WRITING OLD AGE AND IMPAIRMENTS IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

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WRITING OLD AGE AND IMPAIRMENTS IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

by
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INTRODUCTION: STAVES AND STANZAS

> And indeed, if you care to read or hear foreign history,
> you will find that the greatest states have been overthrown
> by the young and sustained and restored by the old.[1]

AT THE END of the *Knight's Tale*, the narrator of the *Tales* reports the unanimity of the pilgrims:

> Whan that the Knyght had thus his tale ytoold,
> In al the route nas ther yong ne oold
> That he ne seyde it was a noble storie
> And worthy for to drawen to memorie,
> And namely the gentils everichon. (I.3109–13)[2]

The terms of this unanimity are given in status and age: the gentlefolk, in particular, find the value of the story the Knight has told, as well as both young and old. But oldness really is paramount here: from the beginning of his tale, the Knight has been conscious of the past, aware of the value of what is old, even as his tale seems to focus on the traditional concerns of the young: love, battle. Indeed, even as the Knight tells a tale, much of the tale's power is found in its age, a fact apparent from the tale's first line: "Whilom, as olde stories tellen us" (1.859). And much of what the tale tells us as readers in the twenty-first century about old age can be seen in the workings of Saturn toward the end of the tale, in the depiction of the old god, whose discussions of disease, age, and infirmity are central to his power, even if the human figures of the tale fail to see this.[3] Even though these strategies are frequently deployed—the temporal framing of the tale, the inclusion of Saturn as a mover of divine disorder or an older order—I see in the Knight's frequent citations of oldness from the beginning more than a commonplace. While many messages about oldness and old age exist in the *Tales* and late medieval England—old age and its effects might be negative, old stories are important, and age can be a source of debility and impairment as well as authority and veneration—this framing has consequences for how these lines at the end of the tale can be understood, which I use a map for *Writing Old Age and Impairments in Late Medieval England.* Although these lines are not connected

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1 Cicero, *Cato Maior de Senectute*, trans. William Armistead Falconer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 29.

2 All citations of the *Tales* refer to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robison (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

3 Harry Peters, "Jupiter and Saturn: Medieval Ideas of 'Elde,'" in *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 375–91.

directly or indirectly to *Parlement of the Thre Ages* and *Wynnere and Wastoure*, which I discuss in the next chapter, the parallels are intriguing: an old story narrated by a mature person, which is worthy of memory and characterized by its nobility. In the naming of nobility and the call to memory, we might also see how this focus on memory and old narrative anticipates the choice of old texts focused on history and nobility for William Caxton's imprints, which I discuss in Chapter 4, or the resurrection of John Gower in William Shakespeare's *Pericles*, who returns from oblivion, memorializing Gower's source texts and Gower's even older sources. Moreover, the answers to this unanimity—the tales of the Miller and the Reeve—shatter this conjunction between young and old, as both introduce debate among the ages.

Mirroring the connections between these lines and the range of texts which *Writing Old Age* treats, the connections between old age and narrative within the *Knight's Tale* do not end at the end of his tale as the phrasing of these lines suggests further links. Even as we might be skeptical of the narrator's claim that all loved the story, that claim nevertheless introduces the downward arc of the First Fragment, as disorder and conflict, and age dominate the next three tales, beginning with the Miller interrupting the Knight and offering the "legende" of an old carpenter who is cuckolded by his young wife.[4] The Miller introduces his tale by positing that "Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,/ For youth and elde is often at debaat" (I.3229–30). The breaking of this community, through the Miller's insertion of a fabliau, is given in the same terms as the description of the community created through the end of the *Knight's Tale*: *estaat,* with its connotations of condition and status, also dovetails here in these opening lines with those of bodily condition and age. The *Reeve's Prologue* and *Tale* (subject of the second chapter) recognizes this downward trajectory, as narrative there emphasizes its power for an aged teller: both as a way to wield authority with a body that has physical limitations and as a way to release that body from the demands of physical desire.

Surely, old age functions like this in different historical moments, as the Reeve himself seems to implicitly echo the Ciceronian benefit to old age and its release of the body from lust and desire. But as an entry point to narratives of old age, the evocation of age-related disunity and the potent impotence of the aged body uncovers the intersection between age and ability outside Chaucer's texts. In these Middle English texts, these grumbling old men repeat, in their garrulous voices, a steady refrain chronicling the pain of existence and their disappointment in the present and future. While a common image, one so frequent that reference to examples seems unnecessary, these common depictions are more than simply narrative fodder: these figures of age use their litany of age-related impairments and elderly debility to create narratives which both highlight

4 The type of narratives *Writing Old Age* treats are themselves worthy of discussion, for what seems clear is that certain narratives seem to touch on old age more than others. So, for example, in the Miller's exposition of his narrative, he claims that he will discuss a "legend," which according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, can mean "a story about a person" or "a narrative dealing with a happening or an event." *Middle English Dictionary*: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED25010/track?counter=1&search_id=1382410. But the main connotations of this word remain tied to hagiography.

and stand in for their physical woes. So, mournful of their loss of youth and ability, these figures appear to possess complaint as a crutch, a verbal and written talent for negative comment and narrative that both defines them and their abilities. *Writing Old Age* then traces these figures of masculine old age who reject ability and highlight their corporeal debility, and deploy narrative and texts, both written and spoken, to position themselves as participants in a textual economy, as able as the allegorized embodiments of youth who they often debate in medieval and early modern literature.

Yet these refrains of this common imagery take on a special, topical significance following the yoking of youth and folly during the Ricardian era. The existence of an age-driven debate and discourse would surely have been a familiar point to those reading these texts in the late fourteenth century, and the skeletal outlines of that debate are clearly seen in the treatments of Richard II and his rule.[5] Contemporary chroniclers note with increasing frequency the problems of Richard's youth and the sidelining of older counselors, even as Richard continues to age and is no longer a youth.[6] Surely this is a concern for the audience of the poems which *Writing Old Age* discusses, both in their original contexts and their afterlives. While some of these poems predate Richard, they still all maintain some voicing of the suspicions of youth that take on added resonance in the political upheavals of the late fourteenth century, when Richard II's youth becomes the focal point of criticisms of his rule. Indeed, the youthful court is as much construction as it is reality, as the future Henry IV and Richard II are defined in opposition in terms of age, with the mature cousin usurping the youthful fool, even as months separate the two cousins in terms of biological age. What this concentration on age, the anxieties surrounding youth, and the elasticity of boyhood and maturity suggest is that age carries with it various weight, socially and politically, and that biological age is not final in determining how to describe bodies and identities. The odd ways in which Richard II is described as a youth to the more mature, though exact contemporary, Henry Bolingbroke speak to the way in which age is more than a number. In this way an apparently timeless discourse about age, as indeed youthe and elde are often at debate, takes on a special significance in the Ricardian age, seeing how the political ramifications of the boy king make discussions of old age and its value timely. Knowing this construction of age is as much a somatic fact as a rhetorical strategy helps to frame the discussion from aged figures in *Writing Old Age*.

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5 While not under discussion, *Richard the Redeless* (which echoes many of the advisory tactics of *Regiment of Princes* traced in chap. 3) directly addresses the problems of Richard's rule and the corruption which chronicles often ascribe to his reign.

6 For the full discussion of these rhetorical strategies, see Christopher David Fletcher, *Richard II : Manhood, Youth, and Politics 1377–99* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). "Reading Richard the Redeless strengthens the impression that the king's critics associated him with the faults of youth, not because he had a particularly youthful appearance or bearing, but because youth invoked a certain set of political vices which his enemies wished to ascribe to him" (17). Fletcher's use of then-contemporary poetry, in the context of various chronicle evidence, serves as one of the touchstones for *Writing Old Age*. Richard II's character has suffered from a successful and persistent narrative that links both the king and his rule to eternal depictions of youth, which, according to Fletcher, sometimes dovetail with depictions of the king as effeminate and unmanly.

Caxton, Chaucer, Gower, and Hoccleve, and the anonymous author of *Parlement of the Thre Ages?* then inherited a mass of information that facilitated an understanding of old age, even as much of it varies from one classical or early medieval authority to another. The so-called "Ages of Man," which existed in various formats, was meant to give some clarity to an otherwise individuating set of bodily, mental, emotional, and social conditions that together constitute old age. J. A. Burrow describes and catalogues these various schematics of ages, which classical, medieval, and Renaissance authors, doctors, and astrologers used to classify and integrate human aging into an existing natural order. Burrow argues that his study "concerns itself with this idea of naturalness as it appears in medieval writings, mainly from England, from the time of Bede to the end of the Fifteenth century."[7] While this schematic indeed appears regularly throughout this period, and roughly conforms to the pattern that Burrow describes, the treatment of age certainly can and does exist outside this paradigm, a fact seen in Burrow's final chapter on transcendence of the scheme. Even with Burrow's acknowledgement of transcendence, much medieval material on age cannot be organized so strictly around either fealty to or transcendence of this organizing principle. As an example, parts of Cicero's *Cato Maior De Senectute* serve as foundation for that schematic, yet Cicero's comments complicate it to the point of confusion, as the rather tidy notion of separate stages grapples with a multitude of individuating factors.[8] And, in surely one of the most authoritative treatments of the scheme, Isidore of Seville writes that there are six stages of age, with the last, called old age, beginning at seventy, and, obviously, having no set end.[9] What we as modern readers might find odd—or not—is that Isidore's scheme of ages marks *Iuventus* (youth) to fifty, a link an often ageist modern society might not make. Clearly, even within a somewhat universal system of demarcating age, one dependent on centuries of received wisdom, definitions could and would differ. In short, the definition of old age was most likely as hazy in late medieval England as it is today.[10] The effect of socioeconomic position, gender, and location all bear and bore upon the nature of what it means to be old. Thijs Porck argues that the "representation of old age is culturally defined; in gerontocratic communities, for instance, the elderly will usually be portrayed in a positive light, whereas societies that prefer the qualities of youth over age will generally devalue old age in their literature."[11] And clearly, *Writing*

7 J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 1.

8 See in particular chap. 3, where I discuss William Caxton's 1481 imprint of William Worcester's translation of Cicero's *Cato Maior De Senectute*.

9 Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. and ed. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 242.

10 Age then, as now, seems as much biological experience, as varied as that might be, as the effects of cultural representations of age. Margaret Morganroth Gullette's *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) lays bare the ways in which a youth-dominated culture in modern America largely forces a negative view of old age.

11 Thijs Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England: A Cultural History* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2019), 52. Of particular value are chap. 2 and 3, which describe, respectively, the merits and disadvantages of old age.

Old Age shows that the literature depicting old age defines this period of life as *both* advantage and disadvantage—with the proviso that characters use these disadvantages to gain advantage over their more youthful and able interlocutors.

For late medieval England, schemes dividing ages into categories "are abstract conventions that cannot be read as simple mirrors of social practice."[12] While I am attuned to the histories of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, the choices available to the aged, and the vocabularies used to describe them, this investigation does not describe in detail the lived experience of age, the reality of social structures, medical treatments and therapies, or even the number of aged men and women living in London, or elsewhere in England. While records exist in great enough number to trace treatments and the lived experience, such as wills, court cases, and annuities and corrodies, *Writing Old Age* is focused on the rhetorical conditions of the depiction of old bodies. However, throughout I consider the material, medical, and social conditions and pressures associated with their production of these depictions. Besides the political tensions associated with youth and old age, which certainly shape much of what these selected texts associate with old age, medical views of the aging body remain an important grounding for the study of these figures of age. Indeed, in viewing the rhetorical sleight of hand that occurs when inability, debility, and lack become the prosthetic rhetoric which allows activity and action, *Writing Old Age* refers to then-contemporary theories of aging and its treatment and symptoms, from Middle English echoes of Avicenna's *Canons of Medicine* to texts associated with Roger Bacon which offer remedies for aging. These texts are not only sources of a discourse of impairment and medicalization—they also offer places and spaces to trace the language and rhetoric these authorities use to describe old age. The medical and the textual are almost impossible to separate, as we consider the definitions of old age, the conditions associated with old age, and the remedies these texts often propose. In short, narrative remains a concern for these texts, even if we consider them historical, scientific, or documentary.

Knowing these tensions, of course, does not obviate the need for historical inquiry, and a small survey of those materials suffices to underscore the extent of new and old thought about age in late medieval England. Importantly, Joel T. Rosenthal traces "the contemporary perceptions of age and the assertions, made time after time and case after case, about its precise nature," and engages with various documents, pointing to a cultural preoccupation with age.[13] Deborah Youngs reconsiders and continues the research of issues, and her work represents both the promise and peril of examination of the reality of age.[14] Primary source material that concerns old age of a scientific or sociological

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12 P. J. P. Goldberg, "Life and Death: The Ages of Man," in *A Social History of England: 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 413–34 at 413.

13 Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 11.

14 Deborah Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c.1300–1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

bent is in short supply for the time that her book considers, and the dearth of materials that might shed light on demographics is often anecdotal, limited, or nonexistent.[15] The value, then, of literary depictions of age cannot be overestimated, but then cannot also pass as a literal reflection for the experience of age.[16] But narrative, of course, persists as one of the clues to this historical old age: medical treatises, descriptions of ailments and impairments, and lists of dubious cures for old age serve as the textual enfleshments for these bodies whose skeletal remains are all that remains. These narratives, like their literary cousins, contain signs for how old age might have been culturally and socially constructed and how the impairments that are associated with old age might have been interpreted or depicted.

Because what counts as old age is amorphous and defies boundaries, great care must be taken to unravel the metaphors of old materials or old bodies which often colour the literature of the fifteenth century, and the later, scholarly studies of this literature. As Irina Metzler has made clear,

> Ageing may be a natural process—in modern thought a biological phenomenon affected by genetics and cellar change—but although deemed natural the process has tended to be pathologized. In this respect old age shares some of the aspects of 'disability': it is seen as a biological derivation from the healthy norm.[17]

Following her portrayal of the biological, cultural, and medical factors affecting the depiction of old age, Metzler continues to interrogate why and how disability might function both as natural process and one which is pathologized. In her view, aging brings together impairment, as it is "both a physical and mental phenomenon," and disability, as it is "a cultural and medical construct."[18] These layers of meaning that modern culture affords old age are present—arguably—in late medieval England, as old age is described not only as a series of mental and corporeal symptoms and changes but also as a factor that prohibits the aged from certain activities, as the texts I describe throughout *Writing*

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15 Although it is no longer strictly considered part of Roger Bacon's body of work, "On Tarrying the Accidents of Age" remains a touchstone for *Writing Old Age*. See a Middle English translation of the original Latin work, which is printed in *Sex, Aging, & Death in a Medieval Medical Compendium: Trinity College Cambridge MS R.14.52, Its Texts, Language, and Scribe*, 2 vols., ed. M. Teresa Tavormina (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), vol. 1, 133–247.

16 See Shannon Lewis-Simpson's "The Challenges of Quantifying Youth And Age In The Medieval North," in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1–15: "Literary sources provide the most compelling accounts of personal experiences of the young and old within society, speaking as they often do of the functional, social, emotional, and cognitive ageing of the individual." Besides J. A. Burrow's work on the Ages of Man and the edited collection *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, other examples of literary studies of age include the edited collection *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007) and Mary Dove's *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

17 Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 92–93.

18 Metzler, *Social History*, 93.

Old Age often portray old age as a disqualification in amorous activities, for example. But I track a specific relationship regarding narratives of impairment that trouble this view of old age—throughout *Writing Old Age*, speakers and authors alike use narratives of age-related impairments to highlight and supplement these areas of debility, inability, or infirmity, turning impairment into a prosthetic that challenges the disabling notions of old age.

Old Man Yells at Cloud: Old Bodies and Common Complaints

This contradiction in these complaints needs further fleshing out: what announces and makes clear the nature of age-related impairment—these complaints—also serves to complete these bodies, to open up new avenues of action, and to paper over the ableist assumptions of youth.[19] Indeed, this function is prosthetic—that which both calls attention to and addresses the impairment, and, as I begin to express in Chapter 4, a kind of prosthesis for performance. This prosthetic old age, given through complaint, is frequent, appearing from Chaucer and Gower through Hoccleve and Caxton to Shakespeare, and although varied, maintains similarities that are formal and thematic. The cry that "I am old," evoked by these practitioners of a kind of narrative or rhetorical prosthesis, calls attention to the impairment while using that call to add to the impaired body. These narratives are known by their common elements, for they often use a common lexicon that speaks to its embodied condition: images of candles burning to their end *(The Reeve's Prologue* and *Pericles*), hairs turned white or "hore" (*Confessio Amantis* and *The Reeve's Prologue*), faces destroyed by age (*Confessio Amantis*). The catalogue of common elements also includes features that describe mental decay, such as "dotage," emphasizing the importance of memory to old men, even as it fails; and the enduring link between negative emotions and old men, voiced not only in Aristotle but also in Cicero.

So what at first appears a rhetorical move, a kind of corporeal bait and switch, is instead a way to change what might be meant by "the ideology of ability," as interrogating these speakers and their litany of bodily woes, in turn, uncovers all kinds of fictions about the body.[20] Because, ultimately, what is turn for the old speakers of these works

19 For a discussion of prosthesis's power to both mark vulnerable bodies and complete them, see Richard Godden, "Prosthetic Ecologies: Vulnerable Bodies and the Dismodern Subject in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Textual Practice* 30:7 (2016): 1273–1290.

20 See Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008). There, Siebers fleshes out what he calls "the ideology of ability," which is "at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness. At its most radical, it defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons" (8). Simultaneously, Siebers considers that the "briefest look at history reveals that human beings are fragile. Human life confronts the overwhelming reality of sickness, injury, disfigurement, enfeeblement, old age, and death … The point is simply that history reveals one unavoidable truth about human beings—whatever our destiny as a species, we are as individuals feeble and finite."

is that narrative is indicative of lack and need, even as it supplies the lack and the need it announces. And this contradiction in terms addresses the aging nature of the body, curious and queer and natural and inevitable. *Writing Old Age* addresses this rhetorical turn toward old age, not only via those examples of old age from the history of rhetoric or those which describe old rhetoricians, but also through what Jay Timothy Dolmage calls a new history of rhetoric, indeed, a "Disability Rhetoric."[21] Showing the need to avoid received histories of rhetoric which might describe an ancient rhetoric that is disembodied and which supports an ableism that erases non-normative bodies, Dolmage argues "that rhetoric has a body—has bodies," a view which helps recover lost stories and different bodies which are both rhetorical and physical.[22] Ultimately, rather than argue that rhetoric itself is ableist, Dolmage argues for inclusion of forgotten bodies and their rhetorical weight so that we may leave behind "the narrow view of the role disability may have played" in the ancient world.[23] And prosthesis is central to his project, as it is central to *Writing Old Age.*

As *Writing Old Age* argues, this notion of prosthesis is a rich one, and many of the shades of modern meaning for prosthesis are extant in the late Middle Ages: indeed, the connotations of prosthesis as something written or textual or rhetorical *seem* to have roots in ancient Greek rhetoric—in fact, *Writing Old Age* argues affirmatively that these medieval authors have, at their disposal, these rhetorical contexts, not simply from Aristotle but also in more implicit uses, such as Cicero's use of Cato the Elder as prosthetic and prothesis for the aging—and this dual usage is no mistake. Indeed, Dolmage demonstrates the "imperfect meaning" in his use of "prothesis/prosthesis" throughout his book. The first half uses the "prothesis" in the sense of a proposition and a central part of speech-making according to Aristotle.[24] But he also uses "prosthesis" throughout the second half of the book, and it is this meaning on which the argument of *Writing Old Age* depends. And while this usage, Dolmage notes, does not refer to prosthetic body parts until 1704, its meaning is rhetorical in the sixteenth century, referring to ornamentation in both Richard Sherry's and Thomas Wilson's rhetorical treatises.[25] For both Sherry and Wilson, prosthesis has an additive quality, one that is tied to words. It is the addition of a beginning syllable, which according to Wilson is one of the six schemes, which "contrary to our daiely wont, is either when we adde or take away a sillable, or a worde, or encrease a sentence by chaunge of speech, contrary to the common maner of speaking."[26] But even as the notion of prosthesis available to these medieval and early modern authors would have been different, it would have existed in some way. There are innumerable mentions of "staves" as walking aids, and medieval

21 Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

22 Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*, 69.

23 Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*, 70–71.

24 Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*, 106.

25 Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*, 107.

26 Thomas Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique 1560*, ed. G. H. Mair (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 176–77.

prosthetic devices do exist. The discussion of narration as prosthetic, however, does not depend on the existence of the extant evidence of the actual word prosthesis. Rather its function in narrative and for bodies becomes clear upon reading these depictions of old speakers. In this way, we might see how prosthesis, pace Dolmage, is not simply additive, but rather central to the production of meaning in these narratives produced by and about old men.

This union of prosthesis and meaning so far demonstrates how old bodies, as common sites of impairment and non-normalcy, are prone to use narrative both to complete and define themselves. Age-related disability, like disability in general, then is tied to the creation of meaning, a link seen by Dolmage, David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, and David Wills. Mitchell and Snyder, in their *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependency of Discourse*, remark that their aim is not to "deny the reality of physical incapacity or cognitive difference."[27] Rather, narrative prosthesis "is first and foremost about the ways in which the ruse of prosthesis fails in its primary objective: to return the incomplete body to the invisible status of a normative essence."[28] Thus, for Mitchell and Snyder, and the aged speakers in *Writing Old Age*, the act of prosthetic narration calls attention to the lack, to the space between disabled and normative, by attempting to fill that distance. And their approach shows "the pervasiveness of disability as a device of characterization in narrative art."[29] And central to that characterization, it seems, is the central place of these images of disability and impairment in narrative work: as they make clear, narrative prosthesis

> is meant to indicate that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight. Bodies show up in stories as dynamic entities that resist or refuse the cultural scripts assigned to them.[30]

Using narrative prosthesis to clarify the status of the aged in medieval and early modern literature too builds upon the notion that these aged speakers use narrative in such a way that calls attention to their bodily shortcomings while simultaneously delivering "the representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight." For example, as Chapter 2 shows, the Reeve presents a kind of misreading of his own body, which, contrary to his own stated narrative, is not too old to play, and his play is by far the most vicious, showing in its cruelty the consequences of nonchoice in the *Knight's Tale* which precedes it. The Reeve's apologia for old age is more offense than defense, as he uses the fiction of his impaired body to wound the Miller with language. Impairments, and their representation, might be the crutch of these medieval and early modern texts, but powerless they are not. Thinking about poetry and prosthesis this way prompts

27 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 7.

28 Mitchell and Synder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 8.

29 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 9.

30 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 49.

a reevaluation of the notion that the able body is a temporary (and temporal) fiction, that given age and enough time, even bodies that are whole and active will lose power and ability. But perhaps prosthesis and narrative might change the dimensions of that inevitability, if only through additions and lack? Or perhaps, to return to Dolmage's account of the "crooked" history of rhetoric and the bodies that comprise it, there is no temporary aspect to that fiction, as the normal body is the constant fiction. These old bodies then remind us of impairment's central place in literary depictions. And certainly medievalists have found narrative prosthesis useful as well—so that beyond Dolmage's conceptualization of a disability rhetoric or Mitchell and Snyder's discussion of narrative prosthesis in more modern materials, medievalists have grappled with prosthesis, from a term that describes the body's connection between flesh and bone to the prosthetic use of disability for medieval occurrences of impairment itself.[31] Indeed, Walker argues that "Flesh's natural properties – its radical difference from the rest of the body, its natural moistness and viscosity – thus enable it to function as a natural form of prosthesis within the body."[32]

These descriptions of "Disability Rhetoric" point towards the "staves" in descriptions of old age, but a turn toward descriptions of poetry in George Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy* demonstrates how stanzas and staves are connected:

> Staff in our vulgar poesy I know now why it should be called, unless it be for that we understand it for a bearer or supporter of a song or ballad, not unlike the old weak body that is stayed up by his staff, and were not otherwise able to walk or to stand upright.[33]

Puttenham's discussion here points to the hazy etymology of "staff," a word used synonymously with stanza by poets such as George Gascoigne and in certain medieval poems. This connection here—that poetry itself might be a staff, that material support needed to help the "old weak body"—is no mere conjecture by Puttenham. Indeed, he has drawn attention in this quotation to the way in which staff and stanza were synonymous, possibly related to the OE origins of *stæfcræft*, or book learning. In fact, in Old English discussions of grammar and learning, *stæf* appears often as a reference to the drawing or shape of characters or letters, shades of meaning that are arguably still part of the late medieval notion of a *staf.* This Middle English word maintains its literary and learned meanings, pointing toward descriptions of "proportions and measure" in

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31 For a particularly rich discussion of prosthesis see the essays in *Textual Practice* 30:7, "Prosthesis in Medieval and Early Modern Culture," which include essays by Naomi Baker, Isabel Davis, Richard H. Godden, Margaret Healy, Allison P. Hobgood, Julie Orlemanski, Chloe Porter, and Katie L. Walter. Godden's, Orlemanski's, and Walker's discussions of prosthesis are particularly important for *Writing Old Age*. For a very succinct and clear presentation of disability and narrative prosthesis, see Jonathan Hsy, "*The Monk's Tale*: Disability/Ability," *The Open Access Companion to the* Canterbury Tales (https://opencanterburytales.dsl.lsu.edu/mkt1/)

32 Katie L. Walter, "Fragments for a medieval theory of prosthesis," *Textual Practice*, 30 (2016), 1345–63 at 1349.

33 George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 154.

poetry, according to Puttenham in the late sixteenth century. While today, we might understand staff as a walking aid or an accessory for a religious authority or magical figure, authors in late medieval England often used staff interchangeably with stanza, as a measure of poetry. This stick, used to aid walking, carried by wizards or witches, or employed as crutch, and its poetic connections offer as a result a way to re-conceptualize not only poetic making but also discourses about old age, impairment, and prosthesis.[34] That is to say, if stanza and staff sometimes have a synonymous relationship in late medieval England, is this relationship one way, or might we read stanza as staff, as a way to uphold the body, to help impairments, and to demonstrate power and authority? Moreover, as staves and crutches are associated with old age—as prosthetic or aid to the aging and impaired body—from Chaucer and Gower to Hoccleve, Caxton, and Shakespeare, do staves and stanzas offer new links among the old body, its apparent inability and impairments, and the creation of new verse and the incorporation of old sources? The frequent citation of the old man and his dependence on this aid serves as signal that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century textual production is positioned both as impairment and prosthetic. Like the old body, this verse announces its impaired state, its incompleteness, its reliance on ancient sources, its inability to follow the pattern of past potency and, simultaneously, serves as prosthetic, grafting itself onto classical and early medieval sources, which are not completely extant. This "staff" refers to a rhetorical pose and a claim upon old age. In other words, staff refers both to the prosthetic used by the aged and the impaired in everyday life, while simultaneously also referring to the prosthetic nature of this poetry of complaint and impairment. This expanded view of *staf*—both as a prosthetic implement such as a walking cane and as a signal that narrative has a prosthetic function—encapsulates time as a layered concept—the present existing with the past. *Writing Old Age* then introduces a rhetorical posture that finds resonance with the material role of the past in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, borrowed from classical and early medieval sources

The growth and practice of this literary borrowing—from the sources that describe old age in Latin texts—serves as a beginning point for *Writing Old Age*, as the section on classical sources below makes clear, especially where the transmission of that material influences the stylized depictions of impairment that surround certain formations of old age. Taking as its focus the repetitions of claims of impairment in descriptions of old men from the anonymously authored *Parlement of the Thre Ages* to Shakespeare's *Pericles*, this examination of stylized old age fleshes out the contours and characteristics of the rhetorical creation of old age. An analysis of the rhetorical claims of impairment, however, cannot and should not substitute for the archaeological, biological, and sociological evidence of aging within pre- and early modern literature. Nevertheless, even with such "hard" evidence, it is clear that such sources demand their own rigorous rhetorical examination. Facts about aging, as with any other contested social and

34 For the staff's use in imagery of the Ages of Man, see Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 54–79, especially 73 and 75.

biological process, must necessarily be read with caution and care, and these facts often undergird the stylized depiction of age which *Writing Old Age* highlights.

But what are these facts about aging? Aging is both biological process and cultural phenomenon, with multiple levels of interplay between biological and cultural meaning.[35] Even that biological fact of aging is tenuous, connected to cultural attitudes, economic considerations, and genetic markers. Whereas genetics might have been a foreign concept to ancient and medieval authorities, the difference in experience in aging based on outside circumstances was not. Cicero's *De Senectute*, mentioned above, presents old age as affected by one's amount of wealth, serenity, and character, including how one spends one's youth. Age, like gender, sexuality, and class, is so foreign a concept between different cultures and periods that it defies easy categorization. And that is, in part, the point of a new inquiry into age depictions of late medieval and early modern England: how might figures of old age function beyond their assumed and common roles (which must of course include comic figures, figures of wisdom, and in certain love narratives, the role of procurer or obstacle)? Their narratives are worthy of study that centres these complaints of impairment and debility. Across each of these texts under discussion here, a set of practices emerges in the depiction of this old age:

1. *Writing Old Age* finds in the criticism of Richard II's youth and bad governance both a valuation of maturity and a space where complaints about old age are highlighted.
2. What *Writing Old Age* argues is that narratives of old age are themselves *both* scripted and natural, inasmuch as they describe the biological states of aging.
3. The nature of scripted impairments, therefore, does not reduce the truth of these statements, but the scripted nature suggests their similarities and conventions are central to how these narratives *work*.
4. They work to emphasize and claim impairments. As a kind of narrative sleight of hand, connected to the modesty topos, these narratives use inability and debility to stake out power and authority. They are, therefore, prosthetic in nature, as they both call attention to a lack or inability while nevertheless papering over it and supplementing that apparent loss of ability.
5. These narratives maintain prosthetic meanings beyond lack and supplement of individual textual bodies. Indeed, the narratives serve as *necessary* prosthetic to the old speaker because they actually seem to constitute old age. Without them, old age seems indefinable in these texts.
6. Medieval narratives of old age reach beyond the grave and can be used prosthetically not only to create a definition of "medieval" in Early Modern England but also to serve as prosthesis for early modern literature, emphasizing and supplementing sources

35 The field of gerontological studies is both an old one, evidenced by the pseudo-Baconian *De Retardatione Accidentium Senectutis* and Gabriele Zerbi's fifteenth-century *Gerontocomia*, and fairly recent, evidenced by works such as *A World Growing Old*, ed. Daniel Callahan, Ruud H. J. Ter Meulen, and Eva Topinková (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

or the lack thereof.[36] As a term tied to ages and time, the Middle Ages and the term "medieval" offer suggestions for how texts themselves might be old yet powerful to the early modern thinkers recycling some of these older authorities.

Four Aging Authorities: Aristotle, Cicero, Juvenal, Maximianus

Reading late medieval and early modern English literature, one frequently encounters a paradoxical status of old age and of things considered old, ancient, or belonging to a past long dead. On the one hand, medieval and early modern authors treasure the past: it is a storehouse of timeless ideals, courageous figures, and monuments to an earlier, golden age. On the other hand, old age could be feared and viewed in the most negative of lights. Indeed, as authorities such as Cicero and Seneca—widely known throughout the Middle Ages—make clear, age has much to dislike, even hate, in it. Humans might wish to achieve it, but once gained, they notoriously often regret how their bodies are failing and bringing them closer to death. The anonymously authored *Elde Makiþ Me Geld* from the early fourteenth century animates the refrain voiced in the late Roman republic by Cicero and the early empire by Seneca: if men desire to be old, why is old age hated?[37]

One might answer this question a number of ways. The desire for old age is actually a desire for extended life, and, like Tithonus, those seeking a long life also desire a long youth. But it is not as simple as declaring old age to be brutish, nasty, and short. Old age, like the past and the golden age to which it often is tied, can also be viewed as a time of unparalleled wisdom. In *De Senectute*, old age, Cato argues, has made him stronger, releasing him from the bonds of lust and physicality. For Chaucer and Gower, they imagine the oldness of books and authorities to be a signal that they possess real authority and power; Hoccleve can reimagine Chaucer and Gower, supposedly his old masters and teachers, to be giants upon which newer practitioners of poetry must work; Caxton repeatedly uses his new technology to print classical narratives of the past; and, finally, Shakespeare uses an old poet to physically bracket his use of a medieval and classical source in *Pericles*, imbuing an old figure with authority.

Common here is a litany of bodily woes and their various impairments, producing narratives that centre on their inutility. Simultaneously, these aged figures still appear useful, either for wisdom or as go-betweens, vacillating between positive and negative roles in literature, also using narratives, bodily centred, to guide characters to other ends. But for either view, what seems true is that the elderly are connected centrally to narrative. And that is precisely what *Writing Old Age* tracks in the depictions of old age from Elde in *Parlement of the Thre Ages* to Gower in Shakespeare's *Pericles*: the close

36 "medieval," s.v: *Oxford English Dictionary* www-oed-com.ulm.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/115638?redirectedFrom=medieval#eid

37 This short anonymously authored lyric is based—in part—on the *Elegies of Maximianus* and is found in the Kildare MS. For the edition I cite, see Wilhelm Heuser, *Die Kildare-gedichte; Die ältesten mittelenglischen Denkmäler in anglo-irischer überlieferung* (Bonn: Hanstein's, 1904), 170–72.

connection among old age and narrative and the latter's tight link to that aged body. Indeed, this connection is an old one even in the Middle Ages, as Aristotle's remarks about the old speaker in his *Rhetoric* make clear:

> The character of Elderly Men—men who are past their prime—may be said to be formed for the most part of elements that are the contrary of all these [of Youth]. They have lived many years: they have often been taken in, and often made mistakes; and life on the whole is a bad business. The result is that they are sure about nothing and under-do everything. They 'think', but they never 'know'; and because of their hesitation they always add a 'possibly' or a 'perhaps', putting everything in this way and nothing positively.[38]

Aristotle's depiction of elderly diction foregrounds its uncertainty and its negative character. By thinking, rather than knowing, old men and their speech reinforce that a life, long-lived, has not made them sure of anything. Adding qualifiers of fact and truth to every statement, these old men speak of wisdom tentatively. In fact, living by "memory," rather than by "hope," old men, according to Aristotle, see life as essentially empty because what is left to them of life is but little as compared with the long past; and hope is of the future, memory of the past. This, again, is the cause of their loquacity; they are continually talking of the past, because they enjoy remembering it, which Caxton characterizes as powerful in his prologue to *The Polychronicon*. Their fits of anger are sudden but feeble. Their sensual passions have either altogether gone or have lost their vigour: consequently they do not feel their passions much, and their actions are inspired less by what they do feel than by the love of gain.[39] This emphasis on anger, loquacity, and the feebleness of the former highlight what is common to the old speaker in late medieval and early modern English literature. Speaking of the past, remembering only the past, these garrulous old men speak too much and say too little. Aristotle's use of "feeble" and "vigour" recall that he traces a paradoxical relationship between ability and impairment that also reflects the paradoxical status of the aged: held up for their wisdom, castigated for their greed, old men in both their speech and actions are powerful in the past, and weak in the present.

And so, following Aristotle, at first glance, it does seem that the focus of *Writing Old Age* is somewhat obvious: old people use narrative to compensate for a loss of bodily power and mental acuity. Following Aristotle, other classical thinkers echo this point, as Cicero argues in his *De Senectute*: old people are predisposed to complaint and noise. But there is a particular connection here, between body and voice, which demands more careful introspection. The specific relationship that I trace here is one which is prosthetic: that is, these narratives about the old body highlight the impairments, corporeal and mental, of those bodies while nevertheless functioning as an additive to complete the unwhole bodies. These characters use these narratives of impairment to gain authority and audience, which the elderly speaker nevertheless disclaims

38 Aristotle, *The Rhetoric*, printed in *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1984. First Published in 1954), 123–24.

39 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 124.

by demonstrating their debility. And this prosthetic relationship goes beyond those individual bodies—this image of prosthetic narrative and old bodies becomes even more important when used to view the classical and early medieval sources which these late medieval texts build on. These sources likewise are often viewed as incomplete, and yet their use, however incomplete, demonstrates their power. In short, for old bodies, of figures within the texts, and the old texts themselves, narratives of impairment and incompleteness prove powerful.

And nowhere are these connections clearer than in Cicero's *De Senectute*. Cicero's Cato is of course one of the central documents describing the journey into old age, a point that Cicero makes clear throughout the entirety of the text, which centres on the imagined dialogue among Cato the Elder, Laelius and Scipio. In a work that self-consciously seeks to elevate the status of old men, Cato produces a short digression on the orator as an old man in which he speaks first of his worries about the old orator, together with the advantages of old oration.

> The orator, I fear, does lose in efficiency on account of old age, because his success depends not only upon his intellect, but also upon his lungs and bodily strength. In old age, no doubt, the voice actually gains (I know not how) that magnificent resonance which even I have not lost, and you see my years; and yet the style of speech that graces the old man is subdued and gentle, and very often the sedate and mild speaking of an eloquent old man wins itself a hearing. And although one cannot himself engage in oratory, still, he may be able to give instruction to a Scipio or an Aelius! For what is more agreeable than an old age surrounded by the enthusiasm of youth? Or do we not concede to old age even strength enough to instruct and train young men and equip them for every function and duty? And what more exalted service can there be than this? For my part, Scipio, I used to consider Gnaeus and Publius Scipio and your two grandfathers, Lucius Aemilius and Publius Africanus, fortunate in being attended by throngs of noble youths; and no teachers of the liberal arts should be considered unhappy, even though their bodily vigour may have waned and failed.[40]

These lines encapsulate one of the central aims of Cicero's Cato, who in his confessional way, both highlights the weaknesses of age (which are bodily and medical) and the strengths (which are oddly corporeal as well). Cato, in the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth sections of *De Senectute*, explains both a fear which he apparently has, and apparently, one which he has no cause to have. He fears the orator weakens. Yet this fear, while apparently true, has no bearing on the actual consequences of the oration he gives. He explains away corporeal weakness and decay by changing a bitter tune of impairment to a sweet melody of influence and strength. The old orator, because his voice has become more mild and constant, renders his speeches in such a way that they win not by level of sound or gesticulation of the body, but "very often the sedate and mild speaking of an eloquent old man" captivates an audience. The lack of what one can only call lung strength produces a contradiction in the description of bodily impairment: impairment causes the old man to sound harmonious, as he is in agreement with his old age, and

40 Cicero, *On Old Age, on Friendship, on Divination*, trans. W. A. Falconer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), 9–99 at 37 and 39.

the lilting sounds of his voice match the quiet range of his topics and assertions. In this sense, narrative fully meets one of its most canorous depictions in this short description of the orator, as Cicero and Cato present him. Rather than fight against what is lost, in the context of claims of impairment, the old man manages to continue to win favor and success. Cato, himself, personalizes this bargain, as his speeches continue to drive the agenda of the Senate—a point he makes elsewhere—in spite, or because of his years. And finally, as my continuing examination of old age and narrative will show, it is both the personal and quasi-universalizing impulse of Cato to see in criticisms of old age both an attack on his mode of existence, as he uses that specificity to advance how all old men should conduct themselves.

At the end of his assertions cited above, he gives room for old men to both be unable to do as he does—owning audiences with his well-measured senescence—and to do something that touches upon the same territory. It is the teaching posture of the old man with which Cato consoles those cantankerous colleagues of age whose voices and presentations are not sonorous and who wear age more roughly. Cato locates pleasure, an undergirding concept of *De Senectute,* in the instruction of young men in the vein of Laelius or Scipio, as nothing is perhaps more enjoyable than the arrangement of youth and age together. This celebration of pedagogy colours, if negatively at times, the deployment of old age as teaching tool in literature of the later Middle Ages and early modern period. The gruff and grizzled speaker with a litany of woes and cries about a life well-wasted demonstrates that Cato's lesson is learned, in a fashion, perhaps differently than this speaker would have liked. But the centrality of impairment and loss to the position of old teacher in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Hoccleve's works and Shakespeare's Gowerian resurrection prove a Cato-like content for tutelage and instruction that often defines this prosthetic connection between old age and narrative of impairment. The context of Cato as advisor of old age and old age man both is reflected and twisted in important ways in works that follow Cicero from the late-antique poet Maximianus to alliterative works of late medieval England which focus, in part or whole, on old age.[41]

For Maximianus, the defining characteristic of old age, its simultaneous destruction of corporeal health and creation of literary record of that bodily decline, finds widespread and influential expression through the *Elegies of Old Age*, a series of narrative poems that chronicle the old-age pains of the I-persona of the poet. It is likely that from *Elde* to Chaucer, Gower to Shakespeare, the poems of Maximianus were well known and influenced the narrating of old age. The echoes of Maximianus's woeful treatment of age are much easier to trace in a short work which predates Chaucer, Gower, and Langland. *Elde Makiþ Me Geld* details in plaintive tones the aging process. Preserved in MS Harley 913 (along with the more famous *Land of Cokayne*), *Elde* is in some ways a highly conventional poem about the nuisances of aging. The artistry

41 See Juanita Feros Ruys, "Medieval Latin Meditations on Old Age: Rhetoric, Autobiography, and Experience," in *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 171–200, especially 176–79 for a discussion of *The Elegies of Old Age*.

of the poem, particularly in the fifth stanza, which amplifies the state of complaint about age to a collection of onomatopoeic woes, combined with its common lexicon with other more famous age-related complaints, however, renders the poem worthy of further study. Paired in a manuscript with the better known *Land of Cokayne*, the alliterative *Elde Makiþ Me Geld* depicts the speaker of the poem as an old man who condemns the horrors of old age through graphic descriptions of a failing body and the narrative of grief which this body produces: "I grunt, I grene, I groan, I gruche" (57). The alliteration of the verbs signals their near equivalence. All words denoting verbal or written complaint, they are tied together in a constellation of negative affects, affected by age. Indeed, the speaker is clear: "And al þis wilneþ eld" (59). Elde, that allegorical construction of old age, is the active agent who desires this degradation of the speaker's body, and the language of complaint which issues forth.

Although these lines do express inevitability, they do so in an odd way: the use of "wilniþ" imbues the lines with a sense that Elde itself is desirous of these changes. These lines cannot help but recall the Ciceronian judgment about old age and man's desire for it, offered through Cato in *Cato Maior De Senectute*: "To this class old age especially belongs, which all men wish to attain and yet reproach when attained."[42] Like *Elde*, *De Senectute* is a work that approaches old age from an affective frame of reference: *De Senectute* attempts to make old age more palatable, to give ease and respite to those in old age, and to raise the esteem of the elderly in the eyes of the young. The affective approach to old age that *Elde* takes, however, cannot be more different. Although it refracts some of the Ciceronian heritage on age, the focus of *Elde* is firmly on the negative affects of the aging, and the negative effects of *Elde* working on the speaker's body. Given their use in grammar school curricula, the age-old imagery of Maximianus's poetic complaints would have been well-known most likely to Chaucer, Gower, and other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century poets. Before the twelfth century, according to Winthrop Wetherbee, "a literary canon has been established which includes traditional beginners' texts like the *Disticha Catonis* and the *Fables of Avianus,* now often augmented by the *Ilias latina* and the elegies of Maximian,"[43] an assertion confirmed by Vincent Gillespie.[44] Like Wetherbee, Gillespie notes the structure of these schoolbooks as one that includes both *Disticha Catonis* (the "Distichs of Cato") and the *Elegies*. And though these books are obviously meant for schoolboys, their influence can be felt in the work of aged authors and speakers: the rehearsal of these aphorisms learned in youth reflects in the prosthetic words of the aged figures of this Middle English poetry. Chaucer's

42 Cicero, *On Old Age*, 13.

43 Winthrop Wetherbee, "From Late Antiquity to the Twelfth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Literature Criticism, Vol II: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 99–144 at 122.

44 Vincent Gillespie, "From the Twelfth Century to c.1450," in *The Cambridge History of Literature Criticism, Vol II: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 145–235 at 153.

Reeve, for example, is responding to the *Miller's Tale*, a work that is introduced by the Miller's observation that youth and age are ever at debate. Tellingly, the Miller states in his tale that his constructed Reeve does not know his "Catoun." Indeed, Chaucer's Reeve, as opposed to the *Miller's Tale*'s Reeve seems to know his Cato, or at least one of those *Sex autores*, namely Maximianus. His prologue is an extended reflection of materials on old age and its lamentations, many of which appear identical to those contained in *Le Regret de Maximian*, found in Digby MS 86. In fact, as a source for teaching the young, the Elegies with their plaintive tone and frank discussions of sexuality and disgust are somewhat of an oddity, as much as the *Reeve's Prologue* is, according to the Host, ill-suited to their narrative needs. Gillespie notes as much:

> The *Elegies of Maximian*, for example, with their laments for old age and lusts for young flesh, are not the most obviously appropriate subjects for study by impressionable schoolboys.[45]

In fact, the lesson these *Elegies* might reflect is one which Hoccleve as teacher might also demonstrate: old age can be both a source of folly and wisdom, powerless and potent, and in spite of claims of impairment, an able source of learning and knowledge.

These mournful accounts of age in *Elegies* present an almost wholly negative view of old age, themselves echoing, indirectly to be sure, Juvenal's *Satires*, an influential description of the horrors of old age. While works predate his "Satire X" that touch upon old age, his contempt of human wishes, in particular, the wish for a long life, finds voice in later medieval works, voicing a familiar refrain of contempt for the world. In "Satire X," at line 188, Juvenal writes that man asks for long life. "Da spatium vitae, multos da, Iuppiter, annos."[46] With these words—Give me a spacious life, Jupiter, give me many years—man unwittingly repeats the mistake of Aurora, who wishing for a long life for Tithonos, forgets to wish for eternal youth. What is the use of a long life, if that long life produces misery, pain, and debility? This question is precisely the one that animates lines 188–288 of "Satire X." Juvenal's reflections on the horrors of old age begin naturally with a close up on the old face, and its purported jowls, wrinkles, and waste. Juvenal's powers of description here are general, and rightfully so, for he argues each young man is different and varied—one is less handsome, one has a different body—but every old man resembles the other. His comments that old age looks the same suggest that these complaints of impairment function both as bodily truth and rhetorical strategy and foreground old age as a period of sameness, where difference melts away through the years.

Innocent III's *De Contempu Mundi* revels in many of the same themes, and seems to have borrowed extensively from "Satire X." It is Innocent's text that seems to have exported much of this imagery of decrepit and impaired old age to Chaucer, his

45 Gillespie, "Twelfth Century," 156–57.

46 Juvenal, "Satire X," in *Juvenal and Persius*, ed. and trans. Susanna Morton Braund (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), line 188. All citations of Juvenal refer to this edition by line number.

contemporaries, and poetic descendants. Indeed, Chaucer mentions his own translation of Innocent's text, not extant, in *Legend of Good Women*. Further printed copies of *De Contemptu* date from 1473 and over 500 manuscripts exist, and a fifteenth-century Irish translation survived.[47] "Satire X" and its contempt for worldly vanity, then, is undoubtedly a source for medieval authors, refracted through Innocent's text and his survey of pains and effects produced by extreme old age. Innocent's *De Contemptu Mundi* offers a brief summary of what Juvenal has written, and the difficult position of being in the world, while railing against that world, reflects the contradictions inherent of wishing for an old age that is beset by impairments and debility:

> But even then, if any one does reach old age, his heart weakens, his head shakes, his vigor wanes, his breath reeks, his face is wrinkled and his back bent, his eyes grow dim and his joints weak, his nose runs, his hair falls out, his hand trembles and he makes silly gestures, his teeth decay, and his ears get stopped with wax. An old man is easily provoked and hard to calm down. He will believe anything and question nothing. He is stingy and greedy, gloomy, querulous, quick to speak, slow to listen, though by no means slow to anger. He praises the good old day and hates the present, curses modern times, lauds the past, sighs and frets, falls into a stupor and gets sick. Hear what the poet [Horace] says:
>
> Many discomforts surround an old man.
>
> But then the old cannot glory over the young anymore than the young can scorn the old. For we are what they once were; and some day we will be what they are now.[48]

Innocent's judgments of the horrors of old age concentrate first on the physical infirmities of the old man: weakened throughout, his body shows the visible signs of age. In addition to internal changes such as loss of natural heat, then, old age is a collection of visible impairments that strike foremost at those organs of sense and movement. But this description strikes at the heart of what it means to live with both the causes and symptoms of old age, all of which can be found in medical treatises through the Middle Ages. Precisely because old age's cause was often the loss of natural or innate heat, manuals exist that seek to treat both the cause and effect, such as *On Tarrying the Accidents of Age*, attributed to Roger Bacon.[49] There before he offers questionable or commonsense cures, often couched in the language of the occult or secrecy, Bacon outlines the general conditions of old age such as

> pallidnes of spirite, moche icchyng and cracchyng, short and stynkkyng breth, blerid eyen, slumber, wrath, and vnrest of soule, hurt of instrumentis of wittis in whom lifly vertu werkith.[50]

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47 Donald R. Howard, "Introduction," in Pope Innocent III, *On the Misery of the Human Condition*, ed. Donald R. Howard, trans. Margaret Mary Dietz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), xiii–xv.

48 Pope Innocent III, *On the Misery of the Human Condition*, 13.

49 For a concise summary of Bacon's work, see Shalamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: "Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain"* (London: Routledge, 2005), 60–62.

50 "On Tarrying the Accidents of Age," 163.

Not only does the old man suffer from all manner of outward infirmities, his capacity for virtue and goodness diminishes, just as surely as the innate heat which keeps the body youthful.[51] Building upon the "concept of the person as a psychosomatic unity of two linked entities, body and soul," this litany of age-related issues strikes at the heart of the mental and emotional signs of age which Innocent describes and which *Writing Old Age* treats in the chapters that follow: the old man demonstrates a propensity to anger, together with a gullible nature.[52] He argues with everything, yet accepts everything: a creature of praise for the past and condemnation for the present and future. The confines of narrative that is prosthetic are clear here: though he is weakened, with head shaking and hand trembling, the performance of the old man is centred on movement and sound. He speaks, in sighs, and frets, always "quick" to speak.

This portrait is clearly influential. One need look no further than the anger and "grucche" of Chaucer's Reeve, or the dim-eyed, enfeebled Elde of *Parlement of the Thre Ages*: these characters perform and flesh out the skeletal themes of Innocent's judgment on old age. More timely, however, might be the ending lines, a reflection, one might argue, of Innocent's own tender age when he composed this text. He was never, according to a modern cultural standard or to his own, old. At thirty-nine, he was the youngest member of the curia when he was elected pope, and unlike the most recent abdication, of Pope Benedict in 2013, Innocent died a fairly young man still pope.[53] These are the "facts" of biology. But Innocent's ending line—"For we are what they once were; and some day we will be what they are now"—posits a cyclical nature to old age and youth, and gives perspective to the grouchy old man and the young man, who feels no sympathy for the former. Innocent's text makes the importation of a rhetorical depiction of old age possible—his descriptions of extreme old age surely foreground Chaucer's and Gower's postures of old men who complain of impairment but still produce action.

Like Juvenal, Seneca, and Cicero, all of whom use old age to evoke the past as a golden age with its catalogue of exemplary ancient men and the aging body with its ailments, impairments, and weaknesses, late medieval and early modern English writers employ these narratives of old age to advance a more volatile and unpredictable view of old age, which shifts constantly between encomium and invective. More than just a view of old age, and a set of rhetorical features associated with garrulousness and complaint, however, this weakness is a pose, if a completely necessary one: authors and speakers in these texts style themselves as old men, bemoaning a lack of beauty and strength. In this way, this stance seems akin to a modesty topos, but unlike the author or speaker proclaiming a false modesty, this stance invokes a past period of power now lost, which

51 Sears, *The Ages of Man*, 12–13 for a discussion of humoural theory pertinent not only to aging but also to its broad categorization within the Ages of Man.

52 Shalamith Shahar, "'All Want to Reach Old Age But Nobody Wants to Be Old': The Middle Ages and Renaissance," in *A History of Old Age*, ed. Pat Thane (Los Angeles: Getty, 2005), 70–111 at 83. For further detail on the medieval medicalizations of the body, see Shahar, *Growing Old*, 51.

53 Howard, "Introduction," xxii–xxiii.

itself conveys authority. Although this pose of the old speaker is related to the modesty topos, it is markedly different in its construction and its aims and consequences. Whereas the modesty topos hides actual ability beneath a posture of inability, this prosthetic narrative about age does not just simply change expectations for its reception, as is so often the case for the modesty topos. Instead these impairments are often real for the speakers, such as the Reeve, and they exist in some form outside the text—even textually—and are meant to be taken seriously, for their existence is a sign of the speaker's weakness and power. Ultimately—and this is the difference between the reliance on narratives of impairment for the elderly and the modesty topos—these narratives are prosthetic because they are so integral to the quality of oldness for their speakers. Without these utterances of pain, debility, and woe, the aged would not be aged.

In tracing the prosthetic functions of these old narratives, *Writing Old Age* begins with a discussion of *Parlement of the Thre Ages*, a poem extant in two versions, complete in British Library, MS Add. 31042, a manuscript compiled by Robert Thornton in the fifteenth century. *Parlement* is central to this view of old narrative, as it advances just how embodied and embodying narrative becomes to Elde in his descriptions of the Nine Worthies, and, likely by accident, this emphasis on narrative's importance to the elderly continues in the poem which follows *Parlement*, as the first fitt of *Wynnere and Wastoure* contrasts the embodied narrative of the old minstrel with the empty jangling of the new one. Both the first fitt of *Wynnere* and the whole of *Parlement* which precedes it suggest narrative is more central to old speakers, especially narratives like the fall of Troy or the amplification of the Nine Worthies.

Next, I turn to the Reeve, another figure of age, who uses narrative both to make clear that his impairments make "pley" impossible and to create space for the aged to appear as "mirrours" to the young. Chaucer's Reeve, who presents himself in his self-effacing prologue as aged, reflects much of the same inevitability of age as *Parlement*'s Elde. However, the Reeve uses narrative age and his own embodied truth of it to metaphorically touch what his weakened body can no longer touch: the supposed invulnerability of youth. Focusing on echoes of *De Senectute* as well as Walter of Henley's *Husbandry* in the Reeve's materials, this chapter describes the use of the old man as narrator and plot mover who exemplifies the prosthetic nature of narrative to the old speaker, both narrator and narrated.

What the Reeve points to in the aging of Symkyn introduces Thomas Hoccleve, the "old, poor versifier," whose works consciously attempt to graft themselves onto the Ricardian legacies of Chaucer and Gower. Moreover, in terms of the prosthetic relationship between narrative and age, Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes* suggests that the role of the tutor is one that both assumes and troubles the category of old age, as Hoccleve inhabits simultaneously the role of student and teacher, youth and old man. Arguing that *Regiment* exists as partially erased prologue to Caxton's paratexts, with Hoccleve's *La male regle,* I argue the embodied Elde-character who appears in the prologue of *Regiment* anticipates Thomas Wilson's mid-sixteenth-century definitions of prosthesis as a rhetorical term: an addition at the beginning which alters the meaning

of that which follows. As a supplement to Caxton's exposition of his body and print, Hoccleve's prologue seemingly guides Caxton's narratives of his body and offers an opportunity to track autobiographical costs of print and manuscript production, which he couches in terms of age-related impairments. As perhaps the central figure of the later fifteenth century in terms of print production, Caxton is an ideal figure to show how these prosthetic narratives that centre age-related impairments continue to shape the discourse about aged bodies and their connections to literary history. Concentrating on his revision of script and print in terms of his rhetorical claims of impairment and his use of quasi-medical terminology to convey translation, I read his imprint of *De Senectute*, a text which weaves independently through each chapter, as a late example of the earliest notions of an impaired, yet active age, because of those impairments. Reflecting the contradiction of old age as evocative of ability and impairment, Cicero's text in translation continues the depiction of the prosthetic relationship between age and narrative, as English readers meet the "reducying" of the original Latin and the wisdom of Cato to his younger interlocutors.

In the final chapter, I interrogate the role of Gower in Shakespeare's *Pericles* as reflection of Gower's own construction of himself as old man in *Confessio Amantis*. By reading this material through Shakespeare's construction of Gower in *Pericles*, I argue that an emergent definition of "prosthesis" as textual addition in the sixteenth century guides Shakespeare's reading and use of the old author, imbuing his choral construction of Gower as a revisionary figure, in both Aman's new vision of himself as old and in-text Gower in *Confessio Amantis*. Both Hoccleve's and Shakespeare's constructions of old men in their prologues enliven the rhetorical definition of prosthesis while also making clear the logic of these prosthetic narratives.

While the choice of texts might seem arbitrary for *Writing Old Age and Impairments*, no selection of texts would be perfect: indeed, the subject of this monograph is capacious, and it is my aim to highlight how Middle English texts depict old age and its function rather to describe any exhaustive catalogue of its portrayal. So, in the following chapters, I follow a specific though idiosyncratic logic: moving from an anonymously authored alliterative text to Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, Hoccleve's *Regiment* and Caxton's imprintings, and Gower's textual afterlives in Shakespeare's *Pericles*, I map out a certain narrative of narratives that feature these old speakers and characters and how they are characterized and characterize old age. Surely, I will have left out important texts—why not Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* or Lydgate's poetry instead of Hoccleve's? Perhaps someone will see the absence of *Piers Plowman* as a failure. Any one of these choices might have improved the following chapters, but this book, a blending of Middle English literature; late medieval history, culture, and medicine; and insights culled from Disability Studies is not meant to be definitive but rather to open new avenues for considering the old subject of the old man.