively with death falling from a tree and on the gallows while enduring the suffering caused by a raven. This further underlines the complexity and multitude of sources and references of the poem.

On the other hand, the introduction, Catalogue 2 and the conclusion are clearly more based on Christian themes. Indeed, the conclusion deals with the fact the God created the world – defined as *middan-geard* ('the world')[25] at line 94 – and provided people with valuable skills, distributing them mercifully and coherently (as already discussed concerning *The Gifts of Men*). The stark contrast between the sections is noteworthy and it characterises the poem as a "big picture" (DiNapoli, 2021: 145) trying to catch a glimpse of many opposed traditions to create something totally unprecedented. According to some, *The Fortunes of Men* results overly-complex or even inconsistent in its combination of such opposed sections. Clements (2018: 49) argues that "much of this neglect is owing to the perplexing structure of the poem and its lack of a clear internal explanation for its contents". Some have found the two catalogues discrepant and incompatible, but this can be explained advancing the hypothesis that they might have their source in a traditional wisdom poem circulating in an oral and not-fixed form before *The Fortunes of Men* was written (Neidorf, 2020: 108). In other words, the poem could arguably be a reworking of an already existing poem, and this would explain the discrepancies allegedly present in it. Neidorf (2020: 109) also argues that:

> it is possible that the resultant incongruity was precisely the effect that the poet sought to create. By taking a traditional catalogue and imposing an antithetical moral upon it, the poet of *Fortunes* creates a paradoxical work that conveys the mysteriousness of life. In this reading, the incongruity remains a real and essential part of the poem, but it would result not from haste or carelessness, but

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[25] The compound noun *middan-geard* occurs several times in Old English literature, including one time in *The Gifts of Men* (line 28) and, most notably, six times in the epic poem *Beowulf*. It is the same word as *miðgarðr* in Old Norse, and it refers to the known world in which humankind lives. It literally translates as 'middle enclosure', and it likely inspired J.R.R. Tolkien in creating Middle-earth as the fictional setting of most of his *legendarium*.

from a deliberate attempt to compose a poem that would instill a sense of profound wonder in its audience.

Catalogue 2 goes on presenting other fascinating images. One particularly interesting and, in a way, also odd – if we consider the poem to deal with human helplessness – is the one of the falconer at lines 85-92:

> Sum sceal wildne fugel wloncne atemian,
> heafoc on honda, oþþæt seo heoroswealwe
> wynsum weorþeð; deþ he wyrplas on,
> fedeþ swa on feterum fiþrum dealne,
> lepeþ lyftswiftne lytlum gieflum,
> oþþæt se wælisca wædum ond dædum
> his ætgiefan eaðmod weorþeð
> ond to hagostealdes honda gelæred.

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 156)

> One must train the wild, proud bird,
> the hawk, to his hand, until the falcon
> becomes pleasant; he puts jesses on it,
> feeds in its fetters the one exulting in feathers,
> gives the one swift in the air little morsels,
> until the servile one in dress and deeds
> becomes obedient to his feeder
> and guided to the hand of its provider.

(Bjork, 2014: 63)

According to Neidorf (2020: 98), the image of the falconer "seems rather discordant with the poem's purported theme of man's helplessness. A person who has invested time, energy, and skill into taming and teaching a resistant beast does not appear to be a fitting symbol of helplessness or resignation". The helplessness supposedly present in the nature of man has been one of the most supported interpretations of *The Fortunes of Men*, starting from Dammers (1976: 468), who argues that humankind, just like a bird tamed by a falconer, bows before God, submitting to him and accepting its faith. Neidorf (2020: 97) proposes another view, focusing on the contrast between the two catalogues.

Catalogue 1 is centred on what humans fail to control, which leads them to death. On the other hand, Catalogue 2 focuses on what happens when humans manage to control their impulses, avoiding sin and danger and thus achieving some control over

the environment surrounding them. It emerges from this reading that people can exert considerable power over their lives, and thus they result empowered and not helpless as others would suggest. Therefore, the didactic aim of the poem could be interpreted as a call by the poet to exhort his fellows to gain control over their lives, respecting God and avoiding danger and sin.

The image of the falconer can also be analysed as adding yet another Germanic layer to the poem. As a matter of fact, it connects it with the practice of falconry, that is the hunting of wild animals in their natural state and habitat by means of a trained bird of prey. Falconry was traditionally practiced by the aristocracy and, as an activity, it required many of the skills that nobles were expected to possess and to display to prove their worth and valour (Russom, 1978: 5-6).

Besides the previous reference to *Hávamál*, *The Fortunes of Men* also shares some similarities with another Eddic poem – namely *Sigrdrífumál* ('Sigrdrífa's discourse') – as noted by Russom (1978: 4). Stanza 30 is highly significant in this sense:

> Sǫngr ok ǫl hefr seggjum verit
> mǫrgum at móðtrega, sumum at bana,
> sumum at bǫlstǫfum;
> fjǫlð er, þat er fira tregr
>
> (Boer, 1922: 172)

> Songs and ale have been cause of sorrow
> to many a man;
> slayers of some, misfortune for some
> manifold is the grief of men
>
> (Larrington, 1999: 171)

A certain "shade of Germanness" is indeed present in lines 48-57 of *The Fortunes of Men*, which exploits – just as *Sigrdrífumál* – the similar images of wine and beer:

> Sumum meces ecg on meodubence
> yrrum ealowosan ealdor oþþringeð,
> were winsadum; bið ær his worda to hræd.
> Sum sceal on beore þurh byreles hond
> meodugal mæcga; þonne he gemet ne con

gemearcian his muþe mode sine,
ac sceal ful earmlice ealdre linnan,
dreogan dryhtenbealo dreamum biscyred,
ond hine to sylfcwale secgas nemnað,
mænað mid muþe meodugales gedrinc.

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 155)

From one, an ale tippler in his wrath,
a man sated with wine, the edge of the sword on the mead
bench takes his life; he was too quick with his words before.
One through beer from the cupbearer's hand will
become a mead-mad man; then he will know no measure,
will not give boundary to his mouth with his mind,
but he must very wretchedly yield up his life,
endure great misfortune bereft of joys,
and people will say he killed himself, will decry
the drinking of the mead-mad man with their mouths.

(Bjork, 2014: 59-61)

The perils of drinking are attested in *Sigrdrífumál, The Fortunes of Men* and also in *Precepts*[26]. This is highly relevant, as it contributes to characterise the second poem as more Germanic than Latin (Cross, 1959: 84), and surely influenced at some degree by Proverbs (20: 1), which reads: "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise".

Concerning the date or, at least, the period in which *The Fortunes of Men* was composed, any solid certainty lacks, even though the same considerations advanced for *The Gifts of Men* can apply[27]. Based on them, it is possible to say that the poem was likely composed in the late 9th or early 10th century (Short, 1973: 186-190). Possibly, it is contemporary to *The Gifts of Men*, as, the two poems display a greater Germanic influence than *Precepts*, which, on the other hand, appears more indebted towards Christianity and its texts as well as towards traditional literary forms. This could be the sign of several contacts between the Christian context of monasteries – in which the poetic art was cultivated – and the heathen traditions brought by Norse riders when they came to England.

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[26] Verse 34 of *Precepts* reads *Druncen beorg þe*, that is "Fortify yourself against drunkenness" (Bjork, 2014: 23).
[27] See pp. 86-87 (*The Gifts of Men*).

As argued by Jurasinski (2007: 356) "*The Fortunes of Men* discloses a catalog whose elements are so well integrated as to justify this poem's departure from the inventory of "gnomic" curiosities with which it has long been classified". It is much more elaborate than what is generally attested, thus it deserves the adoption of "paradigm of complexity" to understand the totality of its colorful shades.

1.4. *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*: a brief comparison

A brief comparison between *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* can be attempted, as already done by Howe (1985: 104-132). The two poems form part of the Exeter Book, and they both display a structural division in multiple parts: introduction, middle section (comprising one or more catalogues), conclusion. In each case, the introduction and conclusion are relatively brief, and the middle section occupies most of the poem. Structure-wise but not only, this makes them worthy of a comparison.

Howe (1985) argues that both poems possess a didactic aim, even though the atmosphere and the message conveyed by the two is different. On the one hand, *The Fortunes of Men* deals with certain situations concerning the lives and deaths of various members of humankind. On the other hand, *The Gifts of Men* focuses on a merry celebration of the talents God has given to humankind, without making use of the highly-evocative and horrific images of its counterpart. On its side, *The Fortunes of Men* makes reference to some of the images of *The Gifts of Men*, and it creates a contrast with them. According to Howe (1985: 110-111), this makes *The Fortunes of Men* the most complex of the two and the product of a poet showing a higher degree of skill.

The Gifts of Men makes use of the literary device of repetition, through which the same concepts accumulate. This results in the reinforcement of the original idea. This is typical of poetry, but it is also true this process has received some critiques. For example, Howe (1985: 110) states that *The Gifts of Men* presents a "sequence of elements [that] does not form a meaningful pattern and [in which] certain of the elements are repeated for no discernable reason". Howe (1985: 131 and 105) has no doubts when he says that "the poet of *Fortunes* reveals a more mature view of life, as

well as of God's creation, than does the poet of *Gifts*" and that, in general, he is "more gifted".

According to this view, *The Fortunes of Men* characterises itself as a more mature poem that displays a clearer and more coherent structure. *The Fortunes of Men* is indeed clearly divided between the account of joyful experiences and of sorrowful ones. Its two catalogues are balanced, unlike in *The Gifts of Men* that only focuses on the bright side. This would make *The Fortunes of Men* the superior didactic poem among the two. Howe's view is also shared by other critics; some of them consider *The Fortunes of Men* inherently better and more original than *The Gifts of Men* (Shippey, 1976: 10). Furthermote, other scholars express themselves in positive terms with regard to the visual aspects and the many details of *The Fortunes of Men* (Greenfield & Calder, 1986: 263; Hartman, 2016: 328-329).

Howe's analysis is indeed thorough, and, in many ways, very objective and text-based. However, it is possible to argue that his comments on *The Gifts of Men* can sound quite harsh, especially the claim of it being a "flawed poem" (Howe, 1985: 105), the uninspired work of an uninspired poet. The author shows a clear inclination for *The Fortunes of Men*. However, the random and confused structure he finds in *The Gifts of Men* does not take anything away from the poem itself, which was evidently produced with a different context and with a different aim in mind. Such structure could be a conscious, motivated choice on the part of the poet. Indeed, a random order and a mixing pattern are effective in highlighting the diversity of God's gifts. Moreover, it could be added that the differences between the contexts for which *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* were likely conceived could explain the "opposite" approaches of the two poems. This makes difficult or even impossible to claim that one of the two showcases a better pattern and a superior structure, or that one is inherently better than the other.

Several other similarities and points of contact between the two poems can be identified, but they occur mainly at a linguistic level. Because of this, an analysis of these aspects will be carried out in the following chapter, centred around the linguistic study of the themes and the vocabulary in *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*.

Chapter 3:

Digging Deeper: at the Core of Wisdom

Little linguistic attention has been devoted to Old English wisdom poems. Some critical interventions on the matter have emerged over the course of the years, but a good deal of them mainly focused on few lines taken from a particular poem (Short, 1974: 388-389; Drout, 1998: 184-187). Howe (1985) and DiNapoli (2021) are two of the very few scholars to have shown a linguistic interest on a number of Old English wisdom poems. They have conducted a detailed lexical analysis of several compositions, trying to understand the similarities and the differences existing between them.

Employing Howe (1985) and DiNapoli (2021) as reference models, this chapter aims to conduct an analysis founded on the themes and on a selection of particularly interesting terms that are present in *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*. As a matter of fact, the linguistic choices they display can already provide considerable information about their nature.

Since the three of them belong to the genre of wisdom poems, it is evident that several themes are shared. The three compositions here presented often convey the same message, something which might have led critics to criticise them, naively thinking that they had nothing to say except for a simple and conventional, biblical-based message of wisdom. Nevertheless, the three compositions adopt different perspectives and show different influences in working with similar themes, thus showing an undoubtedly high degree of craftsmanship and ingenuity and a certain originality as well.

The vocabulary to be found in the three poems is also a powerful tool of revealing how certain issues were considered by people in Early English society. Concerning *Precepts*, its themes and vocabulary offer us precious insights on the value

of the paternal relationship between father and son, on the virtues that were valued the most and on the methods of teaching wisdom. As for *The Gifts of Men*, interesting possibilities of analysis emerge if we consider the role of the mind in such composition, as well as how the nature of God is represented. God is portrayed as gentle and kind, and possessing a merciful mind, on which the minds of His offspring has probably been modelled. *The Fortunes of Men* – often interpreted as the superior and the most proper and articulate poem in terms of form among the three – allows us to reflect on the perception of death that people in Early English society had, as well as on its juxtaposition with the concept of life. The background of the three poems is similar, hence the fact they consider similar themes and issues. Yet, they describe such concepts employing different lexical choices.

1. Themes and Vocabulary

Precepts, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* are all wisdom poems, and thus they tend to convey similar messages and to revolve around comparable themes. Nevertheless, they all display different ways of approaching such themes and issues. Hence, they employ varying linguistic choices and items to provide a description and to achieve a certain effect on the readers and/or on the listeners. As for the listening dimension, one can imagine such poems – just like the others belonging to the Old English poetic corpus – recited in a monastic context as a means to spread knowledge, awareness or even fear, depending on the composition.

Before dwelling upon the linguistic analysis of a selection of particularly relevant words and concepts exploited by the poet(s) of the three compositions, it is essential to have an overview of the major and general themes they deal with. The three poems can be reduced to compositions dealing with pure and "simple" manifestations of God's wisdom on the Earth. What they convey may be viewed as plain, uninspired and self-evident, as argued by some critics. However, in reality, their content is universal, always valid and it can be applied, depending on the specific poem, to a variety of contexts, ranging from the Christian sacred to the heathen, according to the syncretism typical of Old English poetry. Only a few themes from every poem will be taken into

account. Indeed, if all of them were considered, the present chapter would be too vast and it would lack a specific focus. Hence, the decision to tackle only the most representative themes and the terms most related to them.

What really sets one poem apart from the other two lies not only in the different themes and issues they are centred on but also on the linguistic choices conducted by the poets. They are often revelatory of different feelings and attitudes towards similar concepts, and they contribute to a broad understanding of the different periods of Old English wisdom poetry.

For the purposes of the study, the Bosworth-Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online* (Bosworth, 2014) will be used extensively. It has been chosen because it is currently one of the most complete and easily accessible Old English dictionaries, and it provides several examples in context that allow to have a deep understanding of any given word. In other words, it is the "gold standard" for Old English students and scholars. However, since Bosworth (2014) is becoming outdated, its use has been combined with the one of the *Dictionary of Old English* (DOE). The Dictionary, published by the Centre for Medieval Studies of the University of Toronto, is still under production. Its 2018 online version contains the entries for letters A-I of the 24-letter Old English alphabet, and it will constitute the primary source with regard to words beginning with such letters. Comparisons with Bosworth (2014) will be made in order to enlarge the understanding of a given word. Another key resource that will be employed is Brunetti (2008). This website represents a powerful tool that endows several Old English texts with multiple representations of their lexicon: glosses, glossary, list of word forms, concordances and much more. It provides for each word the lemma to look for on an Old English dictionary, and it also gives access to what Brunetti (2008) calls "hyperlexicon", which allows to click on each word and to access useful glosses and statistics. The present work has also benefitted of the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus in Electronic Form* (DOEC) as to the combined search of words all through the Old English literary corpus.

1.1. *Precepts*

Precepts may be understood as a poem aiming to transmit solid principles mainly inspired by the Mosaic Decalogue. An evident theme is represented by the importance, or rather the necessity of living a virtuous life. Such a fact is also stressed in other poems – in different manners and with other approaches – particularly in *The Fortunes of Men*, which seeks to generate a sort of catharsis through a catalogue of gruesome deaths. What *Precepts* specifically does is celebrating virtues coming from God and from *fyrn-gewrites*, meaning "ancient writings" (Bjork, 2014: 25). The reference is likely to the Holy Writ itself, and maybe in particular to the (wisdom) *boca* ('books') King Alfred mentions in the preface of his Old English translation of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* (Fulk, 2021: 6-9). In particular, lines 67-68 and also 72-73 of *Precepts* read:

> "Nis nu fela folca þætte fyrngewritu
> healdan wille […]
> Ac læt þinne sefan healdan
> forð fyrngewritu ond frean domas
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 142)

> "There are not now many people who want
> To keep the ancient writings […]
> But let your heart hold
>
> the ancient writings and the judgments of the Lord
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 25)

Such verses are the only ones of the small corpus of the three poems analysed in the present thesis that explicitly mention the ancient writings, possibly to underline the fact that wisdom can be indeed conveyed by a wise man – a figure mentioned several times in the poem – but that, in the end, everything can be traced back to the Bible. The poet indubitably holds it in high consideration, as one can imagine judging from the structure and the numbering system in the order of the principles written about.

Moreover, these verses seem to echo with the condemnation expressed by King Alfred concerning the cultural and religious decay that England was living in the 9th

century, which, in his opinion, was due to a scarce knowledge of the wisdom books and to the diffused inability of understanding and reading Latin (Fulk, 2021: 6-7):

> […] ond ða swiðe lytle fiorme ðara boca wiston, forðǣm ðe hie hiora nanwuht ongiotan ne meahton for ðǣm ðe hie nǣron on hiora agen geðiode awritene, swelce hie cwǣden, "Ure ieldran, ða ðe ðas stowa ǣr hioldon, hie lufodon wisdom ond ðurh ðone hie begeaton welan ond us lǣfdon. Her mon mæg giet gesion hiora swæð, ac we him ne cunnon æfterspyrigean, ond forðǣm we habbað nu ǣgðer forlǣten ge ðone welan ge ðone wisdom, for ðǣm ðe we noldon to ðǣm spore mid ure mode onlütan."

> […] and they derived very little profit from those books, because they could comprehend nothing of them, since they were not written in their own tongue, as if they were to say, "Our elders, who once inhabited these parts, loved learning, and through it they amassed wealth and left it to us. Here their track can still be seen, yet we cannot follow it".

The poet of *Precepts* appears to share King Alfred's feelings and concerns, but he/she is unlikely to have taken inspiration from his words because, possibly, *Precepts* had already been composed, in particular between the 8th and 9th century. This would indicate a concern attested even before King Alfred's period on the throne of England[1], and it allows to have a better comprehension of Early English society and of what is relationship with religion and the Holy Writ was.

Precepts also stresses the importance of the figure of the unnamed father who teaches his nameless son how to live according to the highest principles of the Bible and of morality in general. His words are a powerful vehicle through which his thoughts and his wisdom are transmitted. The focus is on the paternal relationship between father and son, and it holds so much importance that the poem displays different ways of addressing and referring to the two. They are characterised with different adjectives that underline their role in relation to each other.

The principles taught by the father to his son are so important that it is mandatory to abide by them. As a matter of fact, if one fails to incorporate them in his/her life and in everyday situations, a punishment will inevitably be present. Line 19 reads: *He þe mid wite gieldeð*, that is "He will repay you with punishment" (Bjork,

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[1] A situation of decay had already been denounced by Bede the Venerable back in 8th century (Pàroli, 1982: 705-706). See Chapter 1, 3. (Monastic Poetics), pp. 45-46.

2014: 21). Another brief reference to the possible outcomes of a sinful behaviour animates lines 68-72:

> […] ac him hyge brosnað,
> ellen colað, idlað þeodscype;
> ne habbað wiht for þæt, þeah hi wom don
> ofer meotudes bibod. Monig sceal ongieldan
> sawelsusles.
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 142)

> […] but their thought crumbles,
> courage cools, the community grows idle;
> although they commit evil, against the creator's command,
> they get nothing for it. Many must pay
> With soul torment.
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 25)

The description of the punishments people may encounter if they do not follow the ten sacred principles that are listed is not as visual as in the case of the cruel and horrible deaths of *The Fortunes of Men*. This contributes to create a separation between the two not only on a thematic basis but also at a linguistic level. Punishment is a central issue in Old English wisdom poetry and in Christianity in general, yet it does not receive the same treatment in the three poems. It may be considered a theme of *Precepts*, but references to it are scarce and, arguably, not particularly instrumental in setting the atmosphere of the poem. Indeed, it is clearly more centred around a celebration of principles inspired by Christianity and of qualities and virtues associated to it.

Essentially, three main themes appear in *Precepts*, (1) namely the paternal relationship between father and son, (2) the celebration of principles partly deriving from the Decalogue and from other biblical sources, and (3) the importance of virtues. All of the just mentioned is instrumental to a comprehension of how wisdom is transmitted, treated and also referred to by the poet.

The present chapter will now proceed to conduct a linguistic analysis of some words strictly related to the themes. Particular attention will be devoted to the parts of speech and the expressions that inform us of the nature and the attitude of the father and the son. Furthermore, the verbs that express how wisdom is generated and passed from

one to the other will be considered. Such lexical aspects have been partly considered by Howe (1985: 133-165), in conjunction with *Maxims I* and *Maxims II*, and by DiNapoli (2021: 73-87). However, their analysis can be extended to include other relevant themes as well as some linguistic issues.

The relationship between father and son is pivotal in *Precepts*, up to the point that different words, nouns, adjectives and appositions are employed to mention them, with some terms returning several times in different instances. *Frod fæder* – translated as "the wise father" (Bjork, 2014: 21) is the first expression used to address the figure of the father. He is immediately characterised with the adjective *frod*, which reveals other possible meanings other than 'wise'. In particular, it can also mean "prudent, sage, skilful" and also "advanced in years, aged, old, ancient"[2] among its possible meanings, or "old and wise", "the venerable one"[3]. All of them suggest the value of such adjective and the sense of importance it gives to the noun it premodifies. It conveys a sense of maturity or ripeness as well as of wisdom acquired after having conquered many challenges and difficulties, thus characterising it as extremely precious and valuable. According to the DOE, it is used mainly in poetry, thus signaling the adjective to be particularly evocative.

Just after such definition of the father at line 1, he is shortly afterwards described in line 2 as *modsnottor mon*, translated by Bjork (2014: 21) using the expression "the man prudent in mind". *Snotor* or *snottor* (the latter form being the one employed in *Precepts*) is an adjective signifying "prudent, sagacious" but also "wise"[4]. This particular meaning endows the father with a very prominent aura, characterising him as a wise man perfectly capable of teaching wisdom in the most effective way. His qualities are explicitly recognised and highlighted multiple times in the poem, thus suggesting that they are held in high consideration by the poet.

A very interesting way of addressing the father is present at lines 21-22. They read *Ðriddan syþe þoncsnottor guma breostgehygdum his bearn lærde*, properly translated by Bjork (2014: 21) as "A third time the man wise in his breast-thoughts instructed his child". Other than the use of the noun *guma* ('man') as opposed to *mann* – with the former being more appropriate when dealing with a human being belonging to

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[2] Bosworth (2014).
[3] DOE.
[4] Bosworth (2014).

the male genre[5] – something that immediately catches our attention is the juxtaposition between thought and breast, that is between the high dimension of the mind and the more physical and "earthly" one of the chest[6]. Thoughts – which are generally interpreted as the product of the human mind and the quintessential manifestation of the human intellect – are here associated to the chest, and, arguably, also to the heart. The heart is generally conceived as the source from which feelings originate. The fact of combining two opposite domains is interesting and it creates a certain rhetorical effect that conveys the possible opinion of the poet on the matter. It is possible to infer that the poet believes that a person has to be considered as a whole and not as the mere sum of its parts.

Another expression that conveys a similar idea appears at lines 32-33, which read: *Fiftan siþe fæder eft ongon breost-geþoncum his bearn læran*, that is "For the fifth time the father again began with the thoughts of his heart to teach his child" (Bjork, 2014: 23). Again, thoughts and, in general, the activity of the mind, seem to manifest a certain correlation with the heart. This stresses the fact that the truest and most complete form of wisdom comes both from the mind and the heart. Both of them are necessary to the very purpose of instructing, and this leads us to the possible assumption that they were both equally valued in Early English society.

Precepts also provides us with two brief insights concerning the age of the father who speaks to his son. Line 59 characterises and depicts the father as *eald* ('old'). In a sense, it means so, yet it could be argued that there are other meanings that such adjective acquires in this particular context. As a matter of fact, it also conveys other values, namely "eminent, great, exalted"[7]. Such adjective is highly indicative of the fact that true wisdom comes from a man that not only is old, but also sage, eminent and held in high regard by those belonging to a certain social environment. According to the DOE, it gives a positive connotation to the names it premodifies, and it is often used in conjunction with adjectives that mean 'wise', such as *frod* and *wis*. Its entry on the DOE also reads "old in association with or contrast to young; ealde and / ge geonge". This

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[5] Bosworth (2014).

[6] *Breóst* is a noun conveying a variety of meanings and it can be used to indicate several human organs including the stomach and the womb. In this context, its most likely meaning is breast or chest. (Bosworth, 2014).

[7] Bosworth (2014).

use seems perfectly coherent with the context conveyed by Precepts, based on a series of teachings from a father to his younger son.

The old age of the anonymous father is also signaled by the adjective *gamol*, simply meaning old or aged without any other particular meaning[8] – at least not in this context. It appears at verse 65, while at verse 66 the same concept is conveyed by adjective *eald*. There, *eald* is associated with the noun *úþ-wita*, meaning 'sage'. According to the Bosworth-Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Online Dictionary*, it means "a person distinguished for wisdom or learning in general or in a special branch"[9]. Its use in relation to the old father is extremely indicative and revelatory of the social position that wise men must have enjoyed in Early English society. In particular, it allows us to truly understand how much respected and esteemed the ones who dedicated their lives to the transmission of wisdom were.

The son to whom the wisdom is addressed also displays a variety of terms connected to him, and they are helpful to understand his nature and his attitude. At line 1, *freo-bearn* is mentioned. It is a compound noun that Bjork (2014: 21) translates as "child of gentle birth". It is formed by *freo* and *bearn*. The meaning of the latter is quite clear, and it could be translated as "offspring, descendant, child"[10]. On the other hand, *freó* – which modifies the head of the compound – is fairly obscure in its possible meaning(s). It can mean, depending on the context, "possessing the social and legal status of a free person not in subjection to another"[11], "free, having liberty or immunity, noble, glad, joyful"[12]. The DOE has an entry for the compound noun *frēo-bearn*, which tell us that it means "free-born child or descendant" or "noble son". Judging how Bjork (2014: 21) translated it, and trying to interpret it having the first three lines of *Precepts* in mind, it probably refers to the aristocrats' relative freedom from daily labour obligations. *Freo* can be interpreted in a relation of opposition with the contemporary English adjective 'bound', to underline the fact that the child is free from any obligations and/or compulsions that are typical of adulthood (DiNapoli, 2021: 74-75). Therefore, it is possible to interpret the child both as noble (from a spiritual point of view but also on the basis of material wealth) and free.

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[8] Indeed, Bjork (2014: 25) simply translates it as "the aged one".
[9] Bosworth (2014).
[10] DOE.
[11] DOE.
[12] Bosworth (2014).

The first reference to the fact that the child is male appears at line 15, when he is called *sunu*, that is the accusative singular form of *sunu*, an Old English term simply meaning 'son'. He is also mentioned as *magan* – another accusative singular form of *mága*, a noun also translatable as 'son' – which is arguably used by the poet to to enrich the composition with a certain lexical variation. Lines 27-28 read:

> Feorþan siðe fæder eft lærde
> modleofne magan, þæt he gemunde þis
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 141)

> For a fourth time the father again taught
> the precious kinsman so that he should remember this
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 23)

The use of the compound noun *mod-leof* – which Bjork (2014: 23) translates as "the precious kinsman" – is interesting and it conveys the importance of the child in the family. *Mod* refers to the mind and/or to the passions, while *leóf* means "desirable, pleasant, acceptable, loved, beloved, dear; [...] one who is dear, a friend, loved one"[13]. The combination of the two is significant, as it highlights the relationship between father and son, characterising the latter as a precious resource that has to be protected in order to make it grow.

Lines 65-66 and 76-77 make use of the Old English term *eaforan*, that is the dative singular form of *eafora*.

> Nigeþan siþe nægde se gomola,
> eald uðwita sægde eaforan worn [...]
> Teoþan siþe tornsorgna ful,
> eald eft ongon eaforan læran
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 142)

> For the ninth time the aged one spoke,
> the old sage said much to his offspring [...]
> For the tenth time full of cares
> the old one began to teach his offspring
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 25)

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[13] Bosworth (2014).

Bjork (2014: 25) translates it on both occasions with "offspring", which is coherent with the meaning of such word as "offspring, child; descendant", "offspring in the first degree, in relation to either or both of the parents; child"[14]. Furthemore, it must be noted that the term does not hold a specific reference to sex, and that it is used mainly in poetry. The fact of employing a term meaning successor and heir is highly indicative of the fact that – at least in this context – the child is supposed to carry on the teachings and the wisdom transmitted to him by his old and sage father. The son is bound to absorb and assimilate such principles and to operate as the vehicle of transmission of wisdom to the subsequent generations. In other words, the son will facilitate the further spread of his father's will and virtues, charging them with his personal experience and attitude. The use of *eafora* highlights the importance of having a succession, as well as the fact that wisdom has to be passed on. Otherwise, if not properly cultivated, it will inevitably die. It needs to be promoted to contribute to the common good, and this will affect positively social advancement as well as one's chances to gain access to the heavenly kingdom. This is perfectly coherent with McEntire (1990: 243-244) suggesting that *Precepts* is best understood as a poem belonging to and describing a monastic milieu.

An interesting part of speech that can be considered adopting a linguistic perspective is represented by verbs. Arguably, they constitute the most useful and relevant key to understand the ways in which principles, teachings and, in general, wisdom are transmitted. In particular, they allow us to have a more complete comprehension of the attitude displayed by the nameless father in the process. A description of how the subject matter is learned is a widely attested feature in the majority of Old English wisdom poems, as pointed out by Battles (2014: 14), and verbs can help us in identifying it properly.

The most represented verb, appearing in six out of the ten principles the poem is based on, is *læran*, translated by Bjork (2014: 21, 25 and 20) as "to teach", and, in one case, as "to instruct". It is present in *Precepts* both in its infinitive form and in the preterite. *Læran* is a weak verb[15] whose meaning(s) can be understood by considering

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[14] DOE.

[15] Weak verbs form their preterite by adding *-de* suffix in the singular and *-don* in the plural. They are opposed to strong verbs, which form their preterite by means of a change in the stem-vowel. Irregular verbs such as the contemporary English one *to sing* (whose preterite *sang*) descend from strong verbs,

two entries on Bosworth (2014). The second one is perhaps the most significative with regard to the context of *Precepts*, and it tells us that the verb *læran* means "To teach, instruct, educate, to give religious teaching, to preach, to teach a particular tenet or dogma, to enjoin a rule, to exhort, admonish, advise, persuade, suggest"[16]. The other entry is also useful because it provides further insights on some nuances of the verb. In particular, it gives us the idea that *læran* can also be used to express a deontic modality[17]. More specifically, it can acquire the meaning of 'to give advice' but also of "to prescribe, order, enjoin, direct"[18], thus expressing an authoritative utterance. "To guide the action of a person"[19] is another meaning that such verb has, and it is indicative of the force it can express and of the process of passing wisdom.

Such process happens on a voluntary basis – such as in this specific case between father and son – but it is also true that, in a sense, wisdom and knowledge have to be passed or even enforced, thus signifying that an idea of strength is present in the verb itself and in the context of teaching. As a matter of fact, education is a process that is based on a certain hierarchy in which who is at the top of the chain inevitably influences with his/her superior strength, mental prowess and experience those who, on the other hand, are at the bottom. It requires considerable commitment on both parts, as it is a very serious and demanding process, as stressed by lines 76-77, which employ the powerful expression *torn-sogna ful*, translated by Bjork (2014: 25) as "full of cares". *Sorh* can indeed mean "care" but also "anxiety"[20]. Its juxtaposition to *torn* – meaning "grievous"[21] – indicates the seriousness of the matter and the heavy responsibility that the father has in transmitting wisdom.

Quite clearly, this does not mean that knowledge is imposed without consent or without the active participation of the learner, but it signals that there is a certain relationship going on. Such concept is reinforced at lines 59-60, which read:

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while regular ones (such as *to look*) – whose past tense form is marked by an inflection containing a /t/, /d/, or /ð/ sound (*looked*, for example) – descend from weak ones.

[16] Bosworth (2014).

[17] Deontic modality is a linguistic modality that indicates how the world ought to be according to certain norms, expectations, speaker desires, etc. "Deontic modality is concerned with the logic of obligation and permission" (Crystal, 1997: 109).

[18] Bosworth (2014).

[19] Bosworth (2014).

[20] Bosworth (2014).

[21] Bosworth (2014).

Eahtoþan siþe eald fæder ongon
his mago monian mildum wordum

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 142)

For the eighth time the old father began
to admonish his kinsman with mild words

(Bjork, 2014: 25)

The weak verb *monian* – accusative form, third person singular, present tense of the infinitive *manian* – has "to bring to mind what, should not be forgotten, to admonish, remind, suggest, prompt" and "to tell what ought to be done, to teach, instruct, advise"[22] among its meanings. Bjork (2014: 25) has employed the verb "to admonish" in his translation, and his choice manages to convey the intensity and the multiple meanings of this Old English term. Just like the verb *læran*, it expresses a deontic modality – albeit with less strength – as the action described by *monian* takes the form of an advice. It can convey the idea of a reproach, but the juxtaposition with the expression *mildum wordum*, dative plural form of the terms *milde* ('gentle') – and *word* ('word'), characterises the relationship existing between father and son as a tender and mutually respectful one. This is also suggested by the expression *bliðne geþoht* at line 44, meaning 'with gentle thought', which further portrays the paternal bond in a positive way. This could mean that wisdom can also (or has to) be taught and transmitted in a gentle way, provided one wants it to be effective and long-lasting.

The use of *word* at line 60 is noteworthy, because, among its meanings, there are those of "saying" and "maxim"[23]. This may indeed signify that the words coming from the experience of the old wise man characterise themselves as valuable teachings in the compact form of a maxim, meaning that their meaning rings true and universal while, at the same time, being short and easy to memorise. This favours its assimilation in one's own life and experience.

Another verb that contextualises how wisdom flows from the father to his son is *gegretan* and it appears in its preterite at line 15-16, which read "Fæder eft his sunu frod gegrette oþre siþe" (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 141), that is "The wise father greeted his son a second time" (Bjork, 2014: 21). *Gegretan* is a weak verb that means "to greet,

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[22] Bosworth (2014).
[23] Bosworth (2014).

address with expressions of good will, courtesy, or respect"[24], hence signaling a certain positivity in the relationship *Precepts* deals with. DOE also tells us that it is often used when dealing with a relationship between a superior and someone depending on him/her; this is, indeed, perfectly coherent with the father-son relationship presented in the poem.

Virtually the totality of the lexical choices taken into account seem to stress the importance of the process through which wisdom is transmitted, and to characterise the pedagogical choices that likely prevailed in Early English society in a positive way. Alongside the themes and the form employed by the poet, the vocabulary portrays a perfect "scene of instruction" (DiNapoli, 2021: 73). They underline the value of the actions, the manners and the attitudes involved in such a practice. All things considered, they contribute to align the poem with the perception of wisdom of Early English society, and to make it perfectly representative of wisdom poetry.

1.2. *The Gifts of Men*

Among the three poems that have been selected, *The Gifts of Men* is the one that is focused the most on the celebration of God's almighty power and of His generosity in sharing and giving valuable skills and wisdom to humankind. The most evident feature of the poem is the presence of a fairly long catalogue – extending for more than half of it (lines 30-96) – in which a collection of talents granted by God for people to use is provided. The criterion ordering the sequence of gifts in the catalogue is allegedly random, as secular skills are juxtaposed with spiritual ones. Moreover, the same applies to physical and mental talents. In spite of an uneven division between the just mentioned categories, this can suggest that talents belonging to different classes are equally important, and that people have to cultivate the totality of them in order to live a blessed life.

Even though the role of the mind is not excessively prioritised over that of the body, several terms connected with the mind characterise many sections of the poem. This is clearly shown by the extensive use of the Old English term *mod* ('mind'). In the

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[24] DOE.

113 lines of the poem, such word appears on thirteen occasions, occurring three times in the introduction (lines 1-29), seven times in the catalogue (lines 30-96), and other three in the conclusion (lines 97-113). This is unlikely to be a simple coincidence, and this could lead us to believe that the poet of *The Gifts of Men* had a specific aim in mind when writing the poem, thus explaining the prevalence of the term, alongside a wide attestation of other terms connected with cognition. It would also explain the massive presence in the catalogue of mentions of activities and skills that appear more mental and spiritual than physical and secular.

The mind is a key concept in *The Gifts of Men*, so it can be argued that the celebration of its importance represents one of the main themes of the composition. It is appropriate to take the role played by the mind in the present poem – and, evidently, also in other wisdom poems that celebrate the talents donated by God – because, as Harbus (2002: 3) puts it:

> The Old English poetic corpus contains many explicit references to the life of the mind, sufficiently numerous and prominently situated to suggest that psychology constitutes a definite thematic concern of these texts. This idea is supported by the frequency with which mental processes (perception, imagination, cognition, memory, intention), faculties (reason, intellect, belief, sensation), and experiences (meditation, reverie, dreams and visions) appear in vernacular verse.

Harbus's analysis suggests that the modern model of the mind – generally conceived as strongly opposed to the body and mainly associated with reason and knowledge rather than with emotions and sensations – is significantly different from the Early English model. Early English society valued the role and the importance of the mind as the most evident and tangible sign of God's power and influence on humankind. Such concept was conceived and interpreted differently during the Early English period, with two main traditions characterising the social perception, as well as the literary and poetic production reflected in several compositions. Godden (2002: 284) has considered the perception about the mind and argues that:

> Two distinct traditions of thought about the mind are evident among the Anglo-Saxons. There is, first of all, a classical tradition represented by Alcuin of York (writing in Latin and on the continent, but influential for Anglo-Saxon vernacular writers), King Alfred and Ælfric of Eynsham, who were consciously working in a line which went back through late antique writers such as St

Augustine and Boethius to Plato, but developed that tradition in interesting and individual ways. In particular they show the gradual development of a unitary concept of the inner self, identifying the intellectual mind with the immortal soul and life-spirit. Secondly, there is a vernacular tradition more deeply rooted in the language, represented particularly by the poets but occasionally reflected even in the work of Alfred and Ælfric. It was a tradition which preserved the ancient distinction of soul and mind, while associating the mind at least as much with passion as with intellect.

It is clear that the concepts of the mind and cognition must have enjoyed a certain relevance in Early English society, so a linguistic analysis is surely worth the effort. In particular, the present chapter will examine the ways in which the mind is dealt with in the poem through a selection of terms that highlight its role particularly well. Several talents donated by God and activities that are made possible thanks to such skills will be employed as examples to show how highly the mind was thought of. The fact that the poets most likely associated the mind also with human passions – something which nowadays tend to be examined in relation to the body and with its "less rational" nature – is relevant. They employed poetic conventions to convey the mental origin and reality of emotions. Therefore, the present analysis will try to consider the role of the mind not only in relation to thinking and to mental skills in general but also concerning emotions (Mize, 2006: 57-90).

Another interesting theme is the celebration of God's power. Not only has He created the world and given life to His offspring, but He has also endowed it with a number of different talents. Therefore, it could be argued that God possesses a merciful mind, in line with most of His representations in the New Testament as a gentle, sympathetic and caring entity. Some linguistic considerations will be advanced, in order to enlarge our understanding about the perception of the figure and the nature of God that people of Early English society had.

With regard to the linguistic choices displayed by *The Gifts of Men*, much can be said about the language employed to describe the different skills and talents donated by God to humankind. Referring to Godden (2002: 284-314, especially 300) and to his brief but relevant example concerning *The Gifts of Men* and further enlarging his perspective on the present poem, it is possible to conduct a linguistic investigation of the poet's use of the Old English noun *mod*, as well as of other terms of cognition. Some academic literature centred on the concept and on the representation of the mind

and of the power of cognition in Old English poetry exists, most notably Harbus (2002) and Godden (2002: 284-314). However, only few interventions considering *The Gifts of Men* have emerged – in particular Howe (1985: 104-132), and DiNapoli (2021: 124-144). Nevertheless, none of them has paid particular attention to the poet's concept of the mind or his use of mind-related words. Therefore, this analysis will be focused on such theme to provide a less debated perspective on the matter.

Before considering such linguistic choices, it is necessary to properly define the Old English word *mod*. *Mod* is a polysemous and versatile term with a number of different meanings and values, which change according to the context and to the word(s) it is associated with. This would explain the many uses it is associated with in *The Gifts of Men*. In particular, according to Bosworth (2014), its most common meanings and uses are:

1. The inner man, the spiritual as opposed to the bodily part of man;
2. With references to the intellectual or mental qualities: mind;
3. With reference to the passions and the emotions: soul, heart, spirit, mind, disposition, mood;
4. A special quality of the soul; in a good sense, it can mean courage or high spirit. On the other hand, it also holds negative values and meanings, namely pride and arrogance;
5. It can also apply to inanimate things and signify: greatness, magnificence, pride.

These meanings are indeed very precious because they contribute to enlarge our understanding of the many dimensions and categories that *mod* belongs to. The privileged dimension seems to be the one of cognition and of intellect, which characterise the very beginning of *The Gifts of Men*. The opening lines of the poem are already interesting and relevant for the purposes of the current study because they make the first reference to the mind. The first appearance of a mind-related term is marked by *gewitte* ('mind, intellect'). Moreover, the first lines show that, just like in *Precepts*, there is a certain hierarchy going on in the transmission of gifts to the humankind. Specifically, lines 1-7 read:

Fela bið on foldan forðgesynra
geongra geofona, þa þa gæstberend
wegað in gewitte, swa her weoruda god,
meotud meahtum swið, monnum dæleð,
syleð sundorgiefe, sendeð wide
agne spede, þara æghwylc mot
dryhtwuniendra dæl onfon.

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 137)

Many new gifts are visible
On earth, those that soul bearers
Carry in their minds, according as the God of hosts,
That measurer strong in might, deals them out to human beings,
Gives special gifts, sends them widely
By his own power, a portion of which each
Of those living among the people may receive.

(Bjork, 2014: 13)

We immediately see the fact that *The Gifts of Men* stresses the role of cognition because there is an explicit mention of the fact that intellect is necessary to receive and make use of the gifts granted by God. The poet of *The Gifts of Men* employs the neuter noun *ge-wit*, which means "wits, senses, [right] mind, mind, intellect" and also "knowledge, understanding, consciousness"[25]. A powerful and prepared mind is absolutely crucial in the process, which characterises itself as hierarchical. As a matter of fact, a concept of power is associated to God, as shown by the expression *meahtum swið* – dative singular forms of the noun *meaht* and of the adjective *swið*, which mean 'might' and 'strength' – at line 4. God's power is addressed through an expression that combines two terms linked to the idea of strength, thus signaling Its superiority over people and over any other kind of power in the world.

God possesses a considerable degree of might, but he is also extremely kind in the division of talents he gives to His offspring. The first reference to gifts – so important in the composition that they are mentioned in the title – appears at line 2, with the Old English term *geofona*, genitive plural form of *gifu* ('gift'). *Gifu* displays many possible meanings that revolve around the definition of gift. The most interesting is perhaps "a faculty, power, quality or Christian virtue miraculously bestowed or emanating from the Holy Spirit / the grace of Christ"[26]. This stresses the fact that a gift

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[25] Bosworth (2014).
[26] DOE.

– "a natural or intrinsic ability, faculty, endowment or talent"[27] – is something coming from God, with people such as one's parents generally acting as intermediaries. Moreover, the term refers "to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on Christians, and celebrated at Pentecost"[28]. Isaiah 11: 2-3 reads:

> The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord – and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

A search of the term on Bosworth (2014) tells that *gifu* has a relation with the Latin terms "virtus" ('virtue') and "facultas" ('ability')[29]. This allows us to imagine that *gifu* includes a certain "mental component" in its meaning, as we tend to associate the two just mentioned Latin words to the dimension of qualities typically possessed by the mind and that can be properly manifested only through it. This arguably provides us with a valuable point to interpretate the sequence of skills that are listed in the catalogue.

Gifts are donated to humankind, which is described with a very peculiar expression appearing at line 2, that is *gæst-berend*, a compound noun derived from the nouns *gæst* and *berend* ('carrier, bearer'). The meaning of the former is neither clear nor univocal. It can acquire the significance of "breath" but also of "air in motion, wind"[30]. "The vital spirit (described as a living, breathing part of the body)" and "the spirit: specifically the immaterial, intelligent or sentient element in a person; the spirit as the seat of thought, understanding, emotions"[31] are possibly the most accurate and coherent meanings in relation with what the poet writes. The idea behind the term is that the human spirit carries both emotions and mental faculties and that it blows furiously like the wind. In other words, gæst expresses the idea of a very powerful, overwhelming force. The compound noun *gæst-berend* ('carrier of the spirit') is not simple to translate; Bjork (2014: 13) chose "soul bearers". It is an adequate translation, yet it fails to completely convey the totality of the shades of *gæst*. It can be interpreted as indicating that all living beings receive gifts out of God's generosity. Its use also emphasises the

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[27] DOE.
[28] DOE.
[29] Bosworth (2014).
[30] DOE.
[31] DOE.

belief of the poet that all humans bear souls or spirits inside them. However, the issue seems not to be the point of the poem, arguably more focused around the perception of the body as the holder of God's many gifts, much more than as the container of the human spirit and soul.

With regard to the use of the term *gewitte* ('intellect') at line 3, it is particularly interesting and relevant. It is more of an abstract term than *mod*, which, on the other hand, seems to be more focused around a physical dimension. The latter is coherent with the wide-spread representation in Early English society of the mind as an enclosure (Mize, 2006: 57). However, in this particular instance *gewitte* ('intellect') can be interpreted as conveying the idea of a corporal space capable of holding the gifts God has chosen to share with humankind. Since its members *wegað* ('carry') their gifts in their consciousness, it is possible to infer that in the Early English Society, arguably, consciousness was not interpreted solely as something abstract and unfathomable. On the other hand, it was likely perceived as a physical, tangible space that can be somewhat manipulated. This leads us to believe that the reception and the faculty of employing the gifts seem to be "physical facts", and not something merely intellectual and metaphoric.

From this perspective, it emerges that body and mind function and act in unison, without a sharp prevalence of one over the other. They influence one another and each of them fully manifests itself only thanks to the other. This underlines the fact that, in Early English society, people were most likely conceived in a holistic perspective[32], hence signifying that they were probably thought as the outcome of a process of interaction between the different parts that compose them, thus including body and soul. In other words, according to this point of view, people are not to be seen as the mere sum of their parts, but rather as much more.

It is worth considering the conclusive part of the introduction because it allows us to have a coherent comprehension of the actual importance of the mind in receiving and employing *wise geþohtas ond woruldcræftas*, that is "wise thoughts and worldly skills" (Bjork, 2014: 13). In particular, we get to understand more about the mental

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[32] Holism is the philosophical idea and current that various systems (for example, physical, biological and social ones) should be viewed as wholes, not merely as a collection of parts (Freeman, 2005: 154-155).

qualities of people who are particularly gifted[33] and the equal distributions of talents carried out by God. Lines 20-29 read:

> þurh his halige giefe hider onsende
> wise geþohtas ond woruldcræftas,
> under anes meaht ealle forlæte,
> þy læs he for wlence wuldorgeofona ful,
> mon mode swið of gemete hweorfe
> ond þonne forhycge heanspedigran;
> ac he gedæleð, se þe ah domes geweald,
> missenlice geond þisne middangeard
> leoda leoþocræftas londbuendum.

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 137-138)

> through his holy gift should send here
> wise thoughts and worldly skills,
> should allow all those to be in one person's power,
> lest he, full of glorious gifts in pride,
> a person strong in mind, should turn from moderation
> and then despise those of few gifts;
> but he who holds the power of judgment apportions
> variously throughout this middle earth
> the skills of people to land dwellers.

(Bjork, 2014: 13-15)

The expression *mon mode swið*, translated by Bjork (2014: 15) as "a person strong in mind", is indicative of the fact that a certain mental strength is necessary to receive and make use of gifts. Since they come directly from God, they may be understood as direct emissions and manifestations of His might. It appears clear that the placement of all gifts is in the mind, the only "human component" able to withstand God's power. The mind is given considerable importance. Overall, it may be understood as the quintessential sign on Earth – *middan-geard*, "middle earth" in Bjork (2014: 15) as it is described at line 28 – of the connection existing between God and humankind. It could be argued that the latter manages to perceive God's power through the skills of the mind, so generously donated by God in order to promote the birth and the development of the species.

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[33] It is interesting that in contemporary English we tend to refer to uncommonly talented people as gifted. Arguably, it is a sign of the fact that the idea of the transmission of gifts (talents) by God to the humankind is central in many literary traditions and that it had considerable spread and success.

God's power manifests equally in the world, meaning that the distribution of talents is just and coherent. It is promoted with the aim of not leaving anyone with too many or, on the other hand, too few skills. The distribution takes into account different categories and dimensions, signifying that all of them are necessary to live a blessed and fortunate life. This conception of a joyful life is social and communal, and it entails that one must not behave greedily to accumulate the gifts. As a matter of fact, if someone were in possession of such a hoard, that person would be too *mode swið* ('strong in mind'). By combining two different domains – one associated to physical strength and the other to the mind – *mode swið* likely suggests the fact that being strong in mind is not only confined to possess mental cleverness. Indeed, it could also allude to a sort of strength measurement that takes into account the number of gifts placed within one's mind or "container" (Mize, 2008: 25). In other words, an above-average mental strength serves to receive and make proper use of God-granted talents, thus leading to a positive interpretation of the expression *mode swið*. However, on the other hand, such expression can also be portrayed in a negative light, as no one should receive and display a much higher number of talents than the others.

According to God's will, everyone should receive *wise geþohtas ond woruldcræftas* in equal quantity. It is an interesting expression pointing out that "wise thoughts and worldly skills" (Bjork, 2014: 13) – that is the spiritual and the secular – were probably equally valued in Early English society. Indeed, it is necessary to remember that King Alfred strongly believed that the secular and the spiritual were not distinct categories, as we learn from the preface of his translation of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* (Sweet, 1871: 1-9; Ranft, 2012: 78-79; Fulk, 2021: 4-11). It is interesting to consider both nouns that compose the expression, that is *geþoht* ('thought') and *cræft* ('skill').

The association of the former with the realm of thought is crystal-clear, since its most evident meanings are "a thought, what a person thinks, an idea, opinion"[34]. With regard to the latter, different possible meanings emerge, and interpretation varies depending on the context. As a matter of fact, *cræft* could be interpreted as displaying an association with skills in general and also with wisdom. However, the DOE shows another interesting set of meanings that hold a correlation with the lexical field of the

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[34] Bosworth (2014).

mind and of cognition as well. In particular, "strength, merit, excellence, power (mental or spiritual)" and "skill, ability, faculty, talent (mental or spiritual)"[35] are definitions that allow us to determine the existence of a strong bond between the dimension of skills and the one of the mind. This leads us to understand that the skills that are referred to at line 22 are not only *woruld* ('worldly') – meaning typical of the material world, secular – but also linked to the realm of the mind, which expresses itself through skills that manifest in the earthly world. This could mean that *wise geþohtas ond woruldcræftas* operate at the crossroads between the overlapping categories of spiritual and secular, which acquire total meaning only in relation to the other. In this specific context, it appears quite clear that the poet intends *mod* as referring to the mind space that is capable of containing and developing the many skills humankind possesses thanks to God.

However, it must be noted that, in spite of a certain "privileged" mental nature of the skills given by God to people, the introductory section of the poem concludes by reiterating God's diverse distribution of his gifts and using the somewhat problematical compound *leoþo-cræftas*. Although Bjork (2014: 15) translated such compound noun – which is formed by *liþ* ('member of the body, limb') and *cræft* ('skill') – as "skills of people", the actual etymology and meaning of the word seems to be more coherent with the physical, "bodily" and "earthly" quality of the abilities. Its literal translation would be 'skills of the (member of the) body' and, in a sense, this would somewhat lower the tone of the poem, downgrading the importance of the gifts given by God. Such expression introduces the long catalogue in which we can read a detailed description of the gifts. The use of this word is troublesome because "it suggests that the poem addresses only the physical abilities of mankind" (Short, 1975: 463). However, as discussed above, *cræft* also holds an important, undeniable correlation with cognition in general and the mind specifically, something that probably led Bjork (2014: 15) to translate *leoþo-cræftas* simply as "skills of people". Moreover, the catalogue in *The Gifts of Men* examines different kinds of talents that could be referred to multiple dimensions. Indeed, the mental and the physical, just like the spiritual and the secular, intertwine, signifying that a clear distinction between them was possibly not perceived

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[35] DOE.

in Early English society. This seems to be proved by the usage of the expression *wise geþohtas ond woruldcræftas* at line 22.

In order to prove the point, it would be interesting to consider the totality of the skills and the activities that are listed, but it would require more space than the one offered here. Furthermore, it is undoubtable that some talents are more relevant than other for the purposes of the present analysis, so only a brief, yet hopefully representative, selection of activities will be commented. Lines 89-96 constitute a model section of the poem to focus on, as they offer interesting insights on the matter, and they reveal noteworthy perspectives on the role and on the power of the mind. They read:

> Sum bið deormod deofles gewinnes,
> bið a wið firenum in gefeoht gearo.
> Sum cræft hafað circnytta fela,
> Mæg on lofsongum lifes waldend
> hlude hergan, hafað healice
> beorhte stefne. Sum bið boca gleaw,
> larum leoþufæst. Sum biþ listhendig
> to awritanne wordgeryno.
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 139-140)

> One is brave minded in strife with the devil,
> is always ready in the fight against sins.
> One has skill in many church services,
> can in songs of praise loudly extol
> the ruler of life; that one has an exalted,
> bright voice. One is wise in books,
> able in learning. One is handy
> at writing profound sayings.
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 19)

The first line makes an interesting reference to the fact that of being *deormod*, that is "brave minded" in Bjork (2014: 19). One needs to possess this quality to be able to resist the power, the influence and the temptation of the devil, and to fight against him. *Deor* is an adjective that means "fierce, formidable, bold"[36]. Its association to *mod* is highly indicative of the fact that the battle against Satan has to be fought showing formidable strength and bravery, but from a mental perspective. It is essential to employ the power of the mind – rather than the sheer brute force of the body – and resort to the

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[36] DOE.

so-called cardinal virtues[37]. A similar way of addressing people appears at lines 98, which reads *mode þæs cræftig* – "so skillful in mind" (Bjork, 2014: 19). Such expression further underlines the necessity of having several mental skills to endure the presence of the devil. However, it also employed to remind that no person possesses too many mental skills, which are equally distributed to promote a cooperation between people in the battle of humankind against Satan.

The following lines (91-96) of *The Gifts of Men* display an opposition with the first two, because they deal with some of the most effective ways to celebrate God, who is described as *lifes waldend*, "ruler of life" in Bjork (2014: 19)[38]. They include praising and extoling Him through *circ-nytta* – "church services" in Bjork (2014: 19) – and by singing *lof-songum* – "songs of praise" in Bjork (2014: 19). It is particularly interesting to consider the term *sang*, which means "a song, a poem to be sung or recited"[39]. The use of the term is noteworthy because, arguably, it contextualises *The Gifts of Men* as a composition to be recited in a monastic context, as a lone piece or as part of a larger programme. This contributes to strengthen the claim that *The Gifts of Men* was likely addressed to an already Catholic audience.

Singing songs of praise and doing so in the context of church services is a highly-valued activity in Christianity because it allows the worshippers – possibly monks in this specific case – to approach God Himself and to learn from His wisdom. The voice of the believer who sings a hymn is defined as *beorht* ('bright, clear'), a powerful term that not only is associated with the concepts of brightness and high pitch, but also with the holy, the divine and "heavenly bodies"[40]. A voice like this is a clear manifestation of the skills granted by God to humankind. Through it, people can extol Him and hope to perceive His presence even more than in other ordinary situations. The ability of singings songs of praise and joy is typical of the mentally-skilled followers, just like the fact of being able to read and learn from *boca* ('books'). The books that are mentioned are likely the books and the texts of the Holy Writ that people have to gather inspiration from, since the term holds a correlation with the four Gospels and with

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[37] The cardinal virtues are four virtues of mind and character, and they are referred to both in classical philosophy and Christian theology. They are prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance.
[38] For now, the discussion about the ways of addressing God, instrumental in favouring an understanding of His nature, ends here, and it will be reprised later. See pp. 129-130.
[39] Bosworth (2014).
[40] DOE.

"ecclesiastical, liturgical or penitential book[s]"[41]. Assimilating the concepts and the principles that reside in them is not easy; quite the opposite, it is mentally challenging, but it allows to experience a strong connection with God and, in a sense, to learn directly from Him, since His word lives in such books.

Thanks to the beneficial action of God, people also have the chance to become proficient learners, as signaled at line 95 through the expression *larum leoþufæst* ('fast in learning verses'). *Lar* can indicate both the action of teaching and of learning, but in this specific case the latter seems to be the most valid hypothesis. It expresses a connection with the Bible, as we can understand considering its meanings, in particular "preaching, doctrine, dogma, precept"[42]. The person who dedicates to learning is described as *fæst*. It is an adjective that, when used as a suffix like in this case, means 'fast'. The head of the compound appears to be *leóþ*, a noun signifying "song, poem, ode, lay, verses"[43] and that, in this context, seems to hold a connection with the monastic activity of studying and learning from books.

This kind of learning is instrumental in generating a relation with God himself. He gives inspiration to his faithful and respectful believers, prompting them to write *wordgeryno* ('secret, mysterious word' or 'a mystery expressed through words'). This form is particularly interesting because, if we consider its adjectival part, that is *geryno* ('secret') and we search *geryne* on Bosworth (2014), we see that its meanings are "what is kept from observation or knowledge, a secret, mystery" and "what is beyond mere human comprehension, a mystery"[44]. Such word holds a similarity with *rún*, commonly translated with 'rune'[45]. Besides the dimension of writing, runes can also be linked to the idea of mystery and of secrets as well. In this sense, *rún* seems to convey an idea of magic, especially concerning "that which is written"[46], which appears coherent the mysterious and nature of the "profound sayings" mentioned at line 96 in Bjork (2014: 19). Such sayings can only be written by learned people who had the chance to study

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[41] DOE.
[42] Bosworth (2014).
[43] Bosworth (2014).
[44] Bosworth (2014).
[45] Runes are the letters in a set of related alphabets known as runic alphabets. Runes were used in all Germanic languages as a form of epigraphic writing before the adoption of the Latin alphabet and for specialised purposes thereafter. In addition to representing a sound value (a phoneme), runes can be used to represent the concepts after which they are named (ideographs). See Orel (2003: 310) and Koch (2020: 137).
[46] Bosworth (2014).

and experience the wisdom of God and of the Holy Writ, thus granting their words a certain elitist character. This could be interpreted keeping in mind the fact that, in Catholicism, the communication between the believers and God is, in a sense, made possible by a mediator. The intermediary can be, for example, a priest or a monk, who, after having been properly formed and educated, becomes able of interpreting the word of the Lord present in the Bible and in everyday situations. Through interpretation, he can then transmit such wisdom to the faithful ones through the *wordgeryno*, thus reinforcing the secret character of these words, which are only accessible to a relatively small circle of people.

Speaking of God's nature, the poet generally portrays Him as gentle and kind. However, if one reads between the lines, God is also characterised as extremely mighty, thus being potentially capable of punishing whoever amasses all the gifts He donated to humankind. His nature is underlined by the verbs that describe and characterise His actions. As a matter of fact, at lines 5-6, we read that He "syleð sundorgiefe, sendeð wide agne spede" (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 137) – "gives special gifts, sends them widely by his own power" (Bjork: 2014: 13). In this process, the power of God is highlighted by the poet through the expression *agén spéd* ('his own, peculiar power'), that is the faculty that contributes to make God the powerful, almighty being He is, and to set Him apart from the mortals. A specific verb that refers to God's attitude is *déman* ('to decree') at line 16, which contributes to represent him as a kind of ruler, something coherent with some ways of addressing Him that appear throughout the texts. In particular, *lifes waldend* – "ruler of life" (Bjork, 2014: 19) – *þeóden* ('lord')[47] and *dryhten* ('lord')[48] are used by the poet and their use is highly indicative of God's power and regality, considering that these terms are employed both with a mortal ruler and a deity in mind. The conclusive lines of *The Gifts of Men* are perhaps the most useful ones to properly understand how the actual gentle nature of God is celebrated in the poem. Lines 104-113 read:

ac he missenlice monna cynne
gielpes styreð ond his giefe bryttað, […]
sum biþ þeodne hold.

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[47] It is often used to refer to God (Bosworth, 2014).
[48] In a Christian context, other than lord or chief, it can mean "The Lord, God the supreme ruler" (DOE) and also refer to Christ.

Swa weorðlice wide tosaweð
dryhten his duguþe. A þes dom age,
leohtbære lof, se us þis lif giefeð
ond his milde mod monnum cyþeð.

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 140)

but he variously reproves humankind
for boasting and grants his gifts, […]
one is loyal to his lord.
Thus the Lord appropriately scatters
his gifts widely. May he always have glory for this,
luminous praise, he who gives us life
and shows his gentle mind to humankind

(Bjork, 2014: 19)

Through His power, God is able to promote a coherent distribution of gifts. Two verbs that describe such process are *bryttian* ('to divide and share') and *tosawan* ('to distribute'), two actions that He carries out in a way that is defined *weorðlice* ('in a fitting manner, appropriately'). The most interesting way of describing God is perhaps at line 113, with the word *mod* referring to God for the sole time in the poem. Each of the other twelve instances of *mod* helped defines a human referent, but this use in relation to God is unique and, in a sense, also more obscure, especially with regard to the translation of such line. *Mod* is associated with the adjective *milde* ('mild, gentle'), which sheds some light on God's nature and gives him a trait – a mind – that in the rest of the poem is typically used to refer to people and their skills. It is maybe possible to infer that the mind of people is modelled on God's own, thus characterising His *milde mod* not only as gentle, but also as merciful, because He allowed the mind of humans to be just like His. 'Merciful mind' is arguably the most accurate translation, because it is coherent with the meanings of the term *milde,* and it stresses the likely intention of the poet to tell that God acted wisely to distribute gifts in a way that would maintain order and unity among the people. The rationality of God is underlined, and thus *The Gifts of Men* seems to pay homage to God's choices in giving shape to humankind.

The themes of *The Gifts of Men* may be simple and common in this kind of poetry, yet the poet perfectly manages, though the noteworthy lexical choices that are displayed, to convey a powerful teaching of wisdom. This makes the poem very

interesting, and, arguably, also unique in the context of the compositions that deal with the mind, because of the associations and interpretations that it provides.

1.3. *The Fortunes of Men*

One of the most common interpretations concerning *The Fortunes of Men* finds its basis on the constant alternance between life and death, virtue and sin, mainly expressed by the two catalogues that constitute most of the poem. The first catalogue (lines 10-57) focuses on the unlikely and gruesome circumstances of dying that people can encounter if they do not follow the teachings of God. A first, superficial reading of the catalogue and of the poem in general might lead to the assumption that people are helpless towards death. In a sense, this could be true, since death is a powerful force, certainly superior to the ones exerted by mortals. Several scholars have reflected on the theme of man's helplessness allegedly characterising *The Fortunes of Men*. They say that "These are the fortunes of men. There is nothing to be done about them" (Shippey, 1976: 11), "the main theme of *The Fortunes of Men* is man's helplessness" (Raw, 1978: 73) and "the poet of *Fortunes of Men* uses the fates and accomplishments in the poem to demonstrate explicitly how human lives are determined by God" (Larrington, 1993: 143).

People can only enjoy a limited amount of time in *middan-geard*, and this could be further reduced if they do not pay attention to the dangers one may encounter in life and to the temptations of the devil. However, as argued by Neidorf (2020: 97-98), it is also true that humans possess some degree of agency, and they can decide what to do with the time they are given. It is up to them whether to live a sinful life, inevitably incurring in one the many horrific deaths portrayed in Catalogue 1, or a blessed one, thus embracing wisdom and virtue, as suggested by the joyful images of Catalogue 2 (lines 58-92). As a matter of fact, the second catalogue is undoubtedly more centred around the celebration of the life of people who have managed to pass through the *winter* ('winter) – meaning long years of hardship and perilous situations – and *his earfoðsiþ ealne* ('all of his misfortune'). Doing so, people can reach a blessed old age after having learned how to exert and dispense wisdom, in compliance with God's will.

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Here the alternance between life and death and sin and virtue will be considered from a linguistic perspective. There will be a particular focus on the contrast between the helplessness of people and their power of avoiding sin – influencing their life, the environment around them, as well as their community.

The introductory lines are essential to understand the tone that pervades the whole poem, as they already show the main theme that characterises it, namely the contrast between life and death. More specifically, lines 1-19 read:

> Ful oft þæt gegongeð, mid godes meahtum,
> þætte wer ond wif in woruld cennað
> bearn mid gebyrdum ond mid bleom gyrwað,
> tennaþ ond tætaþ, oþþæt seo tid cymeð,
> gegæð gearrimum, þæt þa geongan leomu,
> liffæstan leoþu, geloden weorþað.
> Fergað swa ond feþað fæder ond modor,
> giefað ond gierwaþ. God ana wat
> hwæt him weaxendum winter bringað!
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie: 1936: 154)

> Very often it happens through God's might
> that a man and a woman bring children
> into the world through birth and adorn them with colors,
> coax them and cheer them up until time comes,
> happens through a number of years, that the young limbs,
> the members endowed with life, become grown.
> Thus father and mother carry them along and walk with
> them, give to them and dress them. God alone knows
> what winters will bring them as they are growing up.
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 57)

Almost the totality of these verses is fixated on the image of giving life. After having been influenced and moved by *Godes meahtum* ('the power of God'), two parents generate some children and educate them. Although there is the presence of God's might upon people, it is up to parents to give life and act for the sake of their own children. Hence the fact that the poem appears to underline the fundamental role of the human agency in the process. There are some verbs that characterise such process, highlighting the fact that *fæder ond modor* ('father and mother') display a certain responsibility as the first mentors of their children. Besides *cennan* ('to conceive'), the verbs *ferian* ('to carry, to lead'), *gifan* ('to give a gift') and *gyrwan* ('to give clothes')

are particularly notable, as their use suggests solicitous care, from a physical but also spiritual point of view. Such verbs contribute to "lend a caring, human gloss to the narrative of generation" (DiNapoli, 2021: 148). The verb *gifan* is especially important mainly because of its connection with the term *gifu* ('gift'), thus implying that the parents are among the ones who are supposed to provide talents and valuable skills to their offspring. In this sense, they are the first to give a direction in life to their children, as suggested by the use of the verb *ferian*. It expresses the idea of helping them to walk straight, prompting them to avoid dangers and the perils of a sinful life. Such risks are highlighted by the last two lines of the section, which refer to the fact that it is not possible to know what God has in store for the human race. In any case, it is certain that mortals will have to face difficulties and periods of hardship while growing up, while *winter* – a word that in this case seems to also acquire the general meaning of 'year(s)' – passes.

People cannot know such perils in advance, yet they can avoid them or, at least, minimise their impact by making reasonable, moral and virtuous choices. Doing so , they manifest all the agency and autonomy that God has given them and that their parents have nurtured. Apparently, there are some events that escape the control of people, as suggested by the gnomic statement at line 14: *ne bið swylc monnes geweald*, that is "such is not under human control" (Bjork, 2014: 57). Such line is likely the one that prompted many commentators to label the poem as only dealing with human helplessness towards the adversities and the blessings of life to be found, respectively, in Catalogue 1 and Catalogue 2. The message that such line conveys seems clear: we know that the horrors dealt with at lines 10-14 will happen, and it is not possible to prevent them from occurring, as death is an otherworldly force that cannot be opposed. From this point of view, the poem seems to deal with – without mentioning it explicitly – the traditional Germanic conception of *wyrd* (in this context, 'fate'), which "mysteriously dictates the moment when individual passes away" (DiNapoli, 2021: 148). However, the term *wyrd* also concerns one's own fortunes, as its general meaning is simply "what happens, fate, fortune, chance"[49]. Such term and the general atmosphere of the poem appear to promote a reflection on the transience of the earthly matters and of life in general, thus arguably charging it with a certain elegiac feel, something that

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[49] Bosworth (2014).

allows to draw a parallel with the other Old English elegies, such as *The Wanderer*. Indeed, such poem exploits the *ubi sunt* ('Where are they?') and reflects on the alternance between prosperity and decay (Bjork, 2014: xviii); most likely, the same occurs in *The Fortunes of Men*, which conveys an elegiac feel.

With regard to the inevitability of fate and death, it seems that not even God can do much other than forecasting it. As a matter of fact, the poet of *The Fortunes of Men* seems to represent Him as an observer, rather than as an agent. Yet, it could be argued that it is not that God cannot prevent fate and death from happening, but rather that He does not want to do anything about it, thus leaving to humankind – to whom He has granted all the necessary abilities – the task of carrying the burden. Quite clearly, it does not mean that people can overcome death, but rather that they ought to accept it as a kind of sword of Damocles hovering upon them. Through awareness and acknowledgment, mortals can accept their faith and decide to act wisely and virtuously. From this perspective, the gnomic saying at line 14 could be interpreted as extremely empowering towards people. Through their will and their intention of living according to the principles of Christianity, people can accept death and even face it boldly. Of course, leading such a kind of life is difficult and it can lead to dangers and temptations. As for this, lines 17-20 are particularly evocative:

> Sum sceal leomena leas lifes neotan,
> folmum ætfeohtan, sum on feðe lef,
> seonobennum seoc, sar cwanian,
> murnan meotudgesceaft mode gebysgad.
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 154)

> One must live his life lightless,
> Grope about it with his hands; one, lame of foot,
> Stick with sinew wounds, troubled in mind,
> Will lament his pain, mourn the decree of fate.
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 57)

Among the other issues, this fragment emphasises the fact that an individual will inevitably experience *bysgu* – that is "affliction, trouble, anxiety"[50] – in the *mod*. It is significant that the trouble and the pain one experiences while living is not put only on

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[50] DOE.

the body, but also on the mind. Just like in *The Gifts of Men*, the mind appears characterised as the enclosure and the container of human feelings and sufferings (Mize, 2006: 57). This passage highlights feelings of uncertainty and of suffering through expressions such as *leomena leas* ('without lights'). In this context, light is clearly used metaphorically, and it can refer to the light coming from God, which is coherent with one of the meanings of *leoma*, that is "light [coming from] a heavenly body"[51]. This is hardly surprising, since the image of the light is one of the most commonly associated with God. John (1: 1-5) and Acts (9: 3-4) read:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

God is light and He shines upon humankind, characterising himself as a reliable guide. However, His light is not always visible and there are several circumstances which people have to endure on their own. In the process, they will feel *sar* ('pain') – both physical and mental as suggested by the definition of the term in Bosworth (2014) – and they will express a lament concerning *metod-gesceaft* ('the decree of fate'). Such compound holds some similarities with *wyrd*, but, quite clearly, there are some differences between the two. The head of the compound, *metod* ('fate'), when used on its own, is attested almost only in poetry, and it used to address God, with a reference to the inevitability of both fate and God's judgment. *Gesceaft* ('decree') is a noun that denotes "something fully wrought or brought to completion, both in literal and in abstract senses" (DiNapoli, 2021: 150). It is also associated to the ideas of destiny and creation, hence with a set of rules governing such process. This would maybe suggest that *metod-gesceaft* expresses the idea of a much less random process than *wyrd*.

In both cases, the idea is that destiny is inevitable, and, indeed, the principle that all men are bound to suffer is typical of Christianity. Yet, God perceives and

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[51] Bosworth (2014).

understands the human suffering. He gives comfort and He sets the bases on which mortals can develop the moral strength required to accept and face death and troubles. Originally, suffering was not present but, since people decided to break the rules and the boundaries set by God, it came into the world. It inevitably changed and influenced the existence of humankind. However, at the same time, it empowered people and gave them the chance to reconcile with God after the Original Sin and after Abel's murder by Cain, thus establishing a new alliance[52].

Many deadly situations are listed in the remaining of the catalogue. All of them are grim and described with a certain richness of details, something that adds to the visual quality of the poem. It could be argued that such precision is instrumental in evoking images inside the mind of the believers who have lost track or simply need to be encouraged to lead a virtuous life. This way, they would be prompted to behave and act well, according to the wisdom of Christianity. For example, the section comprising lines 33-42 deals with the violent death by hanging and being tortured by a raven who plucks out the eyes of a person who is already dead, as we can infer from the expression *sáwel-leás* ('without soul', meaning 'lifeless'). The image is horrific, and it was possibly meant by the poet to shock or even scare the readers and/or the listeners of *The Fortunes of Men*. In particular, lines 38-42 read:

> noþer he þy facne mæg folmum biwergan,
> laþum lyftsceaþan, biþ his lif scæcen,
> ond he feleleas, feores orwena,
> blac on beame bideð wyrde,
> bewegen wælmiste. Bið him werig noma!

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 155)

> neither can he defend against that evil with his hand
> against the hateful airborne robber; his life is gone,
> and insensible, hopeless of life,
> pale on the tree, he awaits fate,
> covered with slaughter mist. His name is cursed.

(Bjork, 2014: 59)

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[52] Interestingly enough, the poet of *The Fortunes of Men* chose not to explicitly deal with Adam and Eve's fall. A hypothetical reference to the Original Sin is present at lines 23-24. For a brief discussion on the possible meaning of such lines, see Chapter 2, 1.3. (*The Fortunes of Men*), pp. 91-92.

Such lines reflect on the passing away of a hanged man who, arguably, did not have the chance to reflect upon his sins and to repent. This causes his *nama* ('name'), meaning his entire existence in the afterlife, to be *werig* ('miserable, wretched'). The fact that the man could not atone for his sinful behaviour led him to *ridan* ('to ride', meaning 'to die on') the *galga* ('gallows'), as described at line 33. The use of the term *galga* is interesting because one of its meanings is 'cross', which allows to draw a possible parallel with Jesus Christ's death on the cross after having endured unbearable suffering. The difference between Jesus and the man with the *werig nama* the former sacrificed himself for the sake of humankind and, doing this, he became blessed and ascended to an even higher state than before. On the other hand, the latter is *werig*, which, in this case, may be properly translated as 'cursed', as suggested by Bjork (2014: 61). The existence of the latter has been marked by horror and crime, and therefore he was condemned to die. The parallel with Jesus Christ's fate is also possibly signaled by the expression *blac on beame* ('pale on the tree'), which conveys in a very visual way the physical appearance marked by extreme pain of both Jesus and the hanged man of *The Fortunes of Men*. In particular, the noun *beam* is highly relevant because not only can it mean 'tree', but also 'cross'[53] or even 'gallows'. Through this likely parallel, the poet possibly intended to signal the fact that two possible faiths await after death. It is up to mortals to decide how to act and behave in life.

Not only does *The Fortunes of Men* reflect on Christianity. As a matter of fact, some passages are particularly relevant partly because they seem to draw a parallel between the sacred and the heathen, a widely attested feature of Old English wisdom poetry. Lines 43-47 are particularly representative, and they read:

> Sumne on bæle sceal brond aswencan,
> fretan frecne lig fægne monnan;
> þær him lifgedal lungre weorðeð,
> read reþe gled; reoteð meowle,
> seo hyre bearn gesihð brondas þeccan.
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 155)

> Fire shall afflict one on the funeral pyre,
> the fearful flame will consume the doomed one;
> there separation from life happens quickly,

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[53] "Specifically: the cross on which Christ was crucified" (DOE).

the cruel ember reddens with blood; the woman weeps,
she sees the flames swallow up her child.

(Bjork, 2014: 59)

These lines could be interpreted as reflecting the topos of the traditional death on a pyre of Germanic heroes, warriors or distinguished people. Probably the most well-known case is represented by Beowulf's funeral. The hero of the poem of the same name is ritually burned on a great pyre after a tremendous battle with a dragon in which he dies after having been mortally wounded. Death on a pyre is generally associated with the celebration of a noteworthy person who has acted well in life. Furthermore, it could also be linked to purification from sins. However, *The Fortunes of Men* exploits this topos in relation to the death of a *fǽgne monna* ('doomed man'), who is probably a criminal. Death by burning is a form of capital punishment that was generally used in cases of treason and heresy, hence in situations of estrangement from God's will. The *fǽgne monna* is condemned to die on a pyre, which could evoke the perpetual flames thought to be present in Hell. There are several passages referring to this in the Bible, such as Matthew (25: 41) and Mark (9: 43):

> "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

> If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.

Death by burning happens quickly, as explicitly told in the poem through the sentence *þǽr him lifgedal lungre weorðeð* – "there separation from life happens quickly" (Bjork, 2014: 59). Of course, this does not mean that it will be painless. Moreover, the mother of the sinner will weep for him. Thus, death is not by any means something purely individual, and others – a family, a community – will also be affected by it, albeit indirectly. This could mean that the poet intended his composition to lead people to reflect upon the consequences of their actions, as they will echo in others' lives. *The Fortunes of Men* addresses the figure of the mother, who is referred to through the term *meowle*. Rather than mother, it actually means "A maid, damsel,

virgin, woman"[54], but, of course, it is clear from the context that the poet is dealing with a motherly figure. It is interesting to consider 'virgin' among the meanings of such noun, as it can maybe be interpreted as a reference to Virgin Mary mourning over her child's death.

The poem does not only make reference to the tragedies one may encounter in life when he/she loses track. Indeed, Catalogue 2 opens with a passage that is worth examining. Lines 58-63 read:

> Sum sceal on geoguþe mid godes meahtum
> his earfoðsiþ ealne forspildan,
> ond on yldo eft eadig weorþan,
> wunian wyndagum ond welan þicgan,
> maþmas ond meoduful mægburge on,
> þæs þe ænig fira mæge forð gehealdan.
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 155)

> One during youth through God's might will
> waste the whole time of hardship,
> and in old age again become blessed,
> dwell in joyous days and partake of prosperity,
> treasures and the mead cup among his family,
> in as much as anyone can hold on to such things
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 61)

This extract of *The Fortunes of Men* offers a clear image of a celebration. This happens *mægburge on*. *On* simply means 'in, among, with', while the compound noun *mægburge* is difficult to interpret univocally. If we consider the nouns that form it, they are *mæg* and *burh*, respectively meaning 'kinsman' and 'castle, fortress'. Putting them together, the result would be 'fortress of the kinsman(s)', which has been interpreted as 'family' by Bjork (2014: 61) and as 'native town' by DiNapoli (2021: 156). Both translations are fine, because the term 'kinsman' can either refer to a relative or to people from the same area. In either case, the stress is on the idea of the community with which the old man written about celebrates joyful occasions, sharing *maþmas ond meoduful* ('treasures and a cup of mead').

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[54] Bosworth (2014).

The reference to mead is particularly relevant, because it allows us to draw a parallel with another fragment of the poem (lines 51-52) that deals with drinking excessively and which reads *sum sceal on beore þurh byreles hond meodugal mæcga* – "One through beer from the cupbearer's hand will become a mead-mad man" (Bjork, 2014: 59). There is a clear contrast between the two, since the one at lines 51-52 is more focused on the perils and on the unlikely, dangerous consequences of drinking excessively, which lead someone to become a *meodugal mæcga* ('a man inebriated from mead'). On the other hand, the passage at the beginning of Catalogue 2 centres on the experience of a person who has managed to control his/her sinful tendencies and can, therefore, enjoy a celebration drinking mead with the dear ones. Mead has played an important role in the mythology of several peoples, most notably in the Norse one. Such mythology makes reference to the Mead of Poetry or Poetic Mead, a mythical beverage which gives poetic inspiration to whoever drinks it[55]. Mead can also be interpreted as the quintessential drink of celebration, meaning that it brings people together. However, if one drinks too much, mead can also take life away, and the poet of *The Fortunes of Men* seems to perfectly acknowledge such contrast.

Catalogue 2 goes on listing and describing several gifts and talents that people who have managed to resist life's many temptations can take advantage from. Lines 64-67 read:

> Swa missenlice meahtig dryhten
> geond eorþan sceat eallum dæleð,
> scyreþ ond scrifeð ond gesceapo healdeð,
> sumum eadwelan, sumum earfeþa dæl
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 155)

> Thus the mighty Lord throughout the expanse
> of the earth deals out variously to all,
> determines, allots, and controls fortunes:
> to one, wealth; to one, a share of miseries
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 61)

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[55] The story of the Mead of Poetry is narrated in both the *Poetic Edda* – more specifically in *Hávamál*, stanzas 103-110 – and in one myth in *Skáldskaparmál* ('The Language of Poetry'), that is a section of the *Prose Edda*. See Larrington (1999: 28-29) and Faulkes (1995: 59-95).

The distribution is carried out according to a certain logic thanks to which no one gets more fortunes or misfortunes than the ones he/she could bear. Everything, including *ead-wela* ('happiness, blessedness') and *earfoðe* ('tribulation'), is distributed equally. It is people's own responsibility to decide what to do and how to act with what God has granted them, and this will determine the direction that their lives will take. Again, this is an empowering statement towards humankind. It is true that God acts and can indeed exert power over destiny, as underlined by the verbs *sciran* ('to declare'), *scrifan* ('to decree, to appoint') and *healdan* ('to hold, to control'). However, the responsibility is still entirely on the human race.

Sciran, *scrifan* and *healdan* are representative of the fact that fortunes and gifts belong to God, who decides to distribute them to his loyal followers. This process could remind of the distribution of privileges between a king or an overlord – in general a person in an administrative position – and his subordinates. Without naming it, this section possibly refers to the figure of the *beah-gifa*, an Old English term generally translated as 'ring-giver', a kenning[56] identifying a person in power. Ring-giver is an interesting compound that is used, in particular, to denote the figure of a *þeóden* ('king, great lord') or also the one of an *eorl* ('earl')[57] who distributed valuable charms to his loyalest and boldest soldiers. Such charms were intended as a reward by the ring-giver to repay the bravest warriors for their courage and strength. Traditionally, soldiers were given arm rings and/or neck rings made of precious metals such as gold, hence the name 'ring-giver'. The fact of possessing and proudly showing one or more of those rings was an indicator of the social prestige of the ones who wore them. The relationship between a *þeóden* and a follower can be likened to the one existing between God and the faithful one. As a matter of fact, one must remember that *þeóden* is also used to address God. God distributes precious, valuable talents to humankind, just like a *beah-gifa* does with his soldiers, who repay him for his generosity fighting for him and honouring him. The same characterises the services that the believers offer to God, choosing to take full advantage of His gifts and to live a blessed life, thus highlighting yet another time the fact of having the possibility to choose which kind of life to conduct. A similar theme is

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[56] "A kenning is a metaphorical compound word or phrase used especially in Old English and Old Norse poetry. An example would be *hwæl-weġ* ('way of the whale'), which stands for sea" (Merriam-Webster).
[57] Even though it is generally translated as 'earl', the term originally identified a nobleman of high rank, without referring to any specific aristocratic title.

also dealt with more in depth in *The Gifts of Men*, which, indeed, is often considered in relation to *The Fortunes of Men*.

It is interesting to see how the poet of *The Fortunes of Men* stresses the fact that, after having received gifts and having exploited them virtuously to resist life's many temptations, one will repay God for His generosity by celebrating Him. This is narrated in a similar fashion in *The Gifts of Men*, which also conveys the necessity of praising God. In both poems, celebration happens through music. Lines 80-84 read:

> Sum sceal mid hearpan æt his hlafordes
> fotum sittan, feoh þicgan,
> ond a snellice snere wræstan,
> lætan scralletan sceacol, se þe hleapeð,
> nægl neomegende; biþ him neod micel.
>
> (Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 156)

> One will sit with his harp at his lord's
> feet, receive payment,
> and always quickly twang the harp string,
> let the plectrum sound loudly, the one that leaps,
> the sweet sounding pick; it will be a great delight for him
>
> (Bjork, 2014: 61-63)

From this section, we learn that a skilled musician plays a *hearpe* ('harp') to please his *hlaford* ('lord, master'). *Hlaford* often refers to a feudal lord, but the content of these lines seems to suggest another possibility that is linked to the instrument that is played for one's lord. The harp is an instrument that, in the context of Christianity, is often associated to angels in Heaven playing harps and producing a melody so sweet that it pleases God. There is an indirect reference to this musical instrument in the Bible, more specifically "His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all who play stringed instruments and pipes" (Genesis 4: 21)[58]. The harp holds a particular value, and, in Old English wisdom poetry, there is at least another poem that makes reference to it, namely *The Gifts of Men*, which, at lines 49-50 reads:

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[58] The King James Version (KJV) and the New King James Version (NKJV) of the Bible explicitly mention the harp in the same passage.

sum mid hondum mæg hearpan gretan,
ah he gleobeames gearobrygda list

(Krapp & Dobbie, 1936: 138)

One can play the harp with his hands;
He possesses the art of deft playing of the instrument

(Bjork, 2014: 15)

The fact of playing the harp and the use of the term *hlaford* – which can be employed to deal with spiritual leaders[59] – is possibly indicative of a Christian context. In particular, the image conveyed by lines 80-84 of *The Fortunes of Men* could be that of a believer who repays God for having given him/her a talent so special like being able to produce music through an instrument associated with the idea of Heaven. The musician playing for his lord sits at his feet, which conveys not only an idea of subalternity but also of abnegation. In particular, the latter could be associated with the religious rite of the maundy, which is described in the Bible, specifically in John (13: 14-17):

> Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Maundy – also known as Washing of the Feet or *Pedelavium* – is the ceremonial washing of the feet of poor people in commemoration of Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet. The possible presence of such rite between the lines of *The Fortunes of Men* is indicative of the necessity of showing respect and love in order to be thankful for what one has been granted. God has given humankind many talents, and so people prostrate at His feet in an act of love, as a clear sign of their desire to live a long and virtuous life, and hoping to get access to Heaven after their death. Acting like this is the best way to please God, as explicitly told at line 84: *biþ him neod micel* – "it will be a great delight for him" (Bjork, 2014: 63). God appreciates the fact that the members of His offspring use the gifts donated to them for the purposes of good deeds. However, it

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[59] "Head of an ecclesiastical institution / community […] superior of a church / monastery" (DOE).

is also true that He leaves the choice of what to do to people, thus stressing their free will and further empowering them to decide how to live and behave. In other words, God does not force mortals to act for the good or, on the other hand, for the evil.

What *The Fortunes of Men* seems to stress through its themes and through the lexical selections and preferences of its poet is the fact that the choice of what to do with life is responsibility of people. Sinful, indecent choices will most likely lead to painful and gruesome deaths, while good uses of God-granted talents will probably lead to live a long and blessed life. Arguably, this reading contradicts the wide-spread interpretation of *The Fortunes of Men* as a poem dealing solely with the helplessness of mortals, thus adding numerous layers of complexity to it.

A linguistic approach similar to the one that has been adopted in this chapter can be employed for the purposes of a much wider analysis on *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*, focusing on the same themes that have been pointed out here but also on other ones, in order to produce new critical assumptions about them. The same could also apply on a larger corpus of several poems belonging to the genre of wisdom poetry, maybe also adopting a comparative perspective in relation to compositions ascribed to other genres. This would surely be interesting, but it is considerably beyond the scope of the present dissertation.

Conclusion:

"Speaking Words of Wisdom"

Know also that wisdom is like honey for you:
If you find it, there is a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off.
(Proverbs 24: 14)

The present work aimed at analysing three Old English wisdom poems that have been often overlooked by critics. *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* have enjoyed scarce consideration and, sometimes, they have been the target of merciless comments concerning their structure, their themes and their language. Far from being plain, "uninspired and platitudinous" (Greenfield, 1965: 202), the three poems are works of art in themselves and a closer look to them can reveal many issues. An unbiased analysis of them allows to enlarge the understanding of wisdom poetry, reconsidering its importance in the Old English poetic corpus and its impact on subsequent literary generations and genres.

The three poems appear in the manuscript Exeter Cathedral Library MS. 3501. The Codex Exoniensis is noted for the unmatched diversity of genres among its contents, as well as for the poetic craftmanship that emerges in its poems. The compositions included therein shed some light on the intellectual sophistication of Early English literary culture, on the issues valued the most in society and on the way in which they were interpreted. Many literary genres characterise the Liber Exoniensis, and they include some 90 riddles, numerous heroic poems, a great deal of saints' lives, gnomic verses, elegies and wisdom poems. The inspiration behind the Exeter Book is surely Christian, but it is also true that more lay material finds a place in the codex.

This is particularly true in the case of Old English wisdom poetry. It shows a clear derivation from the biblical and patristic traditions, but it is not strictly confined to

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them. It is clear that wisdom poetry perfectly embodies the defining features of the monastic culture that found a fertile ground in England, especially thanks to the Monastic Reform. The action of Benedictine monks was instrumental in breathing new life into local literature, in making it more complex and capable of dealing with many assorted themes. Latin culture, monasticism and the reflection on both earthly and spiritual matters promoted by it left a permanent mark, and they contributed to shape the local culture and its artistic production.

However, other than the clear influences from Christianity, wisdom literature also displays other "contaminations", in particular from a number of Germanic traditions. The mixture of different sources is evident in all the major Early English literature codices still surviving and, particularly, in the Exeter Book. Because of the diversity of genres it displays, it appears clear that it reflects the presence of more than one substratum, managing to combine manifold influences, united by a "common monastic denominator".

Wisdom poetry demonstrates to be able to gather and synthesise various ideas and influences. The key feature of its originality lies in the fact of taking advantage both from the sacred and the lay, and sometimes even the heathen. According to some standards of interpretation, the result could seem profane, or even blasphemous. However, the truth is that the different influences, cultures and traditions that are showcased really increase the quality of the poems, contributing to add variation and character, very often resulting in something totally unprecedented. *Quid enim Hinieldus cum Christo?* – 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?' – is the question that the English clergyman Alcuin of York posed to Bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne concerning the latter's interest in heroic legends (Mitchell & Robinson, 1998: 225), which were known to convey heathen elements scarcely related to the Christian lore. That is precisely the point when dealing with Old English literature, and wisdom poetry in particular. Although, at surface level, the presence of Christian-related themes and elements is evident, a study at a deeper level can, indeed, reveal much more.

Old English wisdom poetry constantly introduces new prompts and leaves many doors open, thus resulting in a plurality of possible interpretations on the different matters. There lies its principal strength, which characterises the poems that have been selected for the purposes of the present dissertation. *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The*

Fortunes of Men are compositions – all part of the Exeter Book – that display a high degree of stylistic craftmanship and considerable awareness on the part of its poets. Arguably, all of them tend to refer to similar themes, yet elements of originality and ingenuity do not lack. Many of them are to be found in the influences that the poems combine and display masterfully.

Precepts is clearly indebted towards the Holy Writ, as signaled by its ten-party structure. The most evident model is the Mosaic Decalogue, which contributes to make the poem prominent and its teachings reliable and authoritative. Nevertheless, *Precepts* does not openly convey the same principles expressed by the Ten Commandments. On the other hand, it is clear that it experiments different possibilities and ways of expression, likely more consistent with the cultural references and the social perception of Early English society. It must be noted that the spiritual and the secular were not completely separate categories; they were thought to intertwine, and both of them were deemed necessary to have a proper and complete understanding of the world. The poet of *Precepts* must have acknowledged this very fact, hence including in the composition pieces of advice and directives to heed concerning both earthly and spiritual aspects. The list that presents them is fairly simple but not banal or insignificant. Many issues are tackled in a compact length, and the meaning of the poem rings true and universal, especially if we accept the composition to belong to a monastic context, as well as the fact of it dealing with a teaching relationship between a spiritual father and a younger monk. Many elements – even apparently syncretic ones – are included, yet the poem manages to remain brief, simple and easily accessible to everyone, totally in the spirit of wisdom poetry. No matter how many parallels can be traced with other traditions and other poems – namely the Old Norse *Hávamál* for example. The result is not bound to change and to become overly complex, and that is the sign of great poetic and cultural skills and of considerable communicative abilities as well.

The Gifts of Men is a later poem compared to *Precepts*. The issues that are considered tend to remain comparable, yet the stress and the intention of the poet appear to be different. Here, the endowments provided by God to humankind constitute the focus, and virtually all the poem revolves around the celebration of the Lord's merciful nature. It is God's attitude that makes a coherent distribution of gifts to everyone possible. Such talents are listed in an allegedly random order, and they refer both to the

physical and the spiritual domains, thus signaling that different talents are necessary to praise God and to live a blessed life. The poet of *The Gifts of Men* addresses the whole human race by making reference to diverse activities that can be ascribed to every social group and level. Some skills seem to be characteristic of one certain class over the others, namely in the case of the celebration of those talents that are expected to be in possession of clergymen or, on the other hand, of aristocracy. The latter aspect in particular – alongside other hypothetical connections with *Hávamál* – likely contributes to give a Germanic layer to the poem, thus enlarging the already mentioned component of variation of Old English wisdom poetry. All things considered, it appears quite true that the majority of the skills listed by the poet refer to the entire human race, which is expected to make a thoughtful use of the endowments received. A good portion of them apparently lies in the mind of the faithful believer. The human mind is notably empowered, and it ends up being considered the place where passions, feelings and morality reside. It is the quintessential means through which humankind can fully express its nature and manifest its qualities. They can reside both in the body and in the mind, but it seems that it is the latter that governs human performances. However, it must also be noted that the mind acts in unison with the body. The two manifest each other properly only when they interact, and this seems to orient our gaze towards a holistic perception of people that was possibly widespread in Early English society. *The Gifts of Men* stresses values of friendship and cooperation, and it possibly gives us some insights concerning communal life in a monastic context, that is the milieu to which the poem seems to be addressed.

The Fortunes of Men is possibly the most evocative out of the three poems. Its vivid images of horrific, gruesome deaths and of God's many blessings that descend upon people characterise this composition as extremely powerful and convincing. There is a clear emphasis on structure, and everything seems to be quite balanced. Although the first catalogue – focused on death and pain – is slightly longer than the second one – centred on the celebration of God-granted skills and joyful scenes – neither death nor life seems to excessively prevail over the other. The many details inserted by the poet add to the visual quality of *The Fortunes of Men*, and they seem to reflect the existence of a Germanic substratum. Such Germanic side appears more preponderant than in the case of *The Gifts of Men* and, especially, *Precepts*, given that the latter has been

acknowledged to be the product of an 8th / early 9th century hand. *The Gifts of Men* and, in particular, *The Fortunes of Men* are likely more aware of the Germanic lore, as a possible consequence of the Danish raids in England that began towards the end of the 8th century when several Norse riders chose some Christian monasteries as their target. This reflects on the themes that the poem deals with and in the way in which it approaches them in order to attain a certain effect. The Christian and the heathen are perfectly juxtaposed; they add many shades to *The Fortunes of Men*, and they are exploited by the poet to promote a reflection upon the alternances that govern life. The poem makes the fact that there are two paths one can go by clear. It is up to people to decide which one to take, and this results particularly empowering towards humankind. The poet stresses the role of human agency and the many opportunities each one has to act in his/her own interest.

Wisdom descends on people, principle upon principle. Everyone can take advantage from it and employ it for the good. Arguably, that is precisely the point of Old English wisdom poetry: people should do everything in their own power to gather teachings and use them for the sake of humankind. Such teachings refer to multiple dimensions, and this is a way to acknowledge the diversity inherently present in human race. Wisdom poetry celebrates such diversity, and it does so redefining itself constantly. Its core features remain unaltered, but the forms and the contents change, in order to better stand the test of time. Wisdom poetry is a genre that gathers and merges old and new influences, while at the same time remaining true to itself. Issues and forms are not the only aspects that are bound to change, as wisdom poetry also displays an astounding lexical variation. The lexical research on the part of the poets is indicative of the need to describe one particular issue making use of the most appropriate term, charging it with the most suitable and effective shade of meaning. Such variety is the result of the massive reworking that wisdom poetry has gone through over the course of the centuries. We can appreciate it through *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men* among the many Old English wisdom poems.

The three of them ought to be reconsidered as extremely representative of a long-forgotten genre that deals with universal issues, with a masterful writing on the part of the nameless poets. A solid connection between such issues and the language employed to address them is attested, and, indeed, it is instrumental in favouring the

fullest expression of the most authentic and relevant message of wisdom poetry. Such a message may be simple, but it is not trivial. Wisdom comes in one's life through the action of God. At the same time, wisdom has to be nurtured in order to achieve the best results, so to fully express itself in all of its forms. True wisdom is what connects people with the Lord and what allows them to walk straight and everything to function correctly. That is really what the three poems stress, with each one employing different communicative, rhetorical and linguistic strategies. This very fact mirrors itself in the variety of language that the three poems display so clearly. Such variety is indicative of the considerable degree of poetic prowess that Early English poets had, and especially of their enviable ability to make their compositions colourful and rich from a linguistic perspective while, at the same time, remaining quite accessible and easy to read and appreciate. This is perfectly coherent with the fact that the truest form of wisdom is straightforward, as to allow the vast majority of people to access it and make the most out of it.

Such simplicity is arguably what one reaches after having adopted a "paradigm of complexity" that allows to seize and understand the uniqueness and the charm that characterise Old English wisdom poetry. This very genre speaks to us with words of wisdom and, doing so, it opens many doors, thus allowing many possibilities of analysis to emerge. The most demanding yet rewarding one would be the critical edition of some unjustly overlooked poems such as *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* and *The Fortunes of Men*, as to shed some light on a far-flung past that is, however, still strongly related to the present.

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Con parole di saggezza: analisi dei componimenti in inglese antico "Precepts", "The Gifts of Men" e "The Fortunes of Men"

I tre componimenti oggetto della presente tesi – *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* e *The Fortunes of Men* – trovano spazio all'interno dell'Exeter Book, prodotto per eccellenza del clima di grande animazione sociale, letteraria e culturale, risultato della Riforma benedettina inglese. Altresì nota semplicemente come Riforma monastica, tale esperimento sociale e religioso ebbe luogo nell'Inghilterra della seconda metà del X secolo. Il suo scopo fu quello di opporre un "modello spirituale" a quello di un clero che, come denunciato da eminenti figure come Beda il Venerabile e Re Alfredo il Grande, era andato acquisendo nel corso dei secoli connotazioni via via più secolari. Queste connotazioni non erano rispettose del credo cristiano di tradizione patristica e monastica, più orientato invece alla preghiera, alla riflessione e alla rinuncia ai beni terreni.

Prima di affrontare il contesto e l'importanza della Riforma monastica, occorre considerare il ruolo esercitato da Alfredo il Grande, prendendo in esame le numerose campagne culturali da lui promosse. Re Alfredo, sovrano attento e interessato al benessere terreno e spirituale del proprio popolo, mostrò preoccupazione per la condizione di decadenza culturale che affliggeva l'Inghilterra della seconda metà del IX secolo. La conoscenza del latino era andata progressivamente scemando, al punto che i fedeli – così come anche una certa percentuale di membri del clero – non erano più in grado di leggere e interpretare le Sacre Scritture e altri libri ritenuti essenziali. Per far fronte a ciò, Re Alfredo promosse una massiccia campagna di traduzione dal latino all'inglese antico che interessò, in particolare, i testi della tradizione cristiana, come da egli stesso dichiarato nella prefazione della sua traduzione in inglese antico della *Cura Pastoralis* di Papa Gregorio Magno. La sua campagna, così come la sua riforma giuridica e quella dell'istruzione – promossa e portata avanti in inglese antico al fine di raggiungere quanta più popolazione possibile – ottenne un certo riscontro. Il suo

successo fu tale che venne portata avanti anche nel corso del X secolo, caratterizzato, nello specifico, dall'azione congiunta dei cosiddetti "Riformatori benedettini" e di Edgardo I d'Inghilterra, sovrano inglese tra il 959 e il 975. La riforma benedettina inglese prende avvio all'inizio degli anni '50 del X secolo con il fine di promuovere la Regola benedettina – introdotta da San Benedetto da Norcia intorno al 540 – come standard monastico in Inghilterra. Campioni della Riforma furono i Santi Dunstan, Oswald e, in particolare, Æthelwold. Il loro sforzo combinato portò alla creazione di monasteri di stampo benedettino (o alla "riqualificazione benedettina" di monasteri già esistenti), così come a una promozione dell'inglese antico, che raggiunse nel corso del X secolo vette di notevole altezza. Questo fu il risultato di una campagna di traduzione e promozione letteraria, culturale e religiosa che portò alla traduzione in inglese antico della Regola di San Benedetto a opera di Sant' Æthelwold, così come alla produzione all'interno degli scriptoria di un certo numero di manoscritti e codici estremamente rilevanti dal punto di vista artistico e culturale; tra di essi, spicca certamente l'Exeter Book.

L'Exeter Book – noto anche come Codex Exoniensis o Liber Exoniensis – è uno dei più antichi manoscritti inglesi di argomento poetico, riconosciuto nel 2016 dall'UNESCO come uno dei manufatti più rilevanti dell'intera cultura inglese. Tale codice si presenta relativamente ben conservato, nonostante siano evidenti svariati segni causati dal tempo e da usi non consoni del manoscritto stesso. Il codice presenta centotrentuno fogli di pergamena, e la sezione di maggiore importanza è costituita dai fogli compresi tra otto e centotrenta, dedicati alla trascrizione di numerosi componimenti poetici di vario genere e appartenenti a epoche diverse. Il manoscritto è per lo più originale, nonostante non manchino esempi di aggiunte e interpolazioni risalenti a periodi successivi, come nel caso dell'iscrizione *Liber Decani et Capituli EXONIENSIS 3501* presente nel foglio di guardia; trattasi di una scritta risalente al XVI o XVII secolo, aggiunta con lo scopo di classificare il libro. Altra modifica successiva di una certa entità consiste nell'aggiunta di una rilegatura all'inizio del XVIII secolo, e la sua conseguente rimozione e sostituzione con una maggiormente solida dopo la pubblicazione da parte di Raymond Wilson Chambers, Max Förster e Robin Flower del primo facsimile dell'Exeter Book (1933). Il Liber Exoniensis si compone di diciassette unità codicologiche e non mostra alcuna partizione interna, aspetto che rende talvolta

difficile – unitamente all'assenza di titoli – l'identificazione dei confini dei componimenti presenti.

I primi anni di vita dell'Exeter Book non sono facili da ricostruire. Sono state avanzate numerose ipotesi e condotti svariati studi paleografici e codicologici per stabilire una possibile datazione del codice. La maggior parte degli studiosi sembra concorde nel localizzare temporalmente la stesura del codice tra il 950 e il 990, fermo restando il fatto che è stato realizzato prima del 1072, anno in cui il vescovo Leofric morì, dopo aver effettuato una cospicua serie di donazioni – tra le quali spicca l'Exeter Book – alla cattedrale di Exeter. A partire dal 1072, tracciare la storia del codice si fa decisamente più semplice, in quanto, da quell'anno, è sempre rimasto nella biblioteca della cattedrale di Exeter.

Come già accennato, l'Exeter Book presenta componimenti poetici di vario genere, che spaziano tra il sacro e il laico, includendo talvolta anche elementi e topoi più spiccatamente profani. Per quanto stabilire una chiara divisione fra i generi attestati nell'Exeter Book, e riconoscendo le limitazioni insite in un'operazione di questo tipo, alcuni critici hanno comunque avanzato delle ipotesi in merito. Il genere maggiormente attestato all'interno dell'Exeter Book è costituito dagli indovinelli. Ve ne sono più di novanta e i loro argomenti spaziano dalla religione a temi di quotidianità, talvolta combinando i due aspetti al punto da renderli quasi indistinguibili. La loro importanza nell'economia dell'Exeter Book è tale da aver portato a edizioni del codice focalizzate sugli stessi indovinelli, e anche da avere influenzato vari autori – tra i quali spicca J. R. R. Tolkien con *Lo Hobbit* – nella stesura delle loro opere.

Altro genere di grande rilevanza nell'Exeter Book è rappresentato dalla poesia gnomica, basata sull'impiego di gnome, forma letteraria che mostra notevoli parallelismi con le massime, gli aforismi e i proverbi. Con essi condivide, in particolare, una lunghezza generalmente ridotta, funzionale alla trasmissione di una sapienza pratica e facilmente accessibile che rimanda a diverse categorie, dal laico al profano. Scopo della poesia gnomica è, infatti, quello di fornire ai lettori e/o agli ascoltatori sapienza pratica di grande utilità tramite massime compatte, come si può facilmente evincere da *Maxims I* (presente nell'Exeter Book) e *Maxims II* (presente in Codice Londra, British Library, MS. Cotton Tiberius B.i), due degli esempi per eccellenza dell'intera poesia gnomica in inglese antico. Tali componimenti esemplificano i possibili scopi di questo

genere letterario, che aveva nell'istruzione – ma non solo, in quanto alcuni critici si sono espressi relativamente all'ipotetico ruolo sociale della poesia gnomica – la sua dimensione più congeniale.

Da non tralasciare all'interno dell'Exeter Book sono certamente le elegie, tant'è che queste sono i componimenti più studiati e presi in considerazione a livello accademico dell'intero Codex Exoniensis. Le elegie non costituiscono una sezione a sé nel Liber Exoniensis, e ciò può portare a una certa difficoltà nell'identificare un componimento tipicamente elegiaco. Ciò nonostante, alcuni temi comuni sono identificabili. Nella fattispecie, le elegie si focalizzano spesso su temi legati alla solitudine, al dolore e al trascorrere del tempo; danno grande importanza al lamento da parte di una persona, relativamente a questioni che possono sfuggire all'umano controllo, e impiegano un linguaggio fortemente evocativo atto a generare il massimo coinvolgimento e a stimolare la riflessione sui temi trattati.

I generi letterari di cui l'Exeter Book fa sfoggio possono essere unificati impiegando l'utile e innovativa etichetta "poetica monastica", traduzione letterale di "monastic poetics", concetto introdotto da Marinus B. Pranger (2003) e in parte ricontestualizzato da Brian O'Camb (2009; 2014; 2016). La poetica monastica consente di interpretare la grande varietà di generi e contenuti – anche talvolta apparentemente sincretici, considerando l'accostamento del sacro con il laico e il profano – attestata nell'Exeter Book, così come in potenzialmente ogni manoscritto letterario prodotto in epoca altomedioevale inglese. L'espressione poetica monastica in relazione all'Exeter Book non deve certo far pensare al fatto che la totalità dei componimenti ivi presenti sia stato scritto da monaci o comunque indirizzato a un contesto monastico. Essa vuole suggerire possibilità di studio e analisi che tengano in considerazione un "comune denominatore monastico" a raggruppare e unificare da un punto di vista contenutistico e stilistico svariati componimenti afferenti ai generi più diversi e che fanno sfoggio di molte influenze e derivazioni. La causa di ciò è da ricercare nell'esistenza di un background comune, condiviso da monaci e aristocratici laici, i quali facevano verosimilmente riferimento a temi e testi simili; questo è il risultato della Riforma benedettina inglese e, prima, dell'azione esercitata dai monaci arrivati in Inghilterra sul finire del VI secolo per cristianizzare l'isola.

Un ruolo di un certo peso esercitato dalla cultura monastica – di stampo specialmente benedettino – è da tenere sicuramente in considerazione quando si parla della nascita e del successivo sviluppo della letteratura inglese. I monaci benedettini inviati da Papa Gregorio Magno in Inghilterra a partire dal 596 ebbero un ruolo nel favorire la cristianizzazione dell'isola, così come la diffusione della lingua latina, con l'intento di affiancarla all'inglese antico come lingua di cultura. L'incontro fra due culture quasi agli antipodi dal punto di vista sociale e religioso non fu facile, ma portò comunque a risultati notevoli e di lunga durata. La letteratura locale ne beneficiò, integrando le forme importate per mezzo dell'azione dei monaci del continente, e si fece più complessa e in grado di trattare molteplici temi con grande eleganza e capacità da parte dei poeti e degli uomini di cultura. La conoscenza del latino aumentò grazie alle iniziative promosse dai monaci europei e dal clero locale, anche se tale situazione "di idillio" non fu destinata a durare. Il latino conobbe, infatti, una notevole decadenza a partire dall'VIII secolo. Tale degrado culturale fu oggetto di critica da parte di Re Alfredo il Grande, che promosse una serie di riforme atte a rivitalizzare la lingua, senza comunque dimenticarsi dell'inglese antico, che acquisì una certa importanza grazie a Re Alfredo stesso e nel contesto della Riforma monastica.

Seguì un clima di grande fermento culturale, che gettò le basi per la produzione di molte traduzioni, manoscritti e opere d'arte. Tra questi, spicca chiaramente l'Exeter Book, scelto come oggetto di studio da parte di Brian O'Camb (2009), che applica la sua definizione di "poetica monastica" ai fini dell'analisi del codice stesso. La poetica monastica consente di esercitare uno sguardo ampio – e, allo stesso tempo, estremamente focalizzato sui dettagli – sui parallelismi che si possono tracciare a livello testuale fra alcuni componimenti dell'Exeter Book e una serie di cinque manoscritti e traduzioni di grande rilevanza prodotti nell'ambito della Riforma benedettina inglese. È il caso, per esempio, di *Edgar's Privilege to New Minster* e di *Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold*, testi che consentono, inoltre, di fare maggiore chiarezza in merito al contesto spaziale e temporale dell'Exeter Book. L'analisi portata avanti attraverso gli strumenti offerti dalla poetica monastica sembrano far propendere per l'ipotesi di Winchester o di Abingdon come centri di produzione dell'Exeter Book, e questo risulta estremamente rilevante. Appare evidente come dalla poetica monastica derivino svariati potenziali usi, che consentono di aumentare la conoscenza del periodo altomedioevale

inglese e di favorire una maggiore conoscenza del corpus letterario in inglese antico e delle sue caratteristiche.

Ciò vale, per esempio, in relazione alla cosiddetta "poesia sapienziale in inglese antico", traduzione letterale di "Old English wisdom poetry", genere letterario di inaspettata complessità ma anche di grande fascino, nonostante sia stata scarsamente considerata in ambito accademico. Tale tipo di poesia si propone di trasmettere insegnamenti facilmente accessibili e di riconosciuti valore e utilità universali, in modo che possano essere fruiti da chiunque. La letteratura sapienziale nelle sue forme più ampie è attestata in svariate tradizioni culturali ed appartiene a quasi ogni epoca della storia umana. Tra le varie, spicca sicuramente il genere noto come *speculum principis* ('specchio del principe') – genere letterario di chiaro stampo educativo – e, in particolar modo, la tradizione biblica: l'Antico Testamento include infatti i cosiddetti Libri Sapienziali (Libro di Giobbe, Salmi, Libro dei proverbi, Ecclesiaste, Cantico dei Cantici, Libro della Sapienza, Siracide).

Relativamente alla poesia sapienziale in inglese antico, non risulta facile categorizzare in maniera univoca i componimenti che possono essere ascritti a tale genere. La maggior parte delle fonti sembra concorde nell'identificare un numero compreso tra dodici e venti, contenuti specialmente nell'Exeter Book. Tra questi, si evidenziano *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* e *The Fortunes of Men*, tutti parte dell'Exeter Book nonché oggetto di uno studio approfondito nella presente tesi. Essi fanno chiaro sfoggio di molte delle caratteristiche che definiscono la poesia sapienziale in inglese antico, come il fatto di trasmettere sapienza e principi in forma compatta, impiegando sovente massime gnomiche, promuovendo una riflessione personale atta a compiere scelte di vita coerenti con i principi della morale e della religione cristiana. Come regola generale, i componimenti sapienziali in inglese antico presentano una serie di elementi in comune, ravvisabili solitamente già nelle prime righe. Nella fattispecie, fa capolino un elemento introduttivo il cui scopo è richiamare l'attenzione di chi legge e/o ascolta (*hwæt*, termine difficilmente traducibile, è molto attestato in questo senso). Inoltre, vi è un riferimento alla figura che si incarica di trasmettere la propria sapienza e al soggetto del componimento. Infine, si fa cenno alla localizzazione spazio-temporale del processo, così come alle modalità in cui il processo stesso ha luogo e ai suoi risultati.

Il contenuto varia a seconda del componimento, nonostante siano comunque identificabili temi comuni, quali la necessità di vivere una vita virtuosa – facendo adeguato uso delle proprie abilità e dei talenti donati da Dio. Il focus della poesia sapienziale in inglese antico è sui contenuti, in quanto sono essi a veicolare l'intenzione del poeta e la sua volontà di fornire insegnamenti preziosi. Essi riflettono il passaggio del tempo, così come gli standard e le esigenze sociali propri di un determinato periodo. Tuttavia, risultano comunque di una certa universalità, in modo da poter "parlare" a pubblici diversi e in differenti epoche con la stessa eloquenza. La struttura delle poesie sapienziali in antico inglese – spesso additata come disordinata – riflette una certa volontà di catalogare, com'è evidente dall'enumerazione (specialmente in *Precepts*) e dall'impiego di cataloghi letterari (*The Gifts of Men* e *The Fortunes of Men*). Relativamente alla forma poetica, occorre considerare in particolare il metro che, come da tradizione, è allitterativo. Il verso allitterativo è una forma poetica che utilizza l'allitterazione come principale artificio strutturale per creare coesione tra i versi di un componimento, in luogo di altre strutture come ad esempio la rima. Tale metro risulta funzionale alla memorizzazione, così come alla creazione di un certo andamento e all'enfatizzazione di concetti chiave. Il rapporto sinergico tra forma e contenuto dà origine a componimenti che, di fatto, sono opere d'arte, per la materia trattata, per la forma poetica magistralmente impiegata e per i numerosi riferimenti letterari – espliciti e non – contenuti nelle poesie, che denotano una certa conoscenza di svariate tradizioni letterarie, culturali e religiose de parte dei poeti. Tutto ciò trova chiaro riscontro in *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* e *The Fortunes of Men*.

Precepts è un esempio lampante di componimento poetico direttamente influenzato dalle Sacre Scritture. Nello specifico, i Dieci Comandamenti – attestati nell' Esodo (20: 2-17) e nel Deuteronomio (5: 6-21) – costituiscono il modello letterario più eminente alla base di *Precepts*. Al centro della poesia, trova spazio la figura di un padre saggio e competente che trasmette preziosi insegnamenti a suo figlio. Tali insegnamenti non mostrano generalmente una totale corrispondenza con il Decalogo, ad eccezione di una sezione di *Precepts* (versi 9-14) che rimanda al comandamento "Onora tuo padre e tua madre, perché si prolunghino i tuoi giorni nel paese che ti dà il Signore, tuo Dio" (Esodo 20: 12)[1]. Pur non presentando un'origine esplicitamente biblica, il resto dei

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[1] Citazione tratta dalla versione CEI della Bibbia.

precetti presentati dal poeta non manca di valore e interesse, così come di una certa universalità. Essi contribuiscono a fare chiarezza sui valori sociali ritenuti maggiormente importanti nel contesto dell'Inghilterra altomedioevale. Come da tradizione sapienziale in inglese antico e, in generale, coerentemente con gli standard di percezione del mondo e della vita diffusi nel Medioevo, i principi enumerati si pongono a metà tra lo spirituale e il secolare. Le due categorie si intersecano, segnalando la loro necessità di coesistenza, così come le diversificate tradizioni poetiche, letterarie e culturali che sembrano caratterizzare *Precepts*. Un certo sostrato monastico è evidente, tanto da spingerci a poter immaginare la relazione esistente tra padre e figlio come quella tra un abate e un novizio. Nonostante ciò, non mancano altri riferimenti che consentono di inserire il componimento all'interno di un contesto di più ampio respiro. Tra essi, vale la pena di prendere in considerazione la tradizione norrena. *Hávamál*, un componimento di carattere gnomico presente nell'*Edda poetica*, presenta una moltitudine di sezioni che descrivono la trasmissione di consigli e di saggezza morale e pratica da parte di Odino – il re degli dei nel pantheon norreno – all'umanità e, nello specifico, a un certo Loddfáfnir. Similmente a *Precepts*, il rapporto presentato è di natura genitoriale, e i due componimenti talvolta fanno persino ricorso a immagini comuni, come, per esempio, i pericoli del bere smodatamente. Un'influenza diretta è difficilmente ipotizzabile, considerando che *Precepts* pare essere stato composto tra l'VIII secolo e l'inizio del IX; nulla, comunque, vieta di immaginare l'esistenza di un sostrato comune di matrice indoeuropea. *Precepts* può essere considerato semplice, ma non per questo risulta carente di fascino, da un punto di vista tanto formale quanto contenutistico.

Lo stesso discorso vale certamente anche in relazione a *The Gifts of Men*, che fa di un lungo catalogo letterario il suo principale punto di forza. Nonostante il suo impiego sia stato criticato per la presunta mancanza di un principio regolatore al suo interno, il suo merito sta nel mettere in evidenza i talenti umani necessari a condurre una vita virtuosa e rispettosa degli insegnamenti cristiani. Tali insegnamenti e gli umani talenti sono il risultato e la manifestazione più evidente dell'operato di Dio nel mondo, così come un chiaro segno della Sua natura gentile e misericordiosa. Il componimento mette, infatti, al centro la celebrazione della figura di Dio e della sua opera di distribuzione dei doni, che risulta quanto mai coerente, considerando che nessuno ne

risulta privo o, al contrario, eccessivamente provvisto. Le umane abilità che il componimento elenca e descrive fanno riferimento a varie categorie, includendo sia il secolare che lo spirituale, e sono relative ad almeno due domini, ossia quello del fisico e della mente. Le abilità mentali sono descritte con grande precisione di dettagli, ma non mancano certamente cenni a quelle che sono le capacità più pratiche il cui dominio contribuisce ad assicurare una vita più agiata e agevole. Ciò risulta indicativo del fatto che, evidentemente, nella società altomedioevale inglese, i talenti del fisico – sicuramente più "terreni" – erano ritenuti necessari tanto quanto quelli della mente. In alcuni casi, nel catalogo attestato in *The Gifts of Men*, non è nemmeno presente una chiara divisione tra mente e corpo, a sottolineare l'occorrenza di entrambi. I doni a cui il componimento fa riferimento denotano tutti una certa universalità, e molto spesso fanno riferimento a una serie di abilità che si rivelano utili, se non addirittura fondamentali, specialmente in contesti di condivisione e di comunità. Ciò risulta quanto mai rappresentativo del fatto che l'umana sopravvivenza e, in particolar modo, l'autentico benessere sociale sono possibili solo in un'ottica di collaborazione. Volendo immaginare anche *The Gifts of Men* in un contesto monastico, è verosimile che il poeta abbia voluto farsi promotore di un messaggio di armonia e di mutuo aiuto tra confratelli appartenenti alla stessa comunità, ma anche tra monasteri diversi. La collaborazione si caratterizza, infatti, come la miglior strada da seguire per assicurare la prosperità e per compiacere il disegno di Dio. Nonostante l'esplicita celebrazione del Signore possa far pensare a una derivazione esclusivamente biblica di *The Gifts of Men*, tale componimento sembra comunque inserirsi all'interno di una tradizione maggiormente laica e tipicamente germanica. Innanzitutto, non mancano riferimenti ad abilità che fanno pensare alla vita dell'aristocrazia e alle attività che dovevano caratterizzare la giornata comune di un nobile. Infatti, *The Gifts of Men* non celebra solo l'importanza delle virtù morali, ma mette in rilievo anche concetti quali forza, agilità e astuzia. Tutte queste abilità, si ricorda, sono distribuite in maniera coerente, come si evince anche dalla lettura della stanza 69 di *Hávamál*, che pare costituire, a tutti gli effetti, un testo da comparare con questo componimento altomedioevale inglese. Per forme linguistiche, per contenuti e sulla base di investigazioni condotte, *The Gifts of Men* sembra caratterizzarsi come più tardo rispetto a *Precepts*; nello specifico, viene collocato tra il IX e il X secolo.

Considerazioni simili – quelle riguardo alla datazione – valgono anche relativamente a *The Fortunes of Men*, che, tra l'altro, è stato spesso studiato in relazione a *The Gifts of Men*, come se entrambi costituissero le due facce della stessa medaglia. Effettivamente, non mancano elementi di continuità tra i due, come, ad esempio, il fatto di essere stati verosimilmente composti in un arco temporale comune (tra il IX e il X secolo), così come quello di fare uso di cataloghi letterari. In particolare, in *The Fortunes of Men*, si evidenzia la presenza di due liste di contenuto e di tono opposti che contribuiscono a rafforzarsi vicendevolmente e a restituire un'immagine ampia e pregna di significato. Per mezzo di un linguaggio molto evocativo e vivido, il primo catalogo prende in considerazione una serie di situazioni che spaziano dal pericoloso al mortale. Una serie di incidenti cui le persone possono andare incontro se decidono di compiere scelte peccaminose animano il catalogo, che funziona come monito. Il secondo catalogo, invece, si concentra – in maniera analoga a *The Gifts of Men* – sulla celebrazione dei doni di Dio dei quali una persona meritevole e che ha basato la propria esistenza sulla rettitudine morale può continuare a usufruire anche in tarda età. Similmente a *The Gifts of Men*, il secondo catalogo promuove il valore della condivisione, come reso esplicito dalle immagini festive e ludiche ivi presenti, così come la necessità di celebrare il Signore, ringraziandolo per le fortune accordate. Nonostante queste, così come le tragedie evocate nel primo catalogo, possano sembrare fuori dal controllo degli esseri umani, come potrebbe sembrare considerando in isolamento la massima gnomica del verso 14 (*Ne bið swylc monnes geweald!*, ossia 'ciò non è autorità umana'), in realtà, il messaggio trasmesso dal poeta pare essere diverso. L'essere umano può e deve esercitare una certa influenza sulla propria vita, decidendo in autonomia come operare a partire dalle proprie possibilità. Spetta a ogni singola persona decidere come comportarsi, accettando la responsabilità delle proprie azioni, e andando incontro a una morte dolorosa o, al contrario, potendo godere dei propri doni e delle proprie fortune anche durante la vecchiaia. Anche *The Fortunes of Men* – esattamente come *Precepts* e *The Gifts of Men* – non risulta affatto privo di riferimenti a tradizioni extra-cristiane. L'intento, anche in questo caso, è monastico ed educativo, e viene raggiunto dal poeta operando una sintesi solo in apparenza sincretica di svariate influenze, qui presenti in quantità maggiore rispetto agli altri due componimenti. Innanzitutto, si riconoscono tratti in comune non solo con *Hávamál*, ma anche con

Sigrdrífumál, un altro esempio di poesia eddica. Inoltre, viene evocata – seppur in maniera indiretta tramite il riferimento a un orafo – la figura di Weland il fabbro. Tutto ciò ha portato alcuni studiosi a chiedersi se il poeta di *The Fortunes of Men* non abbia operato una riscrittura di un frammento poetico pagano, considerando che sembra appunto collocarsi all'intersezione fra cristiano e pagano, latino e germanico, spirituale e laico. Questa è una caratteristica attestata all'interno del corpus poetico in inglese antico, e che è evidente in *Precepts*, *The Gifts of Men* e *The Fortunes of Men*.

La complessità e il grande spessore artistico insiti nei tre componimenti risultano funzionali a uno studio linguistico focalizzato su alcuni dei temi maggiormente rilevanti da essi trattati e, in particolar modo, sulle scelte lessicali portate avanti dai poeti per ottenere una connessione intima e forte fra contenuto e forma poetica adoperata.

La lettura approfondita di *Precepts* ha portato a identificare la relazione di trasmissione della sapienza tra padre e figlio come il tema cardine del componimento. Risulta, dunque, interessante prendere in considerazione i termini che denotano le caratteristiche fisiche e spirituali dei due soggetti coinvolti. Il padre è saggio, e questa qualità appare collegata alla dimensione della vecchiaia, dalla quale derivano esperienza, maturità e intelligenza. Il figlio è meno esperto del padre e viene connotato positivamente tramite aggettivi che rimandano alla sua natura di risorsa preziosa; viene sottolineata la sua giovinezza, così come la necessità che egli sia spinto a compiere scelte virtuose. Occorre che tutto ciò avvenga nell'ambito di una relazione rispettosa e amorevole. Fermo restando che il padre presenta uno status sociale di maggior rilevanza e considerando che una certa componente di autorevolezza paterna non può mancare, la trasmissione dei principi e della sapienza trova la sua realizzazione più proficua e autentica in ottica di affetto reciproco. La dinamica tra padre e figlio pare riprodurre quella esistente tra Dio e l'umanità, e dà grande rilievo all'insegnamento. Relativamente a questo, uno studio dei verbi che caratterizzano la trasmissione dei precetti rivela prospettive interessanti e che fanno luce sulle abitudini pedagogiche nel contesto – monastico o meno – dell'Inghilterra altomedioevale.

The Gifts of Men è una poesia che impiega un lungo catalogo letterario per descrivere svariati talenti e abilità generosamente donati da Dio all'umanità. Nonostante essi rimandino sia alla dimensione del fisico che a quella della mente, a significare una certa importanza di entrambe le categorie, ci si è focalizzati sulla seconda. Infatti, la

mente e la sua percezione in ambito altomedioevale inglese sono stati considerati da alcuni studiosi, per quanto a volte in maniera solo parziale. La parola in inglese antico che indica la mente (*mod*) appare svariate volte nel corso del componimento e sembra essere connotata come un luogo fisico e spirituale allo stesso tempo, come lo strumento per eccellenza che gli esseri umani hanno per recepire e usufruire dei doni del Signore. L'intelletto ricopre una certa importanza e sembra finalizzato a compiere scelte virtuose e a vivere vite in cui si faccia buon uso dei talenti affidati da Dio. Non sembra un caso, infatti, che molte delle abilità descritte richiedano l'impiego della mente da parte dei soggetti che le possiedono per realizzarsi pienamente. È il caso di chi si dimostra capace di tessere le lodi nei confronti del Signore attraverso il canto e/o di scrivere massime ricche di significato. Queste attività esprimono una connessione tra gli umani e Dio, e ciò sembra possibile grazie alla mente. Si potrebbe anche affermare che la mente umana è modellata su quella di Dio, che viene descritta come gentile (*milde*) e misericordiosa, come è evidente, tra l'altro, dalla distribuzione coerente dei talenti che il Signore stesso promuove.

The Fortunes of Men impiega due cataloghi letterari che sembrano sottolineare l'inevitabilità del fato e l'impotenza delle persone. Molte interpretazioni del componimento hanno voluto interpretare il messaggio trasmesso dal poeta come uno di passività e di incapacità di influenzare la propria vita. I due cataloghi evocano in maniera dettagliata e vivida le fortune e le sfortune che possono capitare, ma sulle quali, in realtà, sembra che gli esseri umani possano esercitare comunque un certo controllo. Le scelte lessicali portate avanti dal poeta – atte a presentare un'evidente alternanza tra vita e morte e a fare luce sulla percezione di esse che era verosimilmente diffusa nell'Inghilterra altomedioevale – sembrano essere indicative dell'intento del poeta. Con il primo catalogo, vuole avvertire dei pericoli di una vita peccaminosa, come sottolineato dalle immagini di morte che, per temi e modalità, sembrano ricalcare la tradizione biblica ma non solo, mentre il secondo presenta immagini di vita e di felicità. La contrapposizione fra i due cataloghi rafforza quello che sembra l'intento del poeta, ossia responsabilizzare gli umani ed evidenziare il fatto che non siano certo impotenti. Infatti, sta a loro capire come agire, tenendo in debita considerazione le fortune le sfortune descritte, dirette manifestazioni dell'autorità di Dio. Interessante che questa, tra l'altro, sembra in qualche modo ritrarsi in *The Fortunes of Men*. Il Suo potere è

incommensurabile e può portare a gioie come a punizioni, ma è anche vero che è essenzialmente responsabilità delle persone decidere cosa fare del proprio tempo sulla Terra.

Grande saggezza emerge dalle tre poesie e, in particolare, dalle parole di notevole spessore e universalità impiegate dai loro poeti. Saggezza che caratterizza un genere spesso tralasciato e che meriterebbe nuova considerazione. Ciò potrebbe portare a far emergere interessanti interpretazioni e a comprendere in maniera più globale la totalità del corpus poetico in inglese antico, ancora perfettamente in grado di brillare di luce propria.

Dedico questo breve ma imprescindibile spazio a coloro senza i quali la presente tesi non sarebbe stata ideata, sviluppata, portata a termine. Ognuno di loro, con le proprie particolarità, ha contribuito al lavoro, così come alla mia formazione personale.

Innanzitutto, desidero esprimere la mia più sincera riconoscenza nei confronti del Professor Omar Hashem Abdo Khalaf, relatore di eccezione, e del Professor Gabriele Cocco, che hanno saputo far ardere la mia passione per la filologia germanica, sempre disposti a supportarmi e a valorizzare le mie attitudini e le proposte da me avanzate. Un caloroso grazie al Professor Khalaf per l'immensa fiducia accordatami, e al Professor Cocco per la rara disponibilità.

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