

OLD AGE IN THE RENAISSANCE: AGED INDIVIDUALS  
IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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In Memory of

Gilbert L. Jansen  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I.    WHO ARE YOU CALLING OLD? AN INTRODUCTION TO OLD AGE AND THE ELDERLY.....	7
Defining Old Age The Aged Individual in Early Modern Society	
II.   DISCUSSIONS OF OLD AGE AND AGING: THE YOUTH, AGE DEBATES.....	27
III.  A NEW WAY OF APPROACHING AN <i>OLD</i> PROBLEM: CHANGES IN MEDICINE AND THE LITERATURE THAT DISCUSSED IT.....	57
Medieval Medicine, the Church and <i>Piers Plowman</i> The New Gerontology: Renaissance Ideals in Medical Theory Old Age and Melancholy in <i>King Lear</i>	
CONCLUSION.....	89
WORKS CITED.....	92

## INTRODUCTION

The lives of most Early Modern English people were short. The chances of women and/or children making it through childbirth were often very low, and of those children who did live through childbirth only about three-quarters made it past fifteen (Stone 56). The reasons for such low life expectancies included diseases like smallpox, lack of proper sanitation and sometimes war. An excerpt from John Florio's first English translation of Michel de Montaigne's "Of Age" puts the rarity of old age into perspective: "What fondnesse is it, for a man to thinke he shall die, for, and through, a failing and defect of strength, which extreme age draweth with it, and to propose that terme unto our life, seeing it is the rarest kind of all deaths, and least in use" (Montaigne 377). Yet, regardless of the improbabilities, some people in this time survived and lived to ripe old age. This thesis will focus on this small portion of the Early Modern English population.

With the low probability of growing old, it is no wonder that it appears that very little discussion of old age or old people occurred at the time. If there were rarely any old men or women around, why would there be a need to worry about them? But on closer examination it becomes clear that old people did exist in every corner of the population and that the society as a whole was concerned both with the older people around them and—sometimes more so—with becoming old themselves. Though old people were still a small portion of

society, studies show that many more people were living into old age than scholars previously thought (Minois 292). The fact that old age or aging began to be mentioned in almost every aspect of writing in the time should have been an indicator of this rise. A greater frequency of discussions of old age than ever before appeared in personal diaries, philosophical works, medical texts, the laws that were passed, and in some of the greatest literature of the time.

In recent years several scholars of history and sociology—such as Georges Minois, Shulamith Shahar, and many more—have taken an interest in the history of old age. Their studies now allow us to better understand the situations of the elders in society and have enlightened readers about the ways they lived their lives. Despite their work, few literary scholars have taken an interest. While other previously marginalized groups of the literature of the time, including but not limited to women, homosexuals, and Jews, have received increasing attention, the old characters of Renaissance literature have remained in the background. The intention of this paper is to allow them some time in the foreground.

Characters like Thenot, Pandosto, King Lear, Meliboe, Eubulus, Gloucester, Duke Senior and many others have two things in common: first, they are all characters in fictional works created in Early Modern England, and, second, they are all old by one standard or another. This group, though diverse in many ways, represents a character type – the old person—that deserves critical attention for two reasons. One reason, as I've stated, is that the older person as a character type or general topic of discussion in the literature of the time has been overlooked. By looking at both this “new” character type and old age in discussions we can discover more about the fictional works they appear

in. The other reason this topic is important is that old people did make up at least a small portion of the population, and, to understand any society, one should study all of the groups that make up that society. As the reader will soon realize, these two factors have a lot to do with each other, according to New Historicists.

New Historicists would claim that the older person, as a character type or topic, is found in so many types of literature for a reason: namely, they existed in the world surrounding the people who created the literature. Stephen Greenblatt has made the point time and again that an artist's creation that comes out of any specific time and place is bound to have been affected by that time and place, and to have a reciprocal effect on that time and place. So, considering this idea, the fact that the older characters did exist at all is an indicator that they must have existed in the authors' everyday worlds. What is not immediately clear from this observation is in what respect the older people existed in the world and whether or not their views, conditions, lives or positions have anything to do with the characters seemingly created to represent them or the fictional discussions about their conditions.

This thesis will attempt to answer this question by tracking "the social energies that circulate very broadly through [the Early Modern English] culture, flowing back and forth between margin and center, passing from zones designated as art to zones apparently indifferent or hostile to art [like philosophy, medicine, and sociopolitical thought], and pass up from below to transform exalted spheres and down from on high to colonize the low" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 13). Such a study is necessary because it provides evidence of the relationships between the world found in the non-fictional works

of the time and the fictional works as well. The purpose of this study is to look at the representations of old age in order to discuss the extent to which the older characters and discussions of old age in the fictional literature of the English Renaissance represented, identified with, and mirrored the ideas in non-fictional writings about old age and aging. It seems that the fictional and non-fictional writers of the time created recognizable old characters or discussions of old age by using the definitions and realistic societal situations of the elderly. And the fictional works of the time often utilize the same basic methods or ideas behind the non-fictional works to create their discussions of old age and the older characters. But while these representations could be familiar in form and through familiar description, some of the topic areas that are given precedence in the non-fictional texts—such as employment of the elderly or the prolonging of life—are not represented by the fictional texts at all.

A brief description of the chapters follows. To facilitate discussion of the fictional and non-fictional writings, chapter one will survey two important topics. First, it will look at the definitions of old age that existed in Early Modern England. As it is today, a single definition of old age was impossible to find. Philosophers, lawmakers, and fictional writers each attempted to come up with a way to define old age with the results finally depending variously on chronological age, physical appearance and one's ability to function in society. The second section of chapter one will discuss the positions of the elderly in a society that feared and hated old age. The survey will provide evidence that while a select few of the elderly held positions of power and respect, the majority did not have such luck. The result was that many of the aged were poor, and unable to care for themselves. Having a grasp on these two areas will lay a

foundation from which to judge the literature discussed in chapters two and three.

Chapter two will look at one popular method of discussing old age. In Francis Bacon's "On Youth and Age," Edmund Spenser's "Februarie" of *The Shepheardes Calendar*, and Shakespeare's Poem 12 in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, old age is discussed in the form of debates. Following the pattern of Greek dialectics, each of the works debate the topos of youth and old age. Using Bacon's "business"-minded essay as an example of a single perception of the real world opinions of youth and old age, the chapter turns to two other works to find that fictional literature mimicked the form of debate employed by Bacon but focused on entirely different areas of youth and old age. The fictional works of Spenser and Shakespeare were not interested in the same ideas that Bacon perceived to be important to the real world existence of the two groups.

The third chapter turns to a discussion of how the medical theories dealing with old age developed from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and focuses on the similar changes that take place in the literature that dealt with such topics. The first two sections of this chapter provide an overview of medieval medical theories on old age and how one literary work, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, responded to the popular opinions of the time. Langland disagrees with the two most popular approaches to old age—the search for a cure for old age and the idea that old age was the time to become a devout Christian—and provides his own ideas of becoming devout early in life and accepting old age for what it is through his creation of Elde. The third section provides an overview of the changes that came about in Renaissance opinions on medicine and old age. In Early Modern England, the focus shifted from dealing

with old age as a whole, to the study of specific cases, sicknesses and needs of old age. From here the chapter turns to its main focus, Shakespeare's *King Lear*. A study of the play reveals that Shakespeare, unlike Langland, follows the same patterns of contemporary medical theories by looking at an individual case of old age. The section shows that King Lear is suffering from melancholy brought on by old age as defined by Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

This study provides evidence for and against connections between non-fictional and fictional works, but one thing that is most common among all of the works is that they often use similar forms to discuss their subjects. To discuss youth and old age writers used debates. When discussing medicine, writers and theorists alike chose to discuss specific individual areas of old age. Whether fictional or not, there seems to be a level of agreement that comes about in the Renaissance as to the correct manner in which to discuss certain areas of old age. Though the fictional writers will sometimes prove to have very different subject matter or purposes in mind than those found in the non-fictional works, they all utilize similar forms and often employ the well-known emblematic descriptions of old age to relate their varied points to their audiences.

## CHAPTER I

### WHO ARE YOU CALLING OLD? AN INTRODUCTION TO OLD AGE AND THE ELDERLY

In order to intelligently discuss old age as it appears in the literary and non-literary texts of any period in history, one must first attempt to gain an understanding of two things: the basic definitions of old age that existed in that time and the position that the elderly held in that society. This chapter will attempt to explain each of these concepts in relation to Early Modern England. A better understanding of how people during the Renaissance defined old age will help identify, recognize and clarify the concepts of old age discussed in the two chapters that follow. Additionally, a grasp on the status that the older people held in their society will enable us to better appreciate the situations and circumstances of elderly people, from which the numerous opinions concerning them spring.

#### **Section 1: Defining Old Age**

Defining old age in Early Modern England is a difficult thing to do. Even today it is hard to pick an age at which one becomes old. Some groups have

attempted to do so, yet still they disagree. The U.S. Government currently thinks old age begins at sixty-five, when one can start to collect Social Security retirement benefits. AARP, the nation's leading senior organization allows people to become members at the age of fifty. At almost every restaurant there is a menu for seniors only, which usually has a minimum age of 55. It seems that putting a number on old age is not an exact science even in our time.

Of course, one might also claim that old age is dependent on other, physical circumstances. If a person is wrinkled, has gray hair or is bald, he or she is obviously old, right? Most of the time such physical features would indicate that a person is old. But what of the many individuals who have gray hair or go bald before the age of thirty? Should they be considered old? It is obvious that old age can be defined in many different ways. This was also the case in Early Modern England.

Similarly, as one looks at definitions of old age that existed then, many varying descriptions of and disagreements about age existed. The following paragraphs will show several different ways that people of the Renaissance attempted to define old age. They will determine the several reasons that some people of the time looked only at chronological age to determine when one became elderly. And they will discuss the situations in which others felt old age depended on one's ability to function in a productive manner within society. Then the section will turn to a discussion of certain groups who claimed old age could be judged by physical appearance and/or the way an individual thought or acted. This section will explore the definitions that existed in Early Modern England in order to support the various ways people chose to define old age, and

provide the tools necessary to know that characters like King Lear were seen as old, even when in certain situations the age is not explicitly given.

King Lear, in Shakespeare's play, calls himself "fourscore and upward" (21.59), which even by today's standards would be considered fairly old. But in order to understand just how old this was back then, one must attempt to find out what "old age" represented to the people of Early Modern England.

In *Human Aging and Dying: A Study in Sociocultural Gerontology* published in 1977, Wilbur H. Watson and Robert J. Maxwell present their finding that being elderly is often not determined by one's chronological age but by one's age compared to others in the same ethnic and societal group. Centuries before, Montaigne (1533-1592) had written, "my opinion is, to consider, that the age unto which we are come, is an age whereto few arrive: since men come not unto it by any ordinarie course, it is a signe we are verie forward [in years]" (377). In *The Geneva Bible*, which notes, "So all the days of Sheth were nine hundreth and twelve yerrs: and he dyed" (Gen. 5:8), the gloss proposes that "the chief cause of long life in the first age was the multiplication of mankinde that according to God's commandement at the beginning the world might be increased with people, which might vniuersally praise his Name" (Gen. 5:8e). Seth's ability to live to nine hundred years of age is definitely caused by an extra-"ordinarie course." Since the world had been fairly populated by the Renaissance, according to the editor of the 1560 edition of the Geneva Bible, the people of the time should apparently not expect such length in years. Years earlier Montaigne proposed that old age was rare, so if one lived longer than those around him or her, one should consider oneself old. Montaigne was not interested in the number of years that were said to have been attained by people of the past;

instead he looked at those around him to determine when old age began. This of course seems like a logical approach to determining old age. One may ascertain that at least some would have considered old those who lived beyond the average age in Early Modern England.

In recent years several studies have gathered statistical evidence regarding life expectancy in and around the English Renaissance. Lawrence Stone claims that, in 1695, “only about five percent of the population was over the age of sixty” (48). So, using Montaigne’s suggestion, one might claim that since about ninety-five percent of the population died before sixty, those who lived beyond this age at the end of the seventeenth century would be considered old. But this one statistic may be misleading. “The expectation of life at birth in England in the 1640s was only thirty-two years” (Stone 55); so living beyond this age might also be considered at least older, if not old. But this fact is also misleading, because many of the deaths that bring this average down so low occurred in childhood, and simply living through childhood does not make one old. A better but narrower statistic shows that the expectation of life for the heirs of squires specifically and those ranking higher in the social strata of England who had reached twenty-one years of age was sixty-four years old in 1549 and fifty-five years old between 1620 and 1699 (Stone 49).<sup>1</sup> People living close to or beyond these average ages would likely be considered old by those who agreed with Montaigne.

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<sup>1</sup> This decline in the expectation of life may be explained by the coming of the “lethal late 17<sup>th</sup> century,” in which the large populations of the cities were scoured by epidemics, including smallpox, and more so the great plague which ravaged London in 1665 (Stone 61-65).

Georges Minois also gives data concerning life expectancy in the sixteenth century. By looking at the ages of death recorded in some British parishes, he determines that between fifteen and twenty-six percent of each parish died between the ages of sixty and sixty-nine, while another 10% to 20% lived past seventy (Minois 291). This means that between approximately 26% and 46%—probably closer to 32%—of the people in the parishes died after the age of sixty. This life expectancy is much higher than the age found in Stone's late seventeenth-century study, but it confirms that a majority of the people in Britain in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries would have died before the age of sixty. This conclusion would make those who lived beyond sixty eligible to be considered old. Although Minois's and Stone's studies are probably the best studies of life expectancy in Early Modern England because they cover larger portions of the population than others, other studies do provide some additional information.

In her essay, "Everyday Life, Longevity, Nuns in Early Modern France," Judith Brown indicates the life expectancy of cloistered women in the same period. Brown claims that the Nuns of St. Jacobo Ripolia and the Murate, along with those in Italy, tended to live to be very old: half lived to an age of seventy and approximately one-fourth beyond seventy (128). Therefore, a nun in one of these convents might not be considered old until she surpassed seventy. These numbers are a bit misleading because cloistered women were not subject to as many diseases as secular women were and, probably even more significant, cloistered women did not suffer the high rates of childbirth mortality. Though women's mortality rates had lessened since the Middle Ages, the number of women reaching their seventies in England by the sixteenth century was still

nowhere close to that of the nuns. Minois cites a study by T.H. Hollingsworth that found that of the women born between 1550 and 1574, 42.4% could expect to live past fifty years of age, and 8.8% could expect to live into their seventies (293). Another religious group that usually outlived those in the secular world were the monks. Brown points out that the "Benedictine monks of Christ Church in Canterbury could, at age twenty, expect to live" to between fifty-four and sixty-two years of age in the fifteenth century (132), an average fairly close to the one provided by Stone for the privileged groups throughout much of the seventeenth century.

Of the sixteenth-century popes, a group whose longevity is a factor contributing to their selection, only four out of twenty-three died before the age of sixty, while twelve (over half) lived beyond seventy and three into their eighties (Minois 299). So in this case only the final three may have been considered old. As a group, the popes fill the higher end of the life expectancy scale and show what age people might live to under certain circumstances. Their privileged status and living conditions provided a favorable atmosphere that was not available to most in the general populace.

One other group of privileged individuals is similarly informative. The kings and rulers of England and surrounding countries are interesting because their birth and death records are more exact than those for other "lower" sections of society. One example is Henry VIII, "who died at fifty-six, but who outlived ten of the eleven English rulers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries" (Gilbert 31). Two of his rivals on the continent, Francis I and Charles V, lived to fifty-three and fifty-eight respectively. Yet all three lived longer than their predecessors (Gilbert 31). All of these rulers, none of them considered to have

died young, “left their mark by being long in power” (Gilbert 31). So, it seems that for rulers of the era, making it into the late fifties would have been considered quite a feat. Queen Elizabeth’s rule until the age of seventy was a rare feat.

According to the data discussed above, one can draw a conclusion in light of Montaigne’s view of what makes a person old. Barring the regular clergy, living into one’s sixties would be a good indicator that one was old in Early Modern England. But another indicator of aging is also worth considering: namely, the age at which the people begin to consider themselves or others old.

Many people did not take the time to look around them and observe how long their peers were living. As the following examples will show, people often began to feel and act old much earlier than the previous statistics would seem to indicate. One of the more extreme examples of this is François Villon, who insisted that he was in old age in his thirtieth year (Gilbert 15). Michelangelo claimed he was old at the age of forty-two (Gilbert 10). At the age of fifty-three Montaigne considered himself old and “began to act accordingly” (Minois 53). Jean Bodin claimed that for all people “old age begins at fifty-six and most people die within the next seven years” (Minois 262). In Sonnet 2, Shakespeare, who died at fifty-two, suggested that a man of forty was old.

Another indicator of old age occurs in Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. Creighton Gilbert points out that Vasari (1511-1574) was a good indicator of popular beliefs of old age because Vasari’s use of the word old to describe certain people in his work is fairly consistent with specific age groups (19-21). In his work Vasari discusses hundreds of the most famous Italian artists of his time. On several occasions he takes the time to point out not only

the stories of their lives but also their ages at death. Vasari describes Antonio de San Gallo in 1546 “being old and feeble” at the age of sixty-one (Vasari 115, Gilbert 19). Giovan Fransesco died around the age of seventy-six after being described as becoming old several years before (Vasari 19). Vasari also describes Benvenuto Garofalo as old at the age of sixty-nine (Vasari 451). So Vasari’s descriptions of old age are more in line with statistics of chronological determination of age rather than people’s descriptions of themselves.

But we should consider one more area before attempting to determine an approximate starting point for old age. The topos of the stages of life, which dates back to the beginning of writing, was widely known throughout Europe. In his *Convivio*, Dante’s “four stages are adolescence, youth, old age [which begins at forty-five], and senility [which begins at seventy]” (Gilbert 14 n14, Shahar 15). Erasmus, in his “Poem on the troubles of old age” written in 1506 and quoted here from Clarence H. Miller’s English translation of the 1518 *Epigrammata* edition, sets the onset of old age at thirty-five years old (15). In Thomas Elyot’s *Castel of Helth* (1539), “*senectute*” begins at forty (Gilbert 13). Although Elyot and Dante both refer to four stages of life, several other versions of the ages of man existed before and during the English Renaissance. In the thirteenth century Bernard de Gordon wrote “On the Conservation of Human Life.” In it he describes a three-stage division in which old age or *aetas senectutis* “begins at thirty-five and continues until death” (Shahar 15). Shakespeare, whose persona in Sonnet 2 felt that old age begins at forty, provides another system to discuss the ages of man in *As You Like It*. Shakespeare there “made the drama of human destiny unfold in seven acts,” with the sixth and seventh ages being old age and extreme old age respectively (Minois 281):

The sixth age shifts  
 Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
 For his shrunk shank, and his big, manly voice,  
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
 That ends this strange, eventful history,  
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

(2.7, 156-165)

Rosenthal calls Jaques's speech in Act 2, Scene 7, "conventional stuff, if rarely so well put" and reminds us that "we must remember that [. . . Shakespeare] had access to a vast and well known-body of views regarding the stages of life, the transitional links or barriers between the stages, and the salient features of each stage" (Rosenthal 181). Shakespeare's interest in ages and old age is obvious when one considers his many older characters—such as Lear, Gloucester, Duke Senior, Old Capulet, Egeus, Leonato, Timon of Athens, Nestor, Titus Andronicus, and more. His decision to include a set-piece detailing the stages of a man's life seems to indicate that the topos of the ages of man was still relevant.

After considering the several ways in which people of the English Renaissance attempted to determine a chronological starting point for old age, it seems I am hardly any closer to finding one myself. If I follow Montaigne's example and compare the expectations of life in Early Modern England with Vasari's use of the word "old" in describing several of his artists it seems that old

age would be somewhere in one's sixties. Yet many of the greatest thinkers of the time write that they began to feel old in their forties and fifties. Furthermore, according to the ages of man passed down to and rewritten in the English Renaissance, the onset of old age often begins around forty, and, in some case, if one is lucky, one reaches the realms of extreme old age in their seventies. The fact is that there is no one chronological definition for old age that holds more than others. But there was at least one person who had an idea about when old age should end. Philip of Novare wrote, "few [people] lived to be 80, and whoever passed this point had better pray for death" (Shahar 15).

One of the main reasons that so few could agree on a chronological beginning of old age was that people used so many factors to define old age. Yet another important indicator of old age for the Early Modern English people was one's ability to function in his/her society (Shahar 24). Gilbert claims that the main reason the "Renaissance did call forty old...[was because they noticed that] between forty and sixty...most people died" (13). Giacomo Vignola, a prominent architect in charge of the Duke of Parma's building activities in the middle of the sixteenth-century, was demoted and replaced by his son Giacinto Vignola by the Duke of Parma "in order to subtract labor from his [Giacinto's] father's age" (Gilbert 7). The Duke did not want the old man working so much in his old age. In Vasari's work, "fifty-four is an age on the declining side of working maturity" (Gilbert 9). Another indicator that lack of ability determines that one is aged is found in "a statute of Henry VII issued in 1503, [that] discharged all men of sixty and over from the duty of 'fighting in the King's wars'" (Shahar 25). Though this statute indicates a chronological age as a determining factor, it also reiterates that

people over sixty, old by all chronological standards that we've discussed, were old also by their inability to function as soldiers.

Another indicator used widely by people in the Renaissance was physical appearance and ability. Chris Gilleard cites T. G. Parking as agreeing that "despite the philosophical and literary traditions of the *aetates hominum* (ages of man) [in classical literature]...no specific age limit applied..., [A] word like 'senex' was not strictly defined in terms of numbers of years, but was related more to appearance and circumstances" (27). *As You Like It* makes this point evident when Jaques tells Duke Senior that the seventh age is experienced "Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (2.7.162-165). Jaques alludes to the physical features and senses that are lost due to extreme old age. Spenser and Samuel Daniel also warn against the loss of beauty associated with not having physical features such as teeth, while "Hamlet says: 'old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum'" (Minois 281, 283). These thoughts were by no means new. Aristotle constantly "mused on how the body wears out" (Rosenthal 176). In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates had described Cephalus as looking like an old man, and this of course makes him old throughout the work (Plato 327c). St. Augustine, in *City of God*, also discusses this subject:

The decay of the members of the body puts an end to its integrity, deformity blights its beauty, weakness its health, lassitude its vigor, sleepiness or sluggishness its activity—and which of these is it that may not assail the flesh of a wise man? [. . .] Does [such decay] not destroy all beauty and grace in the body whether at rest or in motion? (St. Augustine 676)

Like those that came before him, St Augustine saw the effect that old age had on the body, and once he even commented that aging is “the weak and cowardly shrinking of the flesh” (16). Georges Minois writes that “old age and death constituted the greatest scandals, for the two went together: [. . .thus] old people’s faces were henceforth to be viewed above all as death masks” (250). Rensard, at sixty, complained, “all that’s left of me is bones” (Minois 250).

Many actions and thoughts were associated with old age. One popular belief was the weakening of the mind in old age—though it must be said that Ficino disagrees with this in “On a Long Life,” the first chapter of Book Two in his *Three Books on Life*, when he suggests that a long life may be achieved through the strengthening of the mind and knowledge (Ficino 167). At forty-five Pietro Aretino claimed, “old age is slowing down my wits” (Gilbert 11). Older people are also associated with a propensity for crying. Gilbert points out one occasion in which Charles V “apologized for weeping because he was ‘old and feeble in all his members’” (31). Another common idea was that old people still had the sexual urges they did when they were young, yet they often became upset with their inability to act on those urges. Plato’s Cephalus attempted to deny this common situation by claiming no longer to be interested in such things; he says, “a declining interest in physical pleasures is exactly matched by increasing desire for and enjoyment of conversation” (Plato 327d). However, Robert Greene’s aging Pandosto, who lusts after the beautiful Fawnia until he finds out she is his

daughter, seems to portray the attitude that is most often portrayed in Renaissance literature (Greene 196-204).<sup>2</sup> Montaigne quotes Lucrece:

When once the body by shrewd strength of yeares,  
Is shak't, and limmes<sup>3</sup> drawne downe from strength that weares,  
Wit halts, both tongue and mind  
Doe daily doat, we find. (379)

Such doting is probably the most notable and widely used description of old people's actions in society, and, as will become evident, in their literature.

It should be clear by now that old age was not easy to define. Several factors, including but not limited to chronological age, were utilized by the Early Modern English society and individuals to define old age. Understanding this will not only facilitate the upcoming discussions of old age in philosophy, and medicine, but it will also help to identify some fictional characters as "old" without having to count on or wait for the authors to explicitly tell us they are old.

## **Section 2: The Aged Individual in Early Modern Society**

In his *Utopia*, Thomas More pictures a "family governed by the eldest [. . .] and most ancient father," and a society in which even "old women may be permitted to the Priesthood" (Minois 276). Like Bacon, who in the conclusion of his essay "Of Youth and Age" suggests that old and young men alike should be

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<sup>2</sup> For an examples of this attitude see Poem 12 of *The Passionate Pilgrim* which is discussed in chapter 2 of this work.

<sup>3</sup> "limbs"

employed in the affairs of the court and other fields, so that each age group may quell the weaknesses of the other (424-425), More dreams of a society that employs “the old to moderate the ardour of youth and impart the lessons of experience on them” (Minois 277). Gilleard writes that *Utopia* “provides the most famous illustration” of a reordering of society, one in which the author “seeks to assure that any material miseries associated with old age are ameliorated” (38). More paints a pretty picture of his ideal for the life of the elderly in his society, but in truth, as is the case with most utopian ideals, the situation of the elderly in Early Modern English society was often though not always far from perfect.

Often, “persons stigmatized by physically repulsive features or because they evidence bizarre mental and social behavior are [. . .] assigned places socially” separate from those who are “nondisabled” (Watson and Maxwell 68). People of the Renaissance often saw the elderly as disabled, and in turn shoved the aged aside into the darker areas of society. Minois says that, “the optimistic and creative” Renaissance established “a variety of [. . .] efforts to exorcise aging and its cruelty toward the old reveals the depths of its hidden despair” (249). The subtitle of Minois’ chapter on the sixteenth century is “Humanists and Courtiers versus Old Age” (Minois 250), and thus old people; this title exemplifies the younger generation’s abhorrence of and resulting poor treatment of old people. This hatred of old age created a situation in which many elderly suffered hardships. The evidence that follows will portray a more realistic picture of the social position held by the old people and of the treatment they received from the younger generations than the one More presents in *Utopia*.

Chris Gilleard writes that the younger people and their society respected the aged during much of the Middle Ages (37-38). Landowners and lords often

continued to accumulate wealth long into their old age, suggesting that they were still considered valuable in their positions. Their place in the familial and business worlds was set. But “the Renaissance brought about a radical reordering of priorities,” acknowledged by the passage of the English Poor Laws of 1601, wherein “a new status was established for the aged as a part of the deserving poor with expectations concerning their appropriate care” (Gilleard 38-39). Andrew Wear indicates that “there had to be a perception that a person could not work, usually because of sickness or the infirmities resulting from old age, for relief to be given. Old age did not by itself make a person eligible for poor relief” (19). But it was becoming evident that at least a portion of the elderly population needed support. More and more of them were ending up begging in the streets of London and throughout England. King Lear’s situation of naked poverty was the reality for many older people. Shulamith Shahar notices that the “many warnings [that] came from the Middle Ages for fathers not to give up their powers to their children, [suggesting] they were likely to be cut off,” held true at times in the Renaissance (95-97). The situation of those who no longer had families was often considerably worse. After the elderly without families lost their ability to make a living, little effort was made, outside of the monasteries, to help them in their final days. Early Modern English society “considered the aged expendable” (Marx 37), a situation leading to the elderly being included in the Poor Laws of 1601.

Now these descriptions definitely look very different from the picture in More’s *Utopia*. The reason that the aged were put in such a pitiful position seems clear when we consider the way many felt about the aged. In fact, in the beginning of Book I in More’s *Utopia*, the fool represents old age as despised and

rejected in society and pleads for “deference and respect [to] be shown to old people” (Minois 276). Resentment of the elderly is also noticeable in other European countries both before and during the time. Montaigne does not consider old men much good for anything (Minois 267). Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly* implies that “money is the sole reason that people associated with old men and women” (Minois 261). Castiglione, in his *Courtier*, spends several pages discussing the weaknesses of old men. He writes that the old men’s “talents were not as good then as [those of the young men in the courts]” (Castiglione 68). The rant continues until Castiglione demands the old men of the court to move aside and let the young do their jobs and act as they wish. Similar sentiments were circulating throughout England.

In *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, the old man begs Euphues to listen to him and take his advice because the old man’s “hoary hairs” make him the “ambassador of experience” (Lyly 91). But, like Castiglione, Euphues refuses to appreciate any advice that the old man offers and ridicules him instead. Gilleard writes that, “many Renaissance and Reformation writers strove to topple old age from any position of moral or social worth” (38). Evidently there were a number of people who felt that the old were only a nuisance in society and not deserving of respect. But not *all* of the aged were as bad off as it at first appears; evidently some did respect the elderly, and the elderly did not always end up on the streets.

There was another direction that the older people of Renaissance society could go: up. Though writers such as Francis Bacon held that “the old [were] too timorous and subsequently bad rulers” (Minois 269), they actually “were holding greater positions and greater responsibilities” than their predecessors in

English courts and in other areas (Minois 288). Rosenthal admits that though many of the elderly in society were destitute, “old men in positions of power were probably as much the norm” (117). Bacon cited Plutarch, who said, “aged men ought to govern the commonwealth” (*Youth and Age* n765), a view sometimes upheld in Early Modern society. Cato, in Cicero’s widely read “On Old Age,” claimed to be active in the Roman senate at the age of eighty-four (Cicero 51), suggesting that such things did occur. In certain sections of Renaissance society the idea of the wise old man who should be respected and revered for his knowledge and experience continued to exist.

Plato’s Socrates admitted he enjoyed talking to old people because one ought to learn from them (Plato, *Republic*, 327e), suggesting that they were to be respected for their knowledge and experience. Minois indicates that elderly people respected for their wisdom held high positions: “the Tudor administration was in the hands of experienced people, the more important the job the older they were, with the most important positions reserved for those over fifty” (296). The position held consistently by the eldest officials was that of Chamberlain, whose average age at entry was fifty-eight and whose average age of retirement was sixty-four years and nine months. The position of Treasurer of King’s Household was usually held into one’s seventies (Minois 297). Minois provides examples of older people in positions of power throughout Europe in the sixteenth century, including military leaders such as Blaise de Monluc (who died at 75), and Andrea Doria (94); heads of state including Queen Elizabeth (died at 70), and Andre Gritti (83); and as noted above, the many popes and advisers held their positions into their sixties and beyond (295-96). But it was more “precisely because of their personal qualities that many old people played

important political roles" (Minois 295). Watson and Maxwell suggest that "one of the most important variables determining [. . . old people's] status and their treatment [. . .] is the value assigned to that information [gained from experience] by others" (135). In the Renaissance at least a few men privileged to have held courtly positions in their younger years, were appreciated for that experience in their old age. Minois points out that "admiration for the old man over eighty did exist, especially after [the person's] death" (295, emphasis added).

But for most the situation of the elderly was not pleasant. Like Lear and Gloucester, each dependent on their children in their final moments, and like Don Diego in *El Cid*, who begged for death due to his loss of physical competence and who relied on his son to take up his sword (Butler 237), many of the elderly were forced to look to their own sons, daughters, or younger generations in general, to support them and carry on their affairs. That a small percentage maintained high positions in old age does not overshadow the point that the majority of the elderly were not so lucky.

Although many of the examples of the positions held in society are those held by older men, something should be said of the older women. There seems to have been a greater contempt held for old women than that for men of the same age (Minois 293). In literature, "old women often symbolized or personified winter, the vices, old age, and death itself" (Shahar 47). In a time known for its worship of beauty, the loss of beauty associated with old age replaced worship with detestation. This feeling occurs not only in England; Erasmus in *Praise of Folly* "describes the hideousness of old women" (Minois 255). Simone de Beauvoir illustrates that in folklore really old women were often ogresses or witches (136). Such implications against older women were not just

found in the fiction. In Paris records of women tried as witches between 1565 and 1640 show that “the average age [of the tried woman] was over fifty years” (Minois 256). The older age of accused witches is yet another example of the evils associated with the older woman in society. In situations where cities were under siege, “old women were the first to be expelled” to fend for themselves and often die of starvation outside of the city walls (Minois 256). This occurred in one well-known incident when, “on 25 January 1555, 400 old women were driven from Sienna” while the city was under siege (Minois 256). Compared to older men left alone without anyone to depend on, “widowhood at any age seems to have placed women in [more] socially and economically vulnerable positions” (Gilleard 37n10). Fortunately, by the late seventeenth century children were charged by the law with the responsibility of providing care for their widowed mothers: “so long as they did not remarry, most widows had a legal right to a room and board, and access to the communal fire, in the house of their eldest child” (Stone 48).

The representations of old women in Renaissance fictional literature—such as Skelton’s *Elynour Rummynge*, and Sidney’s *Cecropia*—often portrayed their lives as similarly difficult. Though a few older women, such as Queen Elizabeth, did gain and maintain positions of political or business power, for the most part they represented a miniscule percentage of the total population of elderly women. The few good qualities associated with old men—for example, that they should be respected for their wisdom and experience—are rarely used to describe older women of the time. Although historical information must still be gathered about the older woman’s position in society,

little evidence currently exists regarding the positive qualities of old age in women.

The positions held by any group in a society reflect the value that society accords it. The fact that most older men and women were left out of the mainstream of public affairs suggests that old age was feared and that the young despised the examples of aging that existed all about them. In the few exceptions, when respect is shown to the elderly, other alternatives are not as advantageous to those who employ them; for example, when the Tudor courts employed elderly gentlemen among the highest positions, there was no other alternative for gaining their level of experience through the employment of younger men.

The knowledge of the various definitions used in Early Modern England to define old age, added to the understanding that very few elderly achieved positions of high prestige or power, helps to better comprehend the discussions and descriptions of old age that came through in the debates, medical texts and fictional literature discussed later. In the next chapter the focus will shift to a study of the specific technique of debate utilized by theorists and fictional writer alike—specifically Francis Bacon, Spenser and Shakespeare in this study—to discuss views on the topos of youth and old age.

## CHAPTER II

### DISCUSSIONS OF OLD AGE AND AGING: THE YOUTH, AGE DEBATES

The great minds of Early Modern English culture discussed old age and the aging process in the non-fictional and fictional works of the time in many ways. Writers published critical essays about the aged individual, created characters portraying age itself, and through authorial statement or the fictional character's own words, numerous opinions, good and bad, were voiced concerning the old; all of these methods were used to discuss old age at the time. One of the other popular methods employed to discuss this subject was accomplished through the creation of debates or comparisons concerning the dichotomy of youth and old age—a technique that sometimes follows Aristotle's expressed views on youth and old age in his *The Art of Rhetoric*. The debates often take on the form of dialogues and occur throughout the period. The methods of debate are adopted and used by the writers' discussed in this chapter for their own purposes and successfully implanted into their particular genres. The major works focused on in this chapter were written during the Renaissance, though some, like Aristotle's, were well known and read by intellectual and sometimes popular circles of the age.

The attempt to discover in what ways the discussions of old age found in

the fictional literature represent, comment on, or identify with those found in non-fictional texts continues in this chapter, as the study focuses on discussions of old age in these fictional and non-fictional works. Examining the different uses of debate in Early Modern England will provide an answer to the question of whether the fictional discussions reflect or are spontaneous reactions to the forms, function, and/or realities perceived to be represented within non-fictional texts, or whether they are completely disinterested in them altogether. What this study finds is that the fictional works of the time seem to have their own agendas or purposes, each providing very different pictures of the world of old age than those found in the non-fictional writings. Though the methods utilized by all three writers to be discussed are similar, very little else is.

Erasmus once wrote, “Nothing is better than youth; nothing so hateful as old age” (Minois 260). In Early Modern England this sentiment was also widely held, but a few writers of the time took the time to give an at least superficially more objective view of youth and old age: “The debate of youth and old age scattered in Medieval and Renaissance eclogues [and other works] provided an occasion for writers to articulate the ideals of old age by contrast to those of youth” (Marx 22-23). This chapter surveys three debates between youth and old age in works that have received relatively little attention in past studies. Francis Bacon’s “Of Youth and Age,” in the form of a non-fictional essay, contrasts the qualities, both good and bad, found in the old and the young. Edmund Spenser’s debate occurs in “Februarie” of his *Shepherd’s Calendar*, which presents a discussion between an old and young shepherd about the benefits and disadvantages that each sees in his own and the other’s age. And the series of

love poems in *The Passionate Pilgrim*<sup>4</sup> provides yet another example of a debate between youth and age. I will look at Bacon's work first; though it is written several years after the other two works, it provides the best framework for discussing the other two works. Each form offers contrasts between youth and old age, and while each individual utilization of the method of debate might involve some prejudice against one group or the other, only poem 12 seems quite one-sided due to its outright abhorrence of old age.

Following in the tradition of Cicero's dialogues or incomplete fictions, all are at least somewhat open-ended.<sup>5</sup> Cicero's incomplete fictions, unlike Plato's that search for a truth, are "concerned with the disposition or *presentation* of knowledge" (Wilson 34). In other words, Cicero did not always care to present a final decision as to which side of an argument was right; instead both sides are equally represented for the audience. While Spenser follows this formula closely, Bacon's essay is slightly more conclusive, and Poem 12 is obviously personal and one-sided. One influence that will be evident in the forms of all three works is that of Aristotle's pieces "Youth" and "Old Age" in his *Art of Rhetoric*, which discuss the character traits associated with each of the age groups. A survey of the three works also shows that, though Spenser and Shakespeare use the form of debate in their works as Bacon does, the discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the young and old in public affairs in Bacon's

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<sup>4</sup> The authorship of the poems in this series, though attributed to Shakespeare when originally published, is uncertain in many instances, but for the purpose of this study, the author of the particular poem discussed in this chapter is irrelevant. The form and purpose of the poem and the fact that the collection was published in the Renaissance is reason enough to validate the study of it in this work.

<sup>5</sup> K.J. Wilson uses the phrase "incomplete fictions" to "sum up the position of dialogue inside the Aristotelian scheme" for defining fiction in his *Poetics* (Wilson 20).

essay is ignored in the two fictional texts and replaced by moral differences in Spenser's and emblematic ones in Poem 12.

More widely known for his works on politics and law, Francis Bacon in "Of Youth and Age" takes up the debate between youth and old age and contrasts the strengths and weaknesses of each in the administration of public affairs. And, though Bacon wrote many other essays that involved conflicting points of view, "Of Youth and Age" is unique in its overall form. It is the only essay in which Bacon discusses both subjects by alternating between the two within individual paragraphs; this technique develops a dialogical debate between two opposing sides. "This essay [Bacon's "Of Youth and Age"] owes something to Aristotle's juxtaposition of these two states of life in *Rhetoric*, ii 12-13," according to Brian Vickers (764). Since Bacon's essay is non-fictional, and thus geared to a real world, it provides an example of the perceived reality that I associate with the non-fictional works of the time. As the main purpose of this thesis is to study the relationship, or lack there of, between the fictional works dealing with old age and the realities of old age put forth in the non-fictional works, the form and style of Bacon's "Of Youth and Age," as well as its function are important because they offer this specific point of reference against which to discuss the two fictional works to follow.

Bacon begins his essay by alluding to the neoplatonists' ideal of the *puer senex*, "the youthful elder who combined vigor with sagacity"; this idea "unified

the [. . .] ideals of innocence and experience" (Marx 42-43).<sup>6</sup> Though Bacon rotates the form by giving the strengths associated with the elderly to a young person, it portrays the same ideal: "A man that is young in years may be old in hours, if he have lost no time" (424). This being the ideal and not necessarily the reality, Bacon quickly follows this statement with the qualifier that this perfect state "happens rarely" (*Youth and Age* 424). By removing the ideal of the perfect mixture of the strengths of both the old and young within a single person, Bacon clears a path for his debate. The rest of the essay consists of the juxtaposition of the strengths and weaknesses associated with both conditions of life.

Bacon follows by discussing one of the two main parts making up the *puer senex*: the wise old man. He writes, "generally youth is like the first cogitations, not so wise as the second" (*Youth and Age* 424). The idea of the wise old man was definitely not a new one, as it had been a common topos at least since Plato. Peter J. Steinberger refers to this trait in Plato's Cephalus who, "as an old man, is able to claim a certain traditional authority based largely on experience [. . . allowing him to . . .] impart his putative wisdom to his sons" (193). Georges Minois writes that by the late 15<sup>th</sup> century the idea of the wise old man was becoming more popular: "it is said that old people are usually wiser than the young; this is based on a greater level of understanding and experience" (220). Though popular in Early Modern England, this view was not quite the same as the one found in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which points out that the old person's

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Marx writes similarly: "Milton's 'Il Penseroso' exemplifies what has been called 'the pastoral of solitude,' a strain of the bucolic tradition reflecting the cultural influence of neoplatonism. Much neoplatonic doctrine attempts to unify the divergent paths of the *vita amoris* and the *vita contemplativa* by reconciling the corresponding conflict between young and old" (42).

greater level of experience often leads to unhappiness and says nothing of their wisdom.

The first several paragraphs of "Of Youth and Age" continue by discussing a few traits that are considered strengths in non-recreational endeavors or "business" and political life, the responsibilities that St. Augustine associated with early manhood (Stock 198). Bacon writes, "the invention [or inventiveness] of young men is more lively than that of old; and imaginations [ideas or projects] stream into their [young men's] minds better, and as it were more divinely" (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 424). Sentiments such as these sound very much like the ones found in Baldassarre Castiglione's *Courtier*, which offers a one-sided account of the abilities young men bring to courtly life and affairs (Castiglione 65-70). But just as these few words settle in the mind of the reader, Bacon puts a quick end to the thought that this essay is in any way sympathetic to the young. By suggesting that the young, who possess "natures that have much heat [a reference to an excess sanguine humour related to the blood], and great and violent desires and perturbations," are not ready for major roles or greatness until they reach middle age (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 424), he is claiming that the youthful person, whose personality is still too "hot," is unable to handle the pressures and responsibilities of action that accompany and bring about greatness. Bacon cites Aristotle as writing that the young are "inferior to their passions" (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 173), and, because youthful passions are hot and not yet tempered by the experience that comes with age, being in complete obedience to them is dangerous in political and "business" affairs. Bacon follows this claim with the example of Julius Caesar. Vickers notes that Caesar became a dictator at the age of fifty-six (Bacon, *Youth and Age* n764), an age that, according

to the figures above, would have seemed especially old in the Renaissance, and an age that provided the experiences of life, war, and politics that allowed him to mature to greatness. Then just as quickly Bacon's focus turns to the strengths of youth associated with humoral temperaments.<sup>7</sup> He writes, "reposed [calm, settled] natures may do well in youth" (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 424). And again he gives examples, this time citing Augustus Caesar, "the first Roman Emperor, in power by his early thirties" (Bacon, *Youth and Age* n764). Bacon, as usual, is sure to point to both sides of each situation; this technique is very important in any comparison. Continuing this pattern, Bacon notes that, "on the other side, heat and vivacity in age, is an excellent composition [temperament] for business" or public life (*Youth and Age* 424). For Bacon, the weaknesses of one group always seem to be strengths for the other.

The second paragraph continues with the topics of the first, as Bacon turns to a style that counterpoints youth and old age—a style that, we will see, resembles Poem 12, attributed to Shakespeare in *The Passionate Pilgrim*. Bacon writes, "Young men are fitter to invent than to judge" (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 424). Vickers points out that the terms "invent" and "judge" are "terms from logic: to have ideas, and then to evaluate them" (*Youth and Age* n764). Young men are "fitter for execution than for counsel; and fitter for new projects than for settled business" (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 424). Bacon is asserting, without getting into specific examples, that the young men of the Renaissance courts in England were better used for their fresh ideas and inventiveness, while the older men should

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<sup>7</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines "temperament" as "The combination of the four cardinal humours of the body, by the relative proportion of which the physical and mental constitution were held to be determined."

be left to the decision-making that accompanies public life. He continues by writing that old men's experiences in life and "business" help them to better handle the management of "business," but, when it comes to an experience that the older men have never come across, they are often deceived. The first part of Bacon's next point is the opposite of Castiglione's view that young men should be in charge of the business of the courts (Castiglione 68). Bacon writes, "the errors of young men are the ruin of business" (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 424). This is definitely a cutting statement, especially when in the next line he writes that the old men's mistakes are only that they never do all that could be done and never do anything fast enough. While young men can ruin a "business" with their mistakes, old men simply do their jobs more efficiently.

In the next section of the second paragraph, Bacon creates a long list of the weaknesses associated with young people in administrative positions:

Young men, in the conduct and manage[ment] of actions embrace more than they can hold; stir more than they can quiet; fly to the end without consideration of the means and degrees pursue some few principles which they have chanced upon absurdly; care not to innovate, which draws unknown inconveniences; use extreme remedies at first; and that which doubleth all errors, will not acknowledge or retract them; like an unready horse that will neither stop nor turn. (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 424)

This list points to the main errors made by young men in "business," each caused by an unbridled ambition to overachieve mixed with a dose of undeserved self confidence or pride. Vickers points to Aristotle as a possible influence for these lines: "young men have strong passions [. . .] are hot-tempered and quick-

tempered [. . .] All their mistakes are in the direction of doing things excessively and vehemently [. . .] they overdo everything” (Bacon, *Youth and Age* n765; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 173-174). Aristotle’s words seem to sum up Bacon’s feelings that all of the quoted traits of youth point to a lack of thought before action. The old men’s weaknesses are again less harmful and potentially dangerous to a “business” than those of the young. Bacon writes, “men of age object too much, consult too long, adventure too little, repent too soon, and seldom drive business home to the full period, but content themselves with a mediocrity of success” (*Youth and Age* 424). Again Vickers points to Aristotle who writes that old men are sure about nothing and under-do everything. Vickers quotes, “They ‘think,’ but they never ‘know,’ and because of their hesitation they always add a ‘possibly’ or a ‘perhaps,’ putting everything this way and nothing positively” (Francis Bacon, *Youth and Age* n765; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 175). Again, Bacon indicates that old men do not ruin “business,” but that they could simply do more to add to their successes. In his counter-pointed style Bacon contrasts the strengths and weaknesses of men of youth and age in the “business” world, allowing him to create a foundation for the suggestion of hiring both age groups, and using the strength of each to counterbalance the other’s weaknesses.

In the final paragraph of his essay, Bacon again discusses the classical ideal of the *puer senex*. As I mentioned Bacon has already written that the true *puer senex*, with his perfect mixture of the strengths of both youth and age, rarely exists in the real world. Rather, in order to come close to creating this perfect “man,” Bacon suggests that it is “good to compound the employment of both” the young and the old (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 424). By having both old and young people work together, Bacon continues, a “business” or court benefits from the

strengths associated with each group, while at the same time the weaknesses of each group are corrected and/or curbed by the presence of the other. The dangerous youth would not be allowed to make the mistakes that Bacon earlier associated with the ruin of “business,” because the old, experienced people’s presence would stop the young before they went too far. He writes that this theory is also “good for succession, that young men may be learners, while men in age are actors” (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 424-425). As the old men retire or die, the young men will have gained the experience so heavily linked to wisdom. Bacon takes the two parts that make up the one body of the *puer senex*, and allows them to exist within separate individuals. Also, while the old men’s strengths demand respect and “authority,” the young men’s create the “favour” and the “popularity” for the “business.” Instead of attempting to create or suggest the rare person that has the qualities of both, Bacon takes a more plausible approach by making these suggestions.

After spending the majority of his essay discussing the economic strengths and weaknesses that come with the actions and logic of youth and age, Bacon turns to moral characters of each. And again Vickers notes Bacon’s closeness to Aristotle. Because Bacon’s “Of Youth and Age,” like Aristotle’s debates of “Youth” and “Old Age,” focuses on the characters of the men of each group, there is an even stronger connection between the two works. Vickers notes that Aristotle said that “young men ‘love honour [. . .] more than they love money [. . .] They look at the good side rather than the bad [. . .] They trust others readily [. . .] They would rather do noble deeds than useful ones’” (Francis Bacon, *Youth and Age* n765; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 174). All of these traits deal with the young men’s character, rather than ability. In a similar manner, Bacon writes that young

people have more ethically sound thoughts than the aged. Bacon quotes Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508), a rabbinical scholar, who wrote, "Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams," after which Bacon notes that the meaning "infereth that young men are admitted nearer to God than old, because vision is a clearer revelation than a dream" (*Youth and Age* 425). He continues to find the weaknesses in age when he suggests that old men are drunk with knowledge, and "age doth profit rather in the powers of understanding, [rather] than in the virtues of the will and affections [or passions]" (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 425).

In this conclusion, Bacon gives three warnings against certain excesses that can have negative effects on the young and the old. He first warns that too much learning or experience at a young age can have a negative effect—again going against the idea of the *puer senex*, whose experience and youthful vibrance are possessed at once—and suggests that to hit one's peak early is dangerous. Bacon is sure to back up this idea with an example: that of "Hermogenes the rhetorician, whose books are exceeding subtle; who afterwards waxed stupid" (*Youth and Age* 425). Bacon's second warning of a negative quality is against the elderly having certain "dispositions which have better grace in youth than in age" (*Youth and Age* 425). His point here is again made clear by providing an example: a man who speaks in a manner considered fashionable for a young person would be thought of well in company, yet if he were to continue to speak in such a manner in his older years it would be deemed completely inappropriate. Bacon ends his essay "Of Youth and Age" with a third warning to one striving to achieve the ideal of the *puer senex*. It is directed at those who take on large projects or ambitions with so much energy that they become "more

than tract [length] of years can uphold” (Bacon, *Youth and Age* 425). Bacon points to “Scipio Africanus, of whom Livy saith in effect, ‘*Ultima primis cedebant*’” (*Youth and Age* 425), or “His end did not match his beginning,” a quote that Vickers points out was actually from Ovid’s, *Heroides ix*, 23 (Bacon, *Youth and Age* n765). Bacon’s point in these final warnings is that the young man who attempts to achieve the strengths of character associated with the old usually ends up worse off when he does actually reach old age.

Francis Bacon’s essay “Of Youth and Age” is mainly a debate between the strengths and weaknesses found in either youth or old age when it comes to “business” and character. His purpose is not the same as that of Aristotle—who mostly dealt with character issues in his discussions, “Youth” and “Age.” Though Bacon’s mostly “business”-oriented subject and purpose seem unique, he chooses the form of the debate used by Aristotle. Aristotle chose to write about youth and then old age separately but was able to create the effect of debate by using a similar format, order, and ideas in each discussion. Bacon’s essay differs from the form of Aristotle’s treatise in that Bacon puts youth and old age together in the same discussion. Like Aristotle, Bacon chooses not to come to any outright conclusion as to which age group is better for “business” or public affairs. Each wrote about age groups simply to place them into the minds of the readers—Aristotle so that rhetoricians would know how to identify with each group, and Bacon so that administrative staffs might be better set up with his suggested mixture of the two age groups. A decision as to which group or age is better than the other is not stated outright in either work. Aristotle solves this problem in another treatise entitled “Prime” by indicating that the person

between thirty and thirty-five has the best of both groups (*Rhetoric* 176-177). But in the Renaissance, people like Bacon who choose to write non-fictional works about the subject are more concerned with the political and social aspects of the two groups. Bacon's debate sounds very much like a more open-minded version of the discussion in Castiglione's *Courtier* because, while both are concerned with discussing the qualities of each age group that are useful or harmful to "business" or public life, Bacon offers a balanced comparison, concluding only that the work force should be made up of both young and old.

This trend of leaving the debate of youth and old age open-ended runs through the majority of such works, both fictional and non-fictional, in the English Renaissance. When we turn to fictional debates of the time, however, many differences begin to appear in the content and purposes of the works even though the form remains similar. The debates of youth and age in "Februarie" of the *Shepherd's Calender* and Poem 12 in *The Passionate Pilgrim* offer two different examples of the debate between youth and age in style and overall content.

Mary Parmenter argues that Spenser's *Shepherd's Calender* was highly influenced by the old 1493 *Kalendar and compost of Shepherd's* (190). But the two calendars are different in many ways, including their accounts of "Februarie." In the old *Kalendar* February is described as a schoolroom, and it represents the second six years of life (Parmenter 193); far from being a debate between youth and old age, it is simply a discussion of and example for childhood learning. The old *Kalendar* offers no discussion of anything resembling old age until we get to November. The Prologue to November, told by Master Shepherd, offers this thought on the month:

Then cometh November, that the days be very short, and the Sun in manner giveth little heat and the trees looseth their leaves [...]  
 And then winter is come that the man hath understanding of age, and hath lost his kindly heat and strength; his teeth begin to rot and also they chatter. And then hath he no more hope of long life, but desireth to the life everlasting: and these six<sup>8</sup> for this month maketh him sixty-six years. (Parmenter 193)

If Spenser had chosen to follow this example, we would be discussing November and not February. Also the fact that the *Kalendar* is not a debate would mean that if Spenser simply used the techniques for writing his Calendar that we find in this old *Kalendar*, the version would not be a debate at all.

Parmenter points out that Spenser ignored the calendars of the past, both in style and structure. He created a “new” Kalendar of Shepherds, and “he placed within the framework of ‘the year and its parts,’ a series of pastoral eclogues which in diverse ways both imitate and add to the conventions of the complex genre” (Parmenter 198). One of the major changes that Spenser made in “Februarie” was the choice of the form of the debate, similar to Aristotle’s. By using the genre of poetry in the mode of the pastoral, Spenser opens the possibility of creating debate. As Marx has pointed out, the “the pastoral realm has often been interpreted as nostalgic representation of lost youth,” wherein readers encounter “a stage of life prior to adulthood” (21); this creates a dualistic quality of the pastoral as representative of both youth and old age. The dualistic quality of the pastoral provides a prime location for a debate between the two.

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<sup>8</sup> “Six” represents the number of years that each month adds to the age of man in the calendar of life.

With Thenot and Cuddie, Spenser creates a dialectic between youth and old age, just as Bacon does almost fifty years later.

Something in Early Modern England created the desire to discuss old age, by comparing it to youth in the form of the debate. The lure of Aristotle's use of the debate form to discuss youth and age was strong in the Renaissance. And just as Bacon's essay on youth and age is the only one presented in the form of a debate, Spenser uses the debate form to discuss youth and age in "Februarie."

The author of *The Passionate Pilgrim* also portrays old age, keeping in mind the debate between the topos of youth and age. Georges Minois points out that Poem 12 of *The Passionate Pilgrim* is entirely concerned with the debate between youth and old age popular in Renaissance English Literature (282). As will be discussed, the poem focuses on love and loss, in contrast to the works of Bacon or Spenser, but the poet still develops the opposition of youth and old age as a means of expressing his anger at old age and the pain of lost love. Moreover, Poem 12, virtually a sonnet, lacks a couplet and sense of resolution, with the debate of youth and aging forming the "conceit" the poet uses to organize the poem.

All three works demonstrate awareness of the connection of debate to the topos of youth and age. But once one steps beyond the debates in the three works, the genres, diverse topics and particular functions of each distinguish them from one another and push each work in entirely different directions: while Bacon's essay is all about "business" and character, Spenser's eclogue focuses on moral questions associated with each age and Shakespeare's poem turns to the aging lover's hatred of old age and nostalgia for youth. Just as each work seems to take something from the form of debate, Spenser and at times

Shakespeare, like Bacon, refer to Aristotelian ideas about old age and purposes for developing this topic as well. As this section discusses the content and function of both Spenser's "Februarie," and Shakespeare's poems in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, it will become evident that the only things that each of them has in common is the form of debate, and the topos of youth and age.

Spenser's and Shakespeare's borrow, extend and sometimes ignore the ideas in Aristotle's descriptions of the young and the old. In "Februarie," Spenser creates a debate between an old shepherd and a young one about one-another's views of their own and other's age group.

As one would expect in February, the discussion begins with the young shepherd Cuddie complaining of the cold wind and its effects. This is a strange twist to the normal definition of the aged, as it is often said that the old hate the cold. But Spenser, in linking the winter to old age, makes the old Thenot accustomed to this season, as Cuddie later remarks, "For Age and Winter accord full nie" (A3v). The old shepherd Thenot begins his speech by suggesting that the winter is simply part of what comes with life. He shows his knowledge and experience by saying:

Dust not the world wend in his commun course  
 From good to badd, and from badde to worse,  
 From worse unto that is worst of all,  
 And then returne to his former fall? (A3v)

At "thrice threttie yeares" (A3v), Thenot is quite used to the seasons and expects what is to come, and he scorns Cuddie and all young people for taking too much pleasure in the other seasons and then whining during winter. Thenot's questions suggest that people often live a life of joy and think little of preparing

for the troubles of old age and death. Cuddie returns with a snide remark, “Ah foolish old man, I scorne thy skill, / That wouldest me, my springing youngth to spil” (A4r). Cuddie refuses to listen to Thenot’s “learned” words, and instead blames Thenot’s opinions on a brain rotten with age and sickness. Cuddie’s refusal to listen can be found as a weakness of youthful character in Aristotle’s description. Young people “think they know everything and are obstinate” (Aristotle 175). Why should Cuddie listen to the old man if he already knows all there is to know? This kind of youthful arrogance seems to have been quite common, so much so that Pope Innocent III, in *De Contemptu Mundi sive de Miseria Humanae Conditionis*, once warned, “Young men be not proud in the presence of a decaying old man; he was once that which you are, he now is that which you in turn will be” (Coffman 256). Though Cuddie illustrates weaknesses associated with youth, his descriptions of Thenot as only trying to spoil his youthful mirth resemble Aristotle’s description of the aged: they are “sour tempered” and “pessimistic” and always try to look at the bad in any situation or person. Cuddie suggests that if Thenot were still a young man he would still be drawn by “other delights” (A4r). These lines illustrate not only similarities to Aristotle’s arguments, but also how different the content is from that in Bacon’s essay.

Instead of having anything to do with the qualities associated with “business,” Spenser’s work deals with character, as did Aristotle’s. Nowhere in Bacon’s essay do we find a discussion of delights. Yet in Aristotle’s discussion of “Youth” in the *Rhetoric*, he claims that young men are completely driven by an appetite for sex and are therefore “inferior to their passions” (173). Aristotle’s young men are ruled by their passions rather than by rational thought; they

think that delight is all-important. The delight that Cuddie is speaking of is erotic love, a love, which he tells Thenot “would make thee younge againe” (A4v). But Thenot replies with just as much of the same pessimism as before: “Thou art a fon, of thy love to boste, / All that is lent to love, wyll be lost” (A4v). Aristotle claims that, when it comes to old men, “neither their loves nor their hatreds are strong” (175) since the old have often been disappointed in their lives. Some blamed the refusal of the aged to have desire on the idea that old men are physically unable to act on it. In his treatise “On Old Age,” Cicero scoffed at the idea; his character Cato gives precedence to intellectual pursuits rather than physical ones, though even Cato admits that many old men complain of physical shortcomings. Cato calls sensual pleasure “the greatest blot of youth” and is happy that, in his old age, he no longer suffers the pains of physical yearning (Cicero 60). Spenser’s Thenot follows the same line of thought. Cuddie also comments on Thenot’s old ram near by. He points out that the ram has lost his drive and courage, and that it is “lustlesse and old” (A4v). Being the constant drive behind all youthful thoughts and actions, according to Aristotle, sex is the first thing that Cuddie considers when speaking of Thenot’s ram.

The focus of Spenser’s account is in no way similar to Bacon’s; instead of presenting the strengths of youth and age associated in public life, the story is physiological and moral in nature. Thenot points out the weaknesses of youth by dealing with the character of young people. He says:

For Youngth is a bubble blown up with breath,  
Whose witt is weakenesse, whose wage is death,  
Whose way is wildernesse, whose ynne Penance,  
And stoopegallaunt Age the hoste of Greevaunce. (A4v)

This set of traits is very straightforward, and at least a few are very close to the character traits of youth and age specified by Aristotle. The most obvious resemblance is Spenser's line about the young, "Whose witt is weakenesse" (A4v). Aristotle writes of youth's love of wit, and remarks that such "wit is educated arrogance" (174). Of course "educated arrogance" is not a positive trait, and both Aristotle and Spenser's Thenot naturally see it as a weakness.

Spenser closes the eclogue for the month of Februarie with a fable of the Old Oak and the Young Briar. Thenot tells the tale to Cuddie in order to show that he should respect his elders. The story's main point is that the youthful Briar, feeling overshadowed, convinces his "liege Lord" to cut down the old Oak tree. But, after the Oak is down, winter comes and the Briar learns the importance of the shelter the Oak had once provided. On this one point, Spenser's poem resembles Bacon's essay in suggesting the interdependence of young and old. Yet Thenot privileges old men as the examples and providers of shelter for the young men. When Bacon writes in the last section of his essay that a "business" should employ both young and old alike, his point is that the old will temper the ambition of the young and teach what they know from experience. In Thenot's story of the Oak, the "pryde and baine pleasaunce" (B2v) of the young Briar in the end leaves the sapling cold and alone. The content of Thenot's story is the closest that Spenser and Bacon come to including anything on the same subject; both appear to agree on the importance of the old as providers of shelter and experience for the youth, though Thenot does not offer a reciprocal benefit for the Briar.

Spenser ends the "Februarie" eclogue with Cuddie again playing Aristotle's know-it-all and interrupting Thenot's point: "Now I pray thee

shepherd, tel it not forth: / Here is a long tale, and little worth" (B2v). Though he claims to have listened to the story, Cuddie is too arrogant to get the point Thenot is making. Thenot is concerned with promoting the acceptance of old age (Alpers 27). Although in the old *Kalendar* February was the month of youth's learning, Spenser's "Februarie" has the youth learn nothing. The final lines from Cuddie serve two purposes: one, they add to the idea of the weak know-it-all character of youth; and two, they conclude the debate, as Bacon does, with no decision about which group is better. Like Bacon, the arguments of the two characters are simply articulated, and quite purposely left with no decision as to which side won.

In "Februarie" the youthful Cuddie uses speech that is the "flowery language of the courts" in contrast to Thenot's "*stile humile*—the direct manner of speech and humble choice of words of the rustic"; Marx points out that this style is the traditional one of didactic satires (36). Patrick Cheney indicates that they differ in their manner of speech because "Cuddie models the younger 'amateur' poet in his amorous mode; Thenot, the older Elizabethan amateur in his didactic mode" (89). The use of the "*stile humile*" is another technique that distinguishes the two sides of the debate; thus the reader is drawn to each side, not only by the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments but also by the way they present the strengths and weaknesses. Whereas Cuddie might seem rude and arrogant at times, the quality of his polished language provides some room for likeability; on the other hand, Thenot's language is often harsh and simple, though some readers may be drawn to his rational, more completely developed statements.

Spenser's choices of form in content and language create effects that differ from Bacon's. Spenser's work is moralistic, whereas Bacon's is practical in applying the debate to the question of how best to staff an endeavor or project. Poem 12 of *The Passionate Pilgrim* develops another set of issues. Though old age and youth are again opposed as in Bacon's and Spenser's works, Poem 12 is more one-sided and personal because its speaker directs his words to the one that he loves.

In Poem 12, the comparison is not put forth to discuss the strengths of youth and old age associated with public affairs or morally based differences; instead the poet alludes to emblematic descriptions of each group in order to express a disgust with the aging process. The poem begins with a sigh: "Crabbèd age and youth cannot live together" (12.1). This view is very different from that of the *puer senex*, and it seems to reject Bacon's belief that the two groups should work together. Yet one might claim that Spenser's account of Thenot and Cuddie would be an example of the point in this line. After this line, the poem continues with seven contrasts of the two groups. And unlike the apparently objective debates of Bacon and Spenser, in *The Passionate Pilgrim* the lyric speaker "takes up the classical theme of the conflict between youth and age, to the exclusive advantage of the former" (Minois 282). Minois points out that "the painters of the Renaissance" took the side of youth and "frequently revived the theme of violent contrast between youth and old age" (253). He cites the example of the painting *Roman Charity*, by Bernardino Luini (1480-1532), which depicts "a young [beautiful] woman suckling her [old, decrepit] father" (253). In Poem 12, age does not come off looking much better:

Youth is full of pleasance, age is full of care;

Youth like summer morn, age like winter weather;

Youth like summer brave, age like winter bare.

Youth is full of sport, age's breath is short.

Youth is nimble, age is lame.

Youth is hot and bold, age is weak and cold.

Youth is wild and age is tame. (2-8)

Here the poet includes several of the well-known *topoi* and emblems of youth and old age. D.J. Levinson, in *The Seasons of Man's Life*, points to several of these: "youth stands for warmth, [. . .], power, [. . .], beauty, [. . .], and is in turn symbolized by sunrise, fire, [and the] sun," while the old person stands for coldness, [and] weakness, and is symbolized by darkness, [and] winter" (Shahar 47). Much of the content of the poem is based on emblematic symbols that would have been easily recognizable, even clichéd, as those of old age and youth in the Renaissance.

Similar emblematic representations of youth and age are nowhere to be found in Bacon's work. The content of "Of Youth and Age" is more directly stated and less figurative: "men of age object too much, consult too long, adventure too little, repent too soon, and seldom drive business home to the full period, but content themselves with a mediocrity of success" (*Youth and Age* 424). On the other hand, some of the emblems employed in Poem 12 can be found in Spenser—though they are rarely used for the same purpose. Poem 12 uses the word "pleasance" to describe a quality of youth that is portrayed as strength in comparison with the overly careful nature of the old. Spenser similarly has Thenot use the term "pleasaunce" to describe a quality of youth in his story of

the old Oak and the young Briar. But there is a difference; Thenot points to “pleasaunce” as one of the weaknesses of the young Briar, not a strength. Another emblematic image used in the two works is that of winter. Probably the most widely used symbol of old age, winter signifies the weakness of old age in Poem 12: “age like winter bare” (line 4). Spenser also associates old age with winter, but for a completely different purpose. The old shepherd Thenot does not consider winter negative. Instead of being miserable, as it is portrayed in Poem 12, Thenot brags that winter is a time of year fit for the old and that Cuddie cannot handle it (Spenser A3v).

Several of the traits of old age in Poem 12 echo those found in Aristotle’s works, “Youth” and “Age,” even though the similarities are not straightforward. The speaker in the poem claims that youth is “brave” (line 3) and that “youth is hot and bold” (line 7); Aristotle’s discussion of youth includes similar adjectives. He writes that young people are “warm by nature” and “courageous” (173). In line seven of Poem 12 the poet writes that “age is weak and cold” (line 7). Aristotle describes old men as “chilled” and “cowards” (175). The connection is stronger when one considers that Aristotle also writes that it is the chilled quality of the old person that causes cowardice (175). Poem 12 includes the same pairs of qualities that Aristotle uses: “hot and bold,” and “weak and cold.” The use of these two adjectives together are the only times that Poem 12 presents more than one image in the same line to describe both the young and the old. So, like the works by Bacon and Spenser, Poem 12 includes emblematic words echoing those in Aristotle’s debate.

The two fictional works discussed here include content that portrays the strengths or weaknesses of youth and old age in a fashion similar to Bacon’s non-

fictional work. But the particulars of the descriptions used by each author provide distinct pictures of old age and youth. Such differences occur because each work has a different function. The final section of this chapter demonstrates that debates used to discuss the topos of youth and old age can have multiple purposes.

Bacon's purpose is easy to recognize. He writes a debate to explain theories on the qualities of youth and old age most useful to "business." Though he leaves it up to the reader to decide which group is better on its own, in his final paragraph, he does suggest a purpose of his essay; by pointing out the qualities of each group he creates an opening for the suggestion that it is "good to compound the employment of both" the young and old (424). The essay supports the theory that the most profitable arrangement is an equal employment of the two groups. Bacon's debate is designed to influence its audience to agree to his theory of a diversified work force. Yet this "business"-minded purpose or function is not present in the works of fiction. Bacon's reason for writing his debate is similar to Aristotle's. But, as will be pointed out, the final purposes are very different. Bacon's is politically and socially based, whereas Aristotle's two treatises were written entirely to provide examples of character.

In the Argument introducing the month of “Februarie” in Spenser’s *Calender*, someone describing himself with the initials E. K.<sup>9</sup> in the dedicatory epistle addressed to Gabriel Harvey (¶iijv), writes, “This Æglogue is rather morall and general, than [. . .] written for] any secrete or particular purpose” (A3r). Before the Æglogue begins, E.K. notifies the audience that there is no particular purpose to the story contained within. Being “rather morall and general,” “Februarie,” seems to lack any real purpose beyond providing moral examples for the relationships between youth and the elderly.

Spenser chooses February as the month to include his debate between youth and old age. In the Argument of “Februarie,” E.K. writes that “the matter very well accordeth with the season of the moneth, the year now drouping, and as it wer, drawing to his last age” (A3r). This is again a very different picture than that painted in the old *Kalendar* which associated the month of February with youth, or more specifically, with the second six years of life. This change alone creates a tension between Spenser’s *new* “Februarie” (young) and the old one found in the old *Kalendar*. “Februarie,” while second in *The Shepheardes Calender*, “is twelfth in the pageant of the year in Spenser’s cantos of *Mutabilitie*” (Parmenter 199). Parmenter writes that in the *Mutabilitie* cantos “Cold, aged, impotent, February is drawn in his wagon by the [zodiacal] ‘two fishes,’” and quotes the following lines:

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<sup>9</sup> S.K. Heninger, Jr., the editor of the facsimile reproduction of the 1579 *Shepheardes Calender* attributes “the ‘Generall argument of the whole booke,’ the prose headpieces that serve as ‘Argument’ before each of the twelve eclogues, and the officious gloss that follows each eclogue” to E.K. (Spenser xii). For the purposes of this thesis, I will follow Heninger’s opinion that E.K. is responsible for these sections, though E.K. only claims responsibility for the glosses to the text in his epistle (Spenser ¶iijr)

yet had he by his side  
 His plough and harness fit to till the ground,  
 And tooles to prune the trees, before the pride  
 Of hasting Prime did make them burgein round [. . .]. (199)

The woodcut that appears before the *Æglogue* of “Februarie” also includes these symbols. The two fish appear at top center as the zodiacal sign of February, while Thenot, front and center along with Cuddie, like the character February, still holds onto his tool, the long staff, and maintains the flock that appears to his left, as he stands pleading with the left hand raised in a gesture of explanation to the younger Cuddie, set in a defensive stance. Just like the “Februarie” that we find in the *Calender*, the February of the cantos of *Mutabilitie* “has [a] dual and contradictory significance: the old year struggles with the new, and for a time [like Thenot holds off Cuddie] Winter withstands Spring” (Parmenter 199). Parmenter also writes, “there is endless evidence of the general theme of the assertion of Youth’s will against Age in the Winter-Spring season [. . .] the introductory flyting between the ninety-year-old Thenot and scornful young Cuddie are placed in February because that is the proper month for the contest between Age and Youth, Winter and Spring, Old and New” (200). So Spenser’s decision to place his debate between youth and age in “Februarie” seems purposeful, creating a landscape suitable for it.

The emblems that appear at the end of the *Æglogue* continue the contest between the two ages. E.K. interprets Thenot’s emblem, “*Iddio perche e vecchio, Fa suoi al suo essemplio*” (B3r), as meaning, “namelye, that God, which is himselfe most aged, being befor al ages, and without beginninge, maketh those, whom he loveth like to himselfe, in heaping yeares unto theyre dayes, and blessing them

with longe lyfe" (B3v). E.K. claims that Thenot's emblem of old age makes him closer to God and implies that this should be enough for Cuddie to show him respect. But Cuddie's emblem that follows, "*Niuno vecchio, Spaventa Iddio*" (B3r), described by E.K. as a "counterbuff with a byting and bitter proverbe" and defined as meaning that "me[n] of yeares have no feare of god at al, or not so much as younger folk" (B4r). E.K. justifies this emblem's truthfulness by claiming that "old men are much more enclined to such fond fooleries, then younger heades" (B4r). The two emblems, like the "Februarie" eclogue, continue the debate by providing proverbial sayings associated with opinions of old age and youth that refuse to permit any sort of agreement.

The purpose of "Februarie" is nothing close to the "business"-oriented practicality of Bacon's essay. Instead, it provides examples associated with the interaction of young and old, a purpose closer to Aristotle's presentation of exemplary character types. In introducing *The Art of Rhetoric*, H. C. Lawson-Tancred writes that for Aristotle topics such as youth and age provide the "prototypes that the orator can use in his speech in the reasonable hope that his audience will recognize and respond to them" (30). Aristotle does so by providing common examples of character, and such character types play a big part in the examples in "Februarie." So, although the form of the debate is common to both Bacon's and Spenser's works, their purposes are very different: Bacon's creating a plausible stage for his suggestion of equal employment of young and old, and Spenser's, according to E.K., providing moral examples of each group and leaving the tension between them unresolved.

The function of Poem 12 in *The Passionate Pilgrim* is also quite different from Bacon's essay. The poet chooses not to leave its one-sidedness in question.

The final lines of the poem make the speaker's feelings quite clear: "Age, I do abhor thee; youth, I do adore thee. / [. . .] Age, I do defy thee. O sweet shepherd, hie thee, / For methinks thou stay'st too long" (9-12). In these lines the speaker makes the function of the contrasts clear: the side of youth is praised. The poet writes the debate in Poem 12 to show his love just how much he abhors old age and just how different the two age groups are. This opinion is also found in a line of Juan Ruiz's *Book of Good Love*, in which it is written, "old people are envious of the young" (Rosenthal 117). In Poem 12, the speaker of the poem is envious of youth because he wishes that he were as young as his lost love and that his age would not hinder lust. Georges Minois writes, "The Renaissance, like every time of renewal and rebirth celebrated youth, the fullness of life, beauty and novelty. It abhorred everything that presaged decline, decrepitude and death" (249). Poem 12 articulates this point of view. By contrasting the weaknesses of old age with the strengths of youth, the poet makes his point strong. Using emblematic symbols that would have been easily recognizable to his audience, the poet does what Aristotle hoped the orators would do with the character traits in *The Art of Rhetoric*—namely utilize these traits to persuade audiences through recognizable features and topoi.

Marx points out that the "dichotomy of youth and age is one of those conceptual polarities [. . .] that Renaissance writers thought *with* as much as they thought *about*" (41). Having such a polarity instilled in them, the writers of the time used the form of debate to discuss the topos. Each writer found a technique that worked best for his own aims. As we look at Bacon's essay as a representation of at least his own perception of the situation between the young and the old, we are provided with an example of his impression of the real world

situation around him. Bacon's interest in and position amongst the bodies responsible for public affairs turns his mind, at least in his essay, away from the everyday lives of the majority of the population; though he briefly touches on the character of each group, his main concern seems to lie in providing a debate designed to create better situations for "businesses" and courts.

Looking at Bacon's reaction to this world in comparison to those of Spenser and the poet of Poem 12 shows us that at least the two fictional writers discussed do not find it necessary to respond to the topos as Bacon does later. Each reacts in different ways to the same topos. The fictional works use the debate form either as a way to discuss moral issues and tension, as in *The Shepheardes Calender*, or to rail against the afflictions of aging, as in Poem 12. The fictional works make no attempt to react to the daily situations of the elderly. So it seems that at least when it comes to discussing old age the fiction writers of the time, though they used recognizable symbols and feelings about the old, felt little need to focus their debates in relation to historical, practical situations affecting the aged. Neither author brings up specific cases of the lives of the young or old. Rather both of the fictional writers are concerned with providing, at most, opinions concerning the elderly and aging. In *The Shepheardes Calender* the words of Cuddie express widely held opinions about the elderly, and in the words of Thenot we find the suggestions of how the aged would like to, or thought they should be, thought of.

The perspectives provided by the writers of debates between youth and old age in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century varied. The three works provide us with insights into the conceptions of the topos of youth and old age, and there seems to have been little concern with the actual lives of the aged.

While Bacon suggests their employment, which could be considered a push for providing a better monetary situation for the elderly, he does not seem interested in their daily lives. Although Spenser's *Thenot* advocates a better opinion and treatment of the aged, Spenser also refuses to represent the historical situations of the aged. In Poem 12, the lovesick speaker never once discusses his own condition as an aged person.

The debates were written for several reasons and covered a multitude of concepts, yet none of the debates seem concerned with providing an argument for the betterment of the quality of life for the elderly. This will seem strange as we move into the next chapter. In Early Modern England the daily situation of being old and aging is one of the main concerns of medical texts as well as many fictional texts that presented old characters. These works leave the discussions of youth behind and are concerned more with the condition of old age. The opinions about and the particular employability of the aged are given a lower level of concern than providing the ability to function.

### CHAPTER III

#### A NEW WAY OF APPROACHING AN *OLD* PROBLEM: CHANGES IN MEDICINE AND THE LITERATURE THAT DISCUSSED IT

In Early Modern England old age was not a topic solely confined to debates between youth and old age. The people of the time, like the literature, were concerned with much more than merely comparing the two. After the Middle Ages, when philosophers had tried to completely do away with old age, the concern turned to a more realistic acceptance in the Renaissance. This change, along with many others, was fostered by medical theories that borrowed from and surpassed the theories that had stood firm for centuries.

Georges Minois writes that in the Renaissance, "Humanist doctors took an interest in their enemy old age. Proof of this is in the number of works produced on the origin and treatment of old age produced in the 1500's" (270). For the first time since the Early Middle Ages medical theorists turned away from guidelines established by the Church and began using some scientific methods to study old age. Francis Bacon in particular produced many works concerning the physiology of old age and the prolonging of youth (Minois 274). Along with Bacon, other medical authors wrote a large number of works concerning old age,

including ones seeking to preserve youth and list illnesses and herbals.<sup>10</sup> Most still drew heavily on Galen, whose “writing remained in standard use throughout the Middle Ages and into the 16<sup>th</sup> century” (Galen, *Passions and Errors* 3). Wear points to “the 1525 Venetian Aldine Press edition of the complete works of Galen in Greek” as a “landmark of medical scholarship” (35). His medical texts became so popular that “between 1500 and 1600 around 590 different editions of Galen were published” (Wear 35). One of the major new influences on Early Modern medical thought in England is Ficino, whose *De Vita* received wide circulation throughout England, but ample evidence indicates that such “Renaissance writers knew much about what had come before them” (Shahar 41). Though many, like Bacon, eventually disagreed with Galen and Ficino on the subject of old age, very little was added to a genuinely scientific pursuit of medicine during the Renaissance. The focus and the intent do seem to change, but only slightly. Mixing Greek and Christian ideas, Henry Cuffe, for example, wrote *The Differences in the Ages of a Man’s Life* in 1607 (Minois 273), in which, according to Minois, “the Humanist aim” was the old medieval one, “to eliminate or distance old age” (270).

This chapter has several goals. It examines medical theories associated with old age. In one major change, some medical theorists begin to consider the effects of illnesses and the daily lives of the elderly. Eventually attempts to cure or prevent old age were overshadowed by efforts to make the symptoms associated with age more bearable. To delineate this change, I will examine the

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike the medieval theorists had done, Bacon and the others were not trying to avoid or destroy old age altogether by seeking to preserve youth. They were attempting to extend the period of youth, and thus prolong life. This is discussed more thoroughly below.

medieval concept of medicine in old age represented in *Piers Plowman* and then discuss new developments in medical theory in the Renaissance. This new way of dealing with old age is represented in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

This chapter will examine the play's concern with a well-known medical problem—melancholy brought on by old age. In writing about Lear's illness, Shakespeare takes a different approach to dealing with the medical theories than Langland had; Shakespeare deals directly with the problems of a specific illness associated with old age, whereas Langland discusses generalized problems of old age as though they are common to all elderly people. Shakespeare portrays a particular melancholic old man who represents the medical views of the time.

### **Section 1: Medieval Medicine, the Church and *Piers Plowman***

In medieval England while the Church continued to view old age as a time when one must concentrate on spiritual growth, many of the greatest medical minds of the time were in search of a cure or remedy for the old age. The preservation of youth became a hot topic and an alternative to giving all to God. In *Piers Plowman*, William Langland takes these issues on in a brief but important way. The poem personifies the onset of old age as Elde in order to promote two alternatives to the search for a cure for old age and the Church's pressure to devote one's final years to God.

To set up his points that one should simply accept old age for what it is instead of attempting to avoid it and that one should become devout early in life, Langland makes sure that the characters in *Piers Plowman* are frightened of age. Elde represents problems that people in the Middle Ages were very concerned

with. In Passus XI Elde warns Will, "Man [. . .] if I mete with thee, by Marie of hevene, / Thow shalt fynde Fortune thee faille at thi mooste need / And *Concupiscencia Carnis* clene thee forsake" (28-30). Elde emphasizes that old age brings the loss of good fortune and all youthful pleasure. Elde also represents the fearful coming of death: "Elde the hoore...bar the baner bifore Deeth" (XX, 95-96). Langland has Lyf tell us that old age cannot be delayed (XX, 179). When Will is attacked by Elde after yelling at Elde for flying over his head and making him bald, we see a comic illustration of the destructive effects of old age. When Elde makes Will old, physical deterioration ensues: Will grows deaf, loses his teeth, and suffers from gout (XX 189-192). Another example of physical deterioration is described by Will in a few touching and nostalgic phrases:

For the lyme that she [Will's wife] loved me fore, and leef was to  
feele—

On nyghtes, namely, whan we naked were—

I ne myghte in no manere maken it at hir wille,

So Elde and he[o] it hadden forbeten. (XX, 195-198)

The loss of physical abilities and the onset of infirmities were true frights for Will, and these created a final concern: the aged were forced to depend on others. In *Piers Plowman*, this need is pointed out to Will when Kynde suggests that Will's final days should be spent making sure that others will take care of him (XX, 208-211).

Langland is apparently describing physical traits and ills associated with old age that would have caused fear and that still are easily recognizable. Over and over, medieval people emphasized that old age forewarned the coming of death. Gregory the Great (540-604) writes, "Our body is strong and robust in

youth; when it begins to approach old age, it also begins to weaken through illness; and if it falls to decrepit old age these languishing remnants of life are no more than a continual weakening which tends towards death" (Minois 116). People in the Middle Ages often chose "to receive and transmit lore that held messages [or ideas] to which they were attuned regarding the pre-determined and fleeting nature of life" (Rosenthal 5-6, 179). Aristotle had attempted to provide a more medical approach by claiming, "Death in old age is exhaustion due to the inability on the part of the organ [the lungs], owing to old age, to produce refrigeration" (7).<sup>11</sup> Old age in the Middle Ages signaled impending death, a view represented by Phillippe de Novarre, who once claimed, "after eighty death is all that can be wished for" (Beauvoir 135).

Langland emphasizes that the physical problems of old age are unavoidable. In the Middle Ages the idea that old age brought physical deterioration was common. Pope Innocent III (c.1160-1216) writes, "If anyone does reach old age, his heart weakens, his head aches, his vigor wanes, [and] his breath stinks" (Rosenthal 179). Hugh of Orleans, in *Le Grand Propriétaire de tactes choses* (c1150), complains, "Old age is full of coughs phlegm and filth, until the time it returns to the dust and ashes whence it was taken" (Beauvoir 134). In 1265, Phillippe de Novarre claimed, "the life of the old is but pain and labour" (Beauvoir 135). Jean Regnier complains that in old age he, like Will, is "toothless"

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<sup>11</sup> Aristotle , in "On Youth and Old Age, On Life and Death, On Breathing" translated by G.R. T. Ross, writes that, "Old age causes the exhaustion of heat and when complete exhaustion occurs, one dies" (2), and that "little heat remains for most has been breathed away over a long life, and hence increased strain on the organ causes extinction" (7). Elsewhere, he writes that "The source of life is lost to its possessors when the heat with which it is bound up is no longer tempered by cooling" (7). Galen extended these ideas through the Middle Ages.

(Minois 238). One can even go back to Galen, who writes, "all the old man's physiological functions" including the unfortunate "lyme's" function are "reduced and weakened" (Beauvoir 18). Langland's characterization of the physical state of old age reflected and helped to shape the views of his audience.

Both Christian and secular ideas of old age were similar: being old was horrible. One solution to the poor health and hardships of old age was religion. In the Middle Ages the Church had often stressed that old age was a time for spiritual growth and preparation for death. The Church supported the idea that old age was a time for repentance and encouraged the belief that "the pains of old age were the proper repayment for our innate degeneracy" or original sin (Rosenthal 180). Patristic theologians had affirmed that old age was a time when one should repent and become more devout:

Old age requires the acceptance of bodily deterioration and is viewed as an opportunity to grow in virtue, for the loss of health and bodily firmness that eventually forces a withdrawal from past activities can open up new horizons of meaning...[and it is a time to]...transform the stage of outward decay into one of inward fulfillment. (Post 127)

Instead of treating the physical symptoms of old age, Christians learn that the physical problems associated with old age are deserved and inescapable, with result that, "a disease like melancholy is not just a source of suffering [for the old], but a sin" (Shahar 71). According to Augustine, "it is more appropriate for old people than for all the rest to be concerned with religion," and Jerome agreed (Minois 120). Much of what was taught dealt with "unexceptionable pieties about the aged having more time, finally, for spiritual contemplation"

(Rosenthal 94). In part the Church could encourage such contemplation since "the old man without a family depended on monasteries and churches for sustenance" (Beauvoir 131) and escape from the everyday problems of old age. Moreover, as Post writes, "Christians, by emphasizing moral and spiritual values, rather than [the] material and bodily ones [focused on by the medical theorists, allow] thought to transform the stage of outward decay into one of inward fulfillment [. . .] this dialectic between decline and redemption is the mainstay of Christian thought" (127).

Langland portrays the Church's use of old age to scare old people into becoming more devout with the character of Elde. The portrayal suggests Bacon's dislike of this tactic. In *Piers Plowman*, Elde is called upon by Langland to scare Lyf, Will, and the "fendes," into being good Christians in order to portray the Church's use of old age as a weapon. In one place Elde is called upon to scare the humans of Will's dreamland. Elde joins Deeth and Kynde in killing many of the "fendes" who follow Antichrist and persuading the survivors to "Leve Pride pryvely and be parfite Cristene" (XX, 108). On another occasion Elde fights against the non-believers. At the urging of Conscience, Elde battles Wanhope and Lyf, who have driven the people away from Christianity (XX, 165-185). Finally, as I mentioned above, Elde attacks the narrator, Will, and shows a more detailed picture of the effects of aging. Elde sets on Will "with age," bothering and frightening Will so much that he tells Kynde, "Lo, Elde the hoore hath me biseye," and asks him how to escape it (XX, 185-203). These instances portray the Church's common use of old age to frighten the elderly into becoming good devout Christians.

Langland points out the futility of attempting to cure or avoid old age through the character Lyf. After losing the battle against Elde, Lyf flees to Phisik for help because he "leeved that lechecraft lette shold Elde, / And dryven away Deeth with dyas and droggas" (XX, 173-4). But we, with Lyf, find that medicine, with its herbal cures or remedies for old age, is no match for Elde, who soon kills Lyf's physician. Lyf also goes to "Revel, a riche place and a murye -- the compaignye of confort men cleped it som tyme" (XX, 181-2), to try to live out the last days of his life in joy and fun. But it seems that Elde will follow him. In these passages, Langland indicates that there is no hope of escaping death and that the attempts to cure or delay it will fail.

Langland's fatalism contradicts the optimism of fanciful popular stories and folklore concerning the fountain of youth and the philosopher's stone, an elixir for old age (Minois 174-5; Beauvoir 140). Some medical theorists also offered alternative explanations of the causes and cures for old age. Avicenna (980-1037) looked at the "influence of climate, of diet, and of physical exercise on the aging process"; later Rabbi Moses ben Maimonides (1136-1204) recommended the use of wine and medication to preserve youth (Minois 175, 259). Other medical writers "recommended study, and conversation with friends on intellectual and spiritual subjects, to avoid the melancholy to which old men are prone" (Shahar 75). Such medically prescriptive literature showed a "tension between the possibility of an inherently good old age and the desire to avoid the maladies typically associated with aging" (Troyansky 43). Minois makes a similar point: "Far from being indifferent to time, medieval man feared aging, and he searched for a means of escaping decrepitude, through dreams or through science" (174). The preservation of youth and searches for a cure for old

age hold the most importance in medieval medical studies because medieval people “cherished the dream of victory over old age” (Beauvoir 136). Arnold of Villanova (1135-1211) wrote works titled *The Defense of Age and Recovery of Youth* (Minois 175). Roger Bacon (c.1210-1292), one of the most significant writers of the thirteenth century, suggested many ways to avoid old age in *The Cure of Old Age, and Preservation of Youth*. The title page of the 1683 Richard Brown translation of this work into English indicates that the book shows “how to cure and keep off the Accidents of Old Age; and how to preserve the Youth, Strength and Beauty of Body, and the Senses and all the Faculties of both Body and Mind.” In this work therapies such as nutrition are given most importance in the prevention of old age. Roger Bacon provides “the *Knowledge* of those *Properties* [in nature and foods], that are in certain things, which the Ancients have kept secret” (R. Bacon 11) and which would prevent the loss of the “natural heat” essential to the living body. Bacon summarizes much of the knowledge available; in addition to nutrition, he discusses medicines, exercises, and illnesses that he designates as good or bad for the preservation of youth and the cure of old age. Langland's awareness and disapproval of such searches for medical treatments seems obvious in light of Lyf's inability to gain help from Physic.

Langland portrays many features of old age as unpleasant, but he opposes the idea that old age is the right time to become devout. Instead of offering a cure or remedy for old age and instead of allowing people to wait until they are old to repent, Langland suggests two concepts that react to contemporary medical theories and that are also different from those we will discover in *King Lear*.

The first concept responds to the idea that old age was the time to become devout. Dante had written that the old person should “gently slip cheerfully into the arms of God [. . .] and even as the good sailor, when he draws near to the port, lowers his sails, and gently with mild impulse enters into it, so ought we to lower the sails of our worldly activities. [. . .] so that we may come to that port with all sweetness and peace” (Post 139). Yet, with the character Ymaginatif, Langland promotes the idea that one should become a devout Christian and a virtuous person well before one becomes old. Ymaginatif suggests to Will,

And of thi wilde wantownesse tho thou yong were,  
 To amende it in thi myddel age, lest myght the faille  
 In thyn old elde, that yvele kan suffer  
 Poverté or penaunce, or preyeres bidde. (XII, 6-9)

This idea, though supported by some writers outside England in the late Middle Ages, opposes the view that old age was the time for repentance. Stanley Harakas writes that “Theologically, Eastern Christianity viewed death as an enemy, a consequence of the Adamic sin, and therefore a condition to be struggled against,” and suggests that the struggle should not be conducted “through attempts to prolong life but through efforts to live according to the highest standards of generosity” (Post 157). Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) stated that “It is most useless to hold onto death [. . .]. Think rather about doing that work which is always good, which is seen as noble and beautiful at any age, but which in old age is necessary” (quote in Troyansky 44). Langland seems to introduce similar ideas to England.

The second concept suggested in *Piers Plowman* is the idea of accepting and learning to live with old age. When Will asks Kynde how he might seek

vengeance against Elde, Kynde tells him to go to the Unitee and learn a new craft. Kynde says, "Lerne to love...and leef alle othere" (XX, 208). Instead of telling Will to search out a "phisicien" or to pray every day, Kynde simply says, "And thow love lelly, lakke shall thee nevere / Weede ne worldly mete, while thi lif lasteth" (XX, 210-211). This approach accepts that as an infirm old man Will will not be able to work or care for himself and will therefore need the support of other people. So the best thing that Will can do is learn to love so that people will be more likely to take pity on him and care for him, a very different approach to aging from those that attempted to prevent and delay old age.

Through the character of Elde, Langland discusses these two important concepts. Langland does not deny that old age will be hard or that death will soon follow. Instead he proposes that one become devout early in life and remain that way throughout, and that when one becomes old one should accept all its infirmities.

## **Section 2: The New Gerontology: Renaissance Ideals in Medical Theory**

The changes in medical opinions, writings and suggestions about old age in the Renaissance are responsible for the novel approach that Shakespeare takes to old age and its inevitable infirmity—melancholy. The following pages will survey some of the most popular ideas dealing with health and old age that were developed in Early Modern England.

One of the major differences between medieval and Early Modern approaches to health is the latter's greater independence from religion. Cicero, in *De Senectude*, had "discussed the importance of practicing the virtues, but also

the importance of spiritual and intellectual activity in age" (Shahar 74-75). In the Renaissance, however, the spiritual comes up less and less. The old view of the old body "as an opportunity and means of atonement seems to have tapered off by the Renaissance" (Shahar 54). This does not mean that people did not turn to religion in old age. In his "Poem on the troubles of old age" composed in August 1506 just before his fortieth birthday, Erasmus writes that he will devote his life in old age to God rather than intellectual pursuits: "Whatever remaining time the Fates wish to allot me, let it be from now on dedicated to Christ alone" (25).<sup>12</sup> In "Andrew's Humble Petition unto Almighty God [. . .]," a "prayer" written around 1615 and printed in 1623, John Andrewes tells us that he is an old man who "ha[s] lost to the value of threescore pounds" in Ireland and that he acted badly in his youth (1-2). The prayer that follows asks God to forgive him in his old age. The need to turn to God as one approaches nearer to death still exists, as these examples show, but it does not appear that it was pushed as strongly by the Church in the Renaissance as it was in the Middle Ages.

The ideas of preserving youth and curing or preventing old age also begin to recede from popular thought. Francis Bacon's essay "Of Regiment of Health" exemplifies this point: "For strength of nature in youth passeth over many excesses, which are owing a man till his age. Discern of the coming on of years and think not to do the same things still, for age will not be defied" (404). Sounding like Lyf in *Piers Plowman*, the Early Modern Bacon understands the inevitability of old age and death. Instead of attempting to preserve youth or

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<sup>12</sup> One might question the term "old age" used here since Erasmus was in his thirties when he decided to devote his life to God but, as I mention above, Erasmus set the onset of old age at 35 years.

cure old age, Francis Bacon seems more interested in prolonging life itself (Thorndike 698). This idea agrees more with Ficino in *De Vita* than it does with Roger Bacon several centuries before. Ficino's plea is that "art is long and we can only attain it by a long life," which should "be procured by our efforts" (167). The majority of work done by medical theorists in Early Modern England focuses on this effort to prolong life.

The attempts to find ways to prolong life mean one thing for the scientists of the Renaissance: since old age would be a part of that long life, they had to find ways to make it bearable. Whereas medieval people tried to eliminate old age through cures and remedies, the early modern medical theorists tended to accept old age and tried to make it better. Much of the knowledge that they turn to predated even medieval medicine, originating still in the writings of Aristotle and Galen, but they adjust the focus and overall purpose of herbs, potions, medicines, and practices. Most popular in this time are the herbal books. Two important works prescribing diet and medicine are Richard Brook's *Herbals* (1525) and Sir Thomas Elyot's *Castel of Health* (1530), each containing suggestions for the elderly who seek prolonged life and ease for the infirmities of old age. Some prescriptions come from stories and superstition. Francis Bacon "tells of 'Barbarossa in his extreme old age' [who] by the advice of his Jewish Physician applied young boys to his abdomen to warm and comfort it" (Thorndike 698); in stating this, Bacon seems to assume that this practice promotes longer life. Other prescriptions suggest exercise, intellectual pursuits, and—most popular—abstinence from sexual intercourse. Ficino claims that old people, who are signified by Saturn, "should avoid venereal acts" as well as "cold night air" (Ficino 189). The main objective of each of these prescriptions is always to make

life last longer and to make old age more tolerable; it is not to avoid old age altogether or bring one back to youth.

Another result of the search for prolonged life is the study of the physical, and, more radically, mental health of the elderly person. The most popular subjects of study in physical health remain the same as those first discussed by Aristotle and then Galen. These are included in the three reasons for aging pointed out in Cuffe's *Differences of the Ages of a Man's Life*: 1) diminished heat and moisture, 2) decay caused by daily life, and 3) shifts in balance among the four elements and qualities—Fire, Air, Water, and Earth, and from these Heat, Cold, Dryness, and Moisture (Minois 273). The four elements comprised the humours, of which Galen writes, "black bile [or the melancholic humour] tends to be in excess mainly in the Fall and mainly after the prime of life; [when] there are cold and dry modes of life, regions, constitutions and diseases" (Galen, *Natural Faculties* 203-04). The idea of cold and dry humours as the major causes of discomforts is evident in all medical theories.

Regarding mental health, Galen writes of the loss of reason in old age. He defines reason as "a way to control one's passions without becoming a slave to one's passions" (*Passions and Errors* 43-44). Old people are often subject to committing errors, or things "done without right reason" (Galen, *Passions and Errors* 73). This is about as deep as studies of the minds of old people had gone before the Renaissance. Several medical theorists of the English Renaissance began to dig deeper into the subject matter. Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* is the most comprehensive work printed on the condition associated with the mind and emotions, and in it Burton establishes old age as one of the causes of the infirmity. Mental deterioration and illnesses are also the targets of

many of the prescriptions discussed above. The focus on the study of the mind, along with the constant attention paid to creating a more bearable existence in old age, points to increased interest in the old person as an individual; this idea is the major difference between medieval and Renaissance approaches to old age. In the Middle Ages the focus was entirely on old age itself, while in the Renaissance the focus shifts to the aged, or aging, individual.

The focus on the individual person or individual infirmity is the defining difference between Shakespeare's portrayal of the old Lear and Langland's discussions of *Elde*. The final section of this chapter will examine how Shakespeare took an old man, gave him a well-known infirmity, and provided his audience with an apparently realistic, though exaggerated, picture of sickness in old age. After establishing that it is more accurate to describe Lear's condition as "melancholy" rather than "madness," I consider how Shakespeare's treatment of his king compares to medical theories.

### **Section 3: Old Age and Melancholy in *King Lear***

Shakespeare's King Lear is a character who has received much scholarly attention. However, very few critics have taken a serious look at the King's old age and sickness and the implications his age and illness may have had in the early seventeenth century. King Lear, who dates himself as "fourscore and upward" (21.59), represents a man of "extreme old age (termed *senium* by most authors)" in Shakespeare's time (Shahar 72). Some critics, such as Stanley Wells, suggest that Lear's age makes it easier to portray the King's "irascibility, self

centeredness, [and] blatantly false judgment" (Shakespeare 43), and I agree with him even though there is much more to Lear's age than Wells or any other critic has noted. One of the many topics introduced in the play is an illness that would have meant much more to the Renaissance audience than madness, one that has heretofore been overlooked by critics and readers alike: namely, the sickness of melancholy. The understanding of Lear's sickness as melancholy is strengthened when we realize the relationship of Shakespeare's portrait of old age to the many theoretical studies of old age in Renaissance England.

Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, published in 1621, is a work that is concerned with a condition of the mind. Judith Gardiner points out that one of the most defining traits of Burton's work is that he "treats each melancholic as a unique suffering individual" (381). Like *King Lear*, Burton's work has been studied on many occasions. But, although many studies have used the *Anatomy* to discuss characters such as Hamlet, Antonio in the *Merchant of Venice* and other Shakespearean characters, no study has discussed Lear's melancholy in detail. This seems odd in that the studies point to many similarities in the characterization of Lear; he was a melancholic, and an old one at that. It appears obvious that the king's old age and melancholy are linked, yet critics like William Elton and Bennett Simon in their essays on *King Lear*, fail to notice this connection and refer only to "Lear in his madness" (Elton 48) or his "temporary insanity" (Simon 86)<sup>13</sup>. Bloom joins them by referring to Lear's madness. After describing Lear as wrong and sublime, Bloom writes that Lear's "rashness is

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<sup>13</sup> Burton defines madness as "a vehement *Dotage*, or raving without a fever, farre more violent then *Melancholy*, full of anger and clamor, horrible lookes, actions, [and] gestures" (Burton 132). "Madness" is a degree of melancholy and does not define the majority of Lear's actions in the play as well as "melancholy" does.

matched by his furious sincerity, and overmatched only by his mysterious authority, an eminence that survives madness and petulance" (8). William C. Carroll claims, "Lear falls into actual, not just figurative, madness" (204). Josephine Waters Bennett wrote an essay, "The Storm Within, the Madness of Lear" in which she points out several occurrences in the play where the word "madness" is used to describe Lear's actions. By merely stating that the King is mad, these critics, like many others, overlook that it is Lear's aged, melancholic state that allows him to be manipulated as he is in the play. Lear says to the "elements" or "servile ministers" that he blames for the storm, "Here I stand your slave, a poor, infirm, / weak despised old man" (9.19-20). Shakespeare chooses the word "infirm," not "mad" or "insane"; this choice of words stays in line with Burton, who only relates madness to a level of intensity of action and not an illness or infirmity.

Lear represents a man of extreme old age as established by several definitions of old age discussed above in Chapter One. Moreover, Lear's actions in the play are not those of a man who is simply mad or insane, as many critics have suggested. On the contrary, they are those of a sick man suffering from melancholy brought on by old age, as determined by the symptoms and signs of melancholy defined in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Unlike Langland's *Piers Plowman*, which deviated from theoretical approaches to old age, Shakespeare's *King Lear* absorbs the theories of Early Modern medicine as they apply to the case of an individual old man. Although Shakespeare avoids discussion of prolonging life, he concentrates on problems of a single man who has already been granted a prolonged life.

As I have indicated previously, extreme old age in Early Modern England was a rare phenomenon. For rulers of the era, making it into the late fifties was considered quite a feat. At over eighty, King Lear's age would have been astounding, especially when one considers that Queen Elizabeth was considered remarkably old when she died at 70.

In *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, Shulamith Shahar notes that in the Renaissance "age was more considered by ability to function" than by "chronological age" (24). Simone de Beauvoir writes that "in much of Europe and England, the son took the father's place once the father had reached a certain age and become feeble" (130). Through the other characters in the play one can see that the "old King" has lost his ability to function and gives away his kingdom as he enters the stage of *senium*, even though Gonoril later remarks that the "idle old man, [. . .] still would manage those authorities that he hath given away" (3. 16-18). Burton states, "if [old men] do continue to hold [their] positions, they dote at last: and are not able to manage their estates, through infirmities incident to their age" (1: 204). Though following the custom of giving one's property to heirs, Lear attempts to retain his authority, as well as his followers: this reaction is perhaps embedded in the old person's fear of being poor and alone.

So King Lear, by any of the standards discussed above, is much older than the average man of Early Modern England. He has achieved the prolonged life that the medical theorists of the time were searching for. Just as Lear's being old would have been obvious to the Elizabethan audience, so the symptoms that the King suffers from in the play would have been recognized in light of the contemporary definition of melancholy. After creating a character that has

achieved one of the goals of contemporary science, Shakespeare considers the second condition of old age that people were concerned with: its tolerability. Burton writes that melancholy—the same illness Shakespeare is writing about in *Lear*—is brought on by old age, which is natural and unavoidable (1: 203).

According to Burton, several specific health-related characteristics that accompany old age lead to melancholy. Old age "causes melancholy by the diminution of spirits and substance and an increasing of adust humours" – or humours that are dried up and cold (Burton 1: 203). W.I.D. Scott writes of Dr. Timothy Bright, an expert on the humours in the late 16th century. According to Bright, the humours were substances in the body that varied in abundance—the four humours most often discussed are the bloody or sanguine, the phlegmatic or pituita, the melancholic or saturnine, and the choleric (Scott 20-21). The areas of the body and mind and the substances that help them to function properly are weakening in old age; of the humours, the more loathsome ones, the melancholic and choleric, take over. In his book *On The Natural Faculties* Galen writes that black bile or the melancholic humour "tends to be in excess...mainly after the prime of life (*Natural Faculties* 203). Burton quotes Philip Melancthon as writing that it is the "undoubted truth, [that] old men familiarly dote, for black choler which is overabundant in them" (1: 203). He also quotes Rhasis, or Al-Razi, a Muslim scientist known in the Renaissance for his several books on medicine including *Liber ad Almansorem*, a famous medical encyclopedia, who grumbled, "choler is a necessary and inseparable accident, to all old and decrepit persons" (Burton 1: 204).

The symptoms and characteristics of choler are evident in the case of King Lear. When in Scene 1 Regan speaks to Gonoril about the King's recent outbursts

of choler, she blames them on "the infirmity of his age" (1.282). In other words, Regan blames Lear's actions on the infirmities that come with aging. Burton's reference to Psalm 90:10 makes a similar point: "After 70 all is trouble and sorrow; weak old persons, especially those who lived in actions all their lives [. . . who] had great employment, much business, much command and many servants to oversee and [who] leave off" suddenly or retire as Lear does suffer from this humoural trouble and sorrow even more (Burton 1: 204). All of the examples quoted by Burton are ones wherein earlier scholars have identified reasons why the "old man" becomes melancholy.

Inflicting and tormenting the older person are infirmities such as aches, sorrow, grief, anger, waspishness, waywardness, covetousness, and the states of being self-willed, superstitious, self-conceited and a braggart. Each of these "infirmities" plagues Lear at one time or another in the play. Burton notes that the old "become children again; they sit then stand up then sit again, some talk to themselves, they are displeased with and suspicious of all and are all too often admirers of themselves" (1: 204). Cordelia refers to this quality in Lear when she asks the "kind gods" to cure her "child-changed father" (21.15) before she goes to see him for the first time since her banishment. As I have indicated previously, Shakespeare also uses this idea in *As You Like It*, when Jaques speaks to Duke Senior of the stages of men:

Last Scene of all,  
That ends this strange, eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (2.7 162-165)

This infirmity is probably the most widely agreed upon consequence of old age throughout the Renaissance.

Many of the "infirmities" listed above seem very familiar to the reader of Shakespeare's *King Lear* because they can be found directly in the play, either through the characters' lives and words or through the actions of Lear. But the purpose here is to do more than present connections here and there; by stopping now this work would fall short of a full diagnosis of the sickness. The multitude of symptoms found in Lear and Burton's melancholy aged person prove that there would have been definite cause for the audience of the seventeenth century to have seen Lear as an aged melancholic, not simply an insane individual.

Robert Burton begins his section on melancholics' symptoms by saying "I meete them still as I goe, they can not conceale it, their grievances are too well knowne, I neede not seeke farre to describe them" (1: 381). These symptoms, he admits, may "bee common and incident to all persons, yet they are the more remarkable, frequent, furious and violent in melancholy men" (Burton 1: 395). Taking a more modern approach to Lear's character, James Kirsch uses Jung to analyze his actions and mind in psychoanalytical terms, and he seems to be consistent with both Burton's descriptions of melancholy and my own feelings towards the misuse of the word "madness." Kirsch disagrees with current critics' use of the word "madness" to describe King Lear and writes that we must understand this condition as it would have been understood in the seventeenth century. In this light he feels that Shakespeare used the word "madness" "to describe Lear's state as one which goes far beyond the limits of ordinary human experience" (J. Kirsch 269), consistent with Burton's account of the melancholic. The difference between Kirsch's view and the one being made here is that I am

suggesting that Lear's so-called "madness" can be understood as melancholy, as indicated by the extreme nature of Lear's actions in the play.

In Burton's book, the first of the two most important sections on symptoms of melancholy is called *Symptomes, or Signes of Melancholy in the Body*. One of the major physical symptoms is that the older melancholic will often be cold and dry, a common result of an excess of either choleric or melancholic humours (Burton 1: 381). In the play the point of the storm's coldness is repeated several times. On one occasion, when Lear is out in the storm and has asked the fool whether he is cold, Lear complains "I am cold myself" (9.70). Surely anyone would be cold in such a storm, but Lear, lacking the humours and spirits that help to create warmth, is the first to feel it.

Another common symptom is that the belly aches, a symptom that Lear feels when he finds his servant, the disguised Kent, in the stocks. He cries, "Hysterica passio" (7.225), an illness which F. David Hoenerger describes as "marked by fearful and painful sensations rising from the lower abdomen to the heart and throat" (Shakespeare n.165), and believed caused by a "wind" in the belly. Burton quotes Hippocrates as writing that the melancholic is "much troubled with wind, and a griping in their bellies, or belly-ache" (1: 382). Burton lists restlessness as a bodily symptom and writes that the melancholic's "hot and dry brains make them [so] they cannot sleep" (1: 383), and on several occasions in the play the King is restless and refuses to sleep or be still. In Scene 11 Kent attempts to get Lear to enter the hovel for shelter from the storm and rest, and Lear responds "Prithee, go in thyself. Seek thy own ease. This tempest will not give me leave to ponder on things would hurt me more; but I'll go in" (22-24). Lear admits that the tempest is not only out of doors, but in his head as well, and

he refuses to rest. And again in Scene 11, Lear runs from the Gentlemen who were sent by Cordelia to help him and refuses to sit still or go with them.

Lear's bodily symptoms in the play, compared to the ones listed in Burton's work, suggest that the old king is suffering from melancholy. The next section will concentrate on the mental symptoms of King Lear's melancholy.

Burton divides the section entitled *Symptomes or Signes in the Minde*, into several subsections, among which several focus on extreme old age. According to Burton an important emotional symptom found in most but not all cases of aged melancholy is sorrow. Sorrow is a symptom that weighs heavily on Lear's heart and that is present throughout the play. As he learns that neither Regan nor Gonoril plan to allow him to keep any of his men, Lear calls to the heavens for patience and cries, "You see me here, you gods, a poor old fellow, as full of grief as age, wretchèd in both" (7.430-31). In the final scene of the play Lear refers to his many sorrows when he believes the slain Cordelia's breath is evident in the movement of a feather over her mouth: "If it be so, it is a chance which does redeem all sorrows that ever I have felt" (24.261-63).

Burton lists several additional characteristics relevant to psychological symptoms of melancholy. He quotes many scholars who have noticed the melancholic's tendency to jump from one mood to another—for example, from extreme joy to extreme sadness—without a logical reason. In just this way, Lear alternates his moods throughout the play. In the first scene he seems happy to be giving his land to his daughters and their husbands, but as soon as he does not get what he wants, in his "hideous rashness" (1.142) banishes his favorite daughter Cordelia and loyal earl of Kent. Gonoril later states, "Every hour He flashes into one gross crime or another" (3.4-5). According to Burton, sorrow

often consists of grieving, weeping, a restless mind and complaining (1: 388). In scene four Lear banishes Gonoril and is "ashamed" that she "hast power to shake [his] manhood" and cause "these hot tears, that break from [him] perforce" (4.287-289). In scene seven he is "As full of grief as age" (7.431). Burton notes that in sorrow one often becomes weary of life; Lear, in scene nine, asks the gods to end it all:

thou all-shaking thunder,  
Smite flat the thick rotundity of the world,  
Crack nature's mould, all germens spill at once  
That make ingrateful man. (9.6-9)

He has become weary not only of life but also of the cruel world in which he lives.

Probably the most notable qualities of the melancholics who display sorrow, according to Burton, are that they believe that they are worse off than any other person and that their suffering is the most miserable ever. This feeling is evident when Lear meets Edgar as Poor Tom and asks, "have thou given all to thy two daughters?" (11.43), assuming that this must be the cause of Edgar's suffering as well. He even begins to disrobe to become naked like Poor Tom trying to bring his physical self to Edgar's level. In contrast, the young Edgar, who has been forced into his position because of his brother's lies, observes in an aside, "How light and portable my pain seems now / When that which makes me bend, makes the King bow" (13.101-2). Even in such a state, Edgar is able to see that another is worse off than he is.

Four other symptoms associated with melancholy in the mind are worth looking at in some detail. The first is labeled *Suspition and Jealousie* (Burton 1:

390). The main feature of this symptom is that a person is apt to mistake and misinterpret things or events as the opposite of what they truly are. This symptom is evident in that Lear sees Kent and Cordelia as the ones who do not love him and Gonoril and Regan as the ones who do. And Regan ironically states "All's not offence that indiscretion finds and dotage deems so" (7.352-3).

Another symptom Burton names is the *Inconstant* (Burton 1: 390), a trait of Lear noticed early in the play by Regan who, in speaking to Gonoril of his recent rage at Cordelia, predicts, "Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him"(1.289), fearing the unpredictable nature of her father. Yet the Inconstant is a person who once resolved is "obstinate and hard to reconcile" (Burton 1: 390). The "symptom of Lear's 'insanity' ...is of course the domination of a fixed idea" (Bradley 94). Bradley notices this pertinacious nature in Lear. Another aspect of the Inconstant is a lack of patience, which Kent notices about Lear in Scene 13 when he says "All the power of his wits have given way to impatience" (13.4-5). King Lear himself pleads to the heavens, "give me that patience, patience I need" (7.429).

Burton's *Extreme Passionate* is a third symptom that pertains to Lear (Burton 1: 391), and the one that relates most nearly to the madness portrayed in the play. Burton writes that "what they desire, they doe most furiously seeke" (1: 391) and that one who has such a trait is prone to revenge. Lear desires and seeks revenge in scene seven when he roars to both Gonoril and Regan, "I will have such revenge on you both" (7.437). Burton also notes that the Extreme Passionate sometimes has a "void of all feare and sorrow," and will like Lear in the storm, stay in the most dangerous places without concern for themselves (Burton 1: 392).

The fourth symptom is labeled *Humorous* (Burton 1: 392). Burton notes that a person who is Humorous will not "heed what you say" (1: 393) because there is always something that completely consumes the mind. This is evident in Scene 11 when Lear refuses to listen to Kent, says "Let me alone" (11.3) and later ignores Kent, who asks, "How fares your grace?" (11.112), and to which Lear responds, "What's he?" (11.113). The person who is Humorous will often suffer from a condition which, Burton writes, causes a melancholic person to "wake, as others dreame" (1: 393), in other words, they hallucinate. This occurs when Lear sees three dogs and in the quarto trial scene. Another example occurs when Lear says to Cordelia, as she wakes him from his sleep,

You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave.

Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound

Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears

Do scald like molten lead. (21.43-6)

Even as Lear awakes from sleep, he sees things that are not there. He suffers from the illusion that he has already died and is bound for hell.

Taken together, these symptoms suggest that King Lear suffers from melancholy. Admittedly one may note that other causes could explain some of these symptoms. Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is an enormous collection and all of the symptoms discussed have occurred in just the first of three large parts. Burton's list of possible causes seems exhaustive, and he notes that melancholy may be caused by one thing and amplified by another—that a specific symptom is rarely constant and that no melancholic is the same. Yet Lear's extreme old age is the earliest cause of melancholy that is noticeable in the play, and it lines up with his characteristics.

Although Burton identifies several other possible causes of melancholy that are noticeable in the play, the evidence suggests that these agents act mainly to intensify the melancholy of an old, old man. Such factors affecting Lear's melancholy might include Choler, Sorrow, Perturbation, Disgrace, Desire of Revenge, Anger, Misery, the Stars, the Moon and the Sun, Love and Religion. Many appear as symptoms or aspects of symptoms I have already discussed, and the others are either mentioned or alluded to by characters in the *King Lear*. But as far as what is available in the play itself—lacking any note or mention of the time that has elapsed before we enter into Scene one—the King's being over 80 years old is the main and obvious reason for old age as the principal cause of his melancholy. It is also a very important fact to note that melancholy brought on by old age is the *only* form of melancholy that Burton claims is unavoidable (1: 203).

One other question arises: is King Lear cured of this melancholy in the final scenes of the play? The essay by Howard Felperin in Harold Bloom's *Major Literary Characters: King Lear* refers to Lear's recovery at the end of the play, as if there is no doubt one occurs (56). An essay by Arthur Kirsch, in the same collection, claims that "Lear awakens from his madness" (233); William Elton, also in the same collection, writes that "Lear's madness has run its course" (Elton 48). William C. Carrol in his book *Fat King, Lean Beggar*, never brings up the question and Arthur Sewell refuses to consider it as well. Oddly, a cure seems either thought to be obvious or not discussed at all. I will consider this question briefly in the section below because it does provide more evidence that Lear suffers specifically from melancholy of the aged.

Characters in the play such as Kent, Cordelia, and the Doctor, attempt to find or mention treatments for Lear. Like the medical theorists of the time, they are looking for a way to make Lear's old age more bearable by helping to relieve the symptoms that plague all old men at one level or another. Many of the remedies can be identified as treatments for melancholy known in the seventeenth century. Scott lists several possible treatments: "rectification of sleep" and "confession of grief to a friend, and good company" (Scott 22-3). We will consider each of these briefly. There are two occasions in which "rectification of sleep" is recommended to cure Lear's "sanity." The first occurs in Scene 13 when Kent convinces Lear to sleep but must wake him soon after because they are about to be captured. Kent says, "This rest might yet have balmed thy broken sinews / Which, if convenience will not allow, / Stand in hard cure" (13.90-3). Kent knows that without sleep Lear cannot alleviate the melancholic state he is in. The second occasion of suggested sleep occurs after Lear has finally reached his allies and when the doctor claims that the "foster nurse of nature is repose, / The which [Lear] lacks" (18.13-14). The second treatment, a confession of grief to a friend, occurs when Lear tells the fool for the first time "I did her wrong" (5.23).

Possibly the two most compelling treatments are the two instances wherein herbal medicine—noted earlier to be very popular in the Renaissance—is mentioned. In one Lear pleads to the blinded Gloucester, "Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, / To sweeten my imagination" (20.125-6). Wells' note points out that, besides being a perfume, civet was used "to alleviate melancholy" (n237). This is very important, because melancholy, not insanity or madness, is specifically the targeted illness of the herb. In 20.92 Edgar exclaims

"Sweet Marjoram," as he witnesses Lear in his crown of weeds. Marjoram, according to Wells, was described in John Gerard's *Herbal*, written in 1597, as "a remedy against cold diseases of the brain and head" (n235). And of course cold sickness or disease is one of the main symptoms of cholera abundant in old age and one of the causes of melancholy. The only two herbal treatments mentioned in the entire play are treatments for melancholy or its related causes.

So Lear goes through what one might call a treatment process for melancholy specifically, but what does that mean—is it possible that Lear was cured? Josephine Waters Bennett suggests that, whatever the case, Lear is cured of his madness, though his reaction to Cordelia's death "voices a return to delusion" (155). If Bennett had been aware of the relation of Lear's symptoms to melancholy, she, like many others, would not have made this mistake. The answer to the question, "Is Lear cured?" is most likely no. Burton writes that melancholy usually stays with people to their death, and notes that Giovanni Montanus, a sixteenth century Italian physician and writer, observes that although melancholy on occasion can be cured through hard work and the willingness of the patient, more often it is only "mitigated and much eased" (Burton 2: 1). When speaking directly of the perturbations of the mind, Burton suggests that, if the patient is willing to be helped, "no doubt but he [the melancholic might. . .] be eased at least, if not cured" (2: 101). With nearly every remedy that Burton mentions, the result sought is qualified with the likelihood of an "easing" of the symptoms. Burton seems to believe that though melancholy may be cured, more often it is merely alleviated for the moment, especially in old age when the disease can in no way be avoided (1: 203). The several attempts to help Lear in his sickness in the play are not attempts to "cure" the melancholy.

Instead they are attempts to alleviate the symptoms suffered by an old sick man; they cannot cure an illness that is most often incurable. The treatments mentioned in the play are those often suggested in the seventeenth century for melancholy, and this fact appears more than coincidental. Lear's treatments, which bring the play close to the medical theories of the time, provide yet another set of circumstances that relate Lear's sickness to melancholy.

In *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton accumulates a vast amount of knowledge on melancholy that existed, by looking at thousands of individual circumstances and exemplary people. He claims in the introduction that the work contains "references [to the studies of] hundreds of persons from classical times through the early seventeenth century" (Burton 1: 1viii). The collection gives a thorough account of the many opinions on melancholy that would have been acknowledged at this time. Ruth Nevo suggests that widely recorded "sins of Lear"--including self-will, self-love, vanity, and choler--have been used to "indict" Lear time and again (120-21). Yet characteristics Nevo cites can be found in Burton's work and have been alluded to as symptoms of a melancholic; though old age was at times seen as a punishment for original sin, it is no sin or crime to be sick. My point is not that the critics of the past have failed to notice the many symptoms discussed here or that they have not noticed that the King is old. They have simply failed to look at all Lear's symptoms, even those which critics often define as indicators of insanity or madness, that were signs of melancholy, a melancholy which was inevitable in such an old king. Had they considered that the main concerns of the medical minds of the time dealt with prolonging old age, the mind of the elderly person, and alleviating the symptoms with which they are constantly afflicted, it would have been easier for them to

notice *King Lear's* relationship with these studies. Realizing that it is a play about a melancholic old man and not about a criminal king should reverse and prevent the "indictments" that Nevo points out have been handed down time and again.

This discussion shows how one literary work of the Renaissance involved the major medical theories of the time. Instead of taking Langland's approach of attacking the major medical theories on how to deal with old age, Shakespeare provides an example of the major concerns of Early Modern English medical theory. In a sense, Shakespeare provides us with, among many other valuable insights, a case study of an individual old man, his mind, and his illness. The similarity between Shakespeare's presentation of a melancholic old man and Burton's shows how much both the play and nonliterary medical theory are occupied with the condition and effects of old age.

The main purpose of this chapter has been to gain an understanding of the relationship between the literature of old age that existed in the Renaissance and the medical opinions dealing with old age. By looking first at *Piers Plowman* as an example of how medieval fictional literature reacted to common medical and religious theories of old age and then discussing how both the fictional literature and medical theories changed during the Renaissance, we may better understand the unique relationship between fictional literature and medicine in Early Modern England. The old person in this time became an individual worth studying. The person's mind came to be considered as actively changing and being changed throughout life rather than maintaining a kind of rational stability from the onset of reason in youth to its disappearance in death. Medical theory found the old person, referred to earlier under the grand topos of "old age," and brought that person's psyche to the forefront. Shakespeare found an old person,

brought him out from background, and set him center stage for the world to see and experience.

## CONCLUSION

At the age of eighty and after over fifty years of farming my grandfather retired. When I once visited my grandparents in their country home, I asked my grandfather what he was going to do now that he was retired. I'll never forget his response: "Trey, I'm too old to do any of the things I ever thought about doing when I retired," and I knew that he meant it and that bothered him. Here was man who had spent his whole life working to make a living, who finally had a chance to relax, and he was bored and seemed unhappy. I was sad for him. I wanted to know what made him too *old* to do anything that he had ever thought about doing. I wondered what made anyone too old. During the next several months he looked forward to trips to a nearby town for ice cream and to cakes that my grandmother would bake for him, and slowly began to fade away.

My grandfather's condition was worsening rapidly during my first semester in graduate school. Ironically, at the same time, I was reading *King Lear*—not for the first time, but reading it was definitely more meaningful this time. I read as Shakespeare's king grew sadder and angrier as scenes developed. I didn't focus as much on his daughters' actions as the cause for many of those feelings. I saw something else in his sadness. A link connected this king to my grandfather; they were both old, and I wanted to know what that meant.

Experiencing Shakespeare's brilliant play about a very old King Lear and watching my grandfather age seemingly twenty years in the two years after he

retired had a profound effect on me. For a twenty-four year old graduate student, I was spending an extraordinary amount of time thinking about old age. I began to see old age in everything I read. Older characters like Lear, Pandosto, Thenot, Elde, Chaucer's Reeve, the Wife of Bath, the old man in the Pardoner's tale, and many others began to carry more meaning than before. Suddenly, I cared about old age and about what writers in the past thought about it. The stage had been set.

Through this study I've learned that while fictional Early Modern works dealt with varying levels of the "realities" of aging outlined by non-fictional works, all seemed to use same forms to do discuss similar topics. In Chapter Two works attributed to Shakespeare and by Spenser use the same form of debate found in Bacon's non-fictional discussion of the topos of youth and old age. Though the specific purposes and conclusions of each prove quite different, the method remains similar. In chapter three Shakespeare continues this trend in *King Lear* by following the medical theorist's interest in the individual situations and discussing a specific individual malady—melancholy—instead of old age as a whole. The fact is that writers in the Renaissance, like me, took an interest in the old age of individual people: writers created characters, discussions, stories, essays, theories, and treatises that represented the views that existed about the elderly and aging and helped to shape those views as well—more than has been noticed by literary critics.

Little attention has been directed to the fictional works that consider old age, and this absence led me in the direction I took in this thesis. Much is still to be said about old age in Early Modern England that I wish I had the space for here. A study specifically on older women in Medieval and Renaissance

literature is needed, as is research of many older characters I have not discussed—Shakespeare offers several characters whose old age has not been adequately examined. Placement of the elderly characters in their fictional societies could be interestingly compared to the historical positions that old people held, as documented in archived records, laws, and non-fictional accounts such as diaries.

In Early Modern England the phrase “old age” was seen as much more than something determined by number of years: it defined a time in people’s lives that had been feared and hated for centuries. Once the possibility of avoiding old age altogether became less plausible, people turned to procuring longer lives for themselves. In doing so, old age needed to become more accessible, enjoyable, and respectable. What we find in the fictional and non-fictional literature and theories of the time is the outward struggle between the old and the new ways of approaching old age: a struggle between those who still railed against aging with the power that only well written lines can have and those who began to try to understand old age—to give Elde a new name.

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