INTRODUCTION

The Poetics of the Life Course

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged.
– Virginia Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’

This book follows the gaze of Old English poets, watching people age through their lives. In doing so, it partly tells a story of a series of bodies moving through distinct stages of life development in a normative way: childhood, youth, maturity, old age. Poets working in Old English often presume that growing older is a predictable process and that certain patterns shape the passage of every life in the world – patterns often modelled on the experience of able-bodied men. Viewed this way, age is a matter of progression through well-recognised stages of physical and mental development.

In suggesting that living through the life course is so foreseeable, Old English poetry shares much with the ‘ages of man’ schemes of learned Latin tradition, popular in early medieval England, which provide universalised models for the maturation of the human body. The *aetates hominis* vary in name and number but typically include *pueritia* (‘childhood’), *iuventus* (‘youth’/’midlife’), and *senectus* (‘old age’), and were explicitly drawn upon by writers in Latin such as Alcuin (in the eighth and early ninth centuries) and Byrhtferth (in the eleventh) in their literary works, including hagiographic life narratives. The ‘ages’ tend to peak at a midpoint of reproductive ability – a heteronormative impulse, as feminist and queer scholarship has pointed out – while the logic of steady advance intrinsic to the tradition has been found to express a ‘masculinist’ conception of linear time, constructing an ‘illusory ideal’ of ‘order’ and ‘smooth progress’. Several scholars have approached ideas of ageing in Old English poetry by recourse to the ages of man, and some vernacular poems do give a similar impression of orderliness around age – discrete phases of an individual’s life are experienced one after another, in what sometimes looks like a march of progress. This march peaks at a midpoint of physical strength and ability, comparable to the ‘perfect
age’ (perfecta aetas) of Latin tradition; afterwards, it is superseded by what can often look like a march of decline through old age and death before the soul is ushered into the (glorious or torturous) timelessness of the afterlife. Old English poetry’s tendency towards sequential narrative has long been appreciated, and its treatment of age narratives is no exception: phases of life experience are often encountered separately and chronologically, one at a time.4 Nonetheless, as Frederick Klaeber once famously complained of the structure of Beowulf, Old English poetry can also present us with a striking lack of ‘steady advance’.5 Different poems offer a multitude of pictures of ageing, many of which run counter to any suggestion of a predictable march. The human lifespan as a whole is conventionally referred to as a ‘number of days’ or the ‘days of one’s life’ (through terms such as dogor-rim or ealdor-dagas), suggesting an interval of variable length made up of a great accumulation of small units of time.6 For all that such compounds are formulaic, the mode of conceptualising a lifespan which they enshrine poses a challenge to the neatly structured, teleological arcs of the ages of man. Rather than a regular sequence of different stages, these compounds point only to a mass of the same unit, each day on a par with another, with the number varying from person to person. In other ways, poets strive to demonstrate that each life course differs in length, such that not everyone lives through every possible phase of life. Death comes unexpectedly — any reader of the wisdom poem known as The Fortunes of Men will have had this message firmly instilled.7 It is no sure thing that any given person will make it to later phases of the life course, and old age especially is often presented as a possible fate, comparable to illness or violent death, rather than a predictable part of every life.

In other ways too, the passage of life unfolds differently for each person. Rhythms of disruption, interruption, and redirection shape all kinds of narrative sequences in Old English verse, of the kind usefully bracketed by Edward B. Irving Jr, with reference to Beowulf, as ‘the pattern of “until”’.8 Through a table-turning use of a temporal conjunction such as ofþæt (‘until’), one long interval of experience is suddenly (and often unexpectedly) brought to an end and a new one begins. We might understand this as a kind of narrative equivalent of what is known as ‘punctuated equilibrium’ in evolutionary biology, whereby species often exhibit little change for long periods in the fossil record, with this stability broken up by periods of relatively abrupt change.9 The effect of this narrative device in shaping the presentation of life courses in Old
English poetry is profound. To give an example from *The Fortunes of Men*:

Sum sceal on geoguþe mid Godes meahtum
his carfoð-siþ ealne forspildan,
ond on yldo eft eadig weorþan.[\textsuperscript{10}]

One person must, through God’s powers, put an end to all his experience of hardship in his youth, and afterwards, in his age [in the age afterwards], become happy.[\textsuperscript{1}]

In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar, the aged ruler of the Danes, experiences a similarly momentous reversal, but in a different direction – one more commonly represented in Old English verse:

þæt wæs an cyning,
æghwaes orleahtre, of þæt hine yldo benam
mægenes wynnum[\textsuperscript{14}].

that was one king faultless in everything, until old age deprived him of the joys of strength[\textsuperscript{1}].

We are not dealing in these instances with the life course viewed as progression through neatly measured intervals, each of a set number of years. The terminology of youth, strength, and age is looser and more relative. These individuals face periods of continuous experience of unspecified length, curtailed by sudden shifts in identity and circumstance. We might loosely call *Fortunes*’ narrative ‘a story of improvement’ and *Beowulf*’s ‘a story of deterioration’, in the terms of J. David Velleman, but on the other hand these passages lack any direct reference to causality or moral justice; they are stories only of the most jagged and discontinuous kind, perhaps even ones that refuse to give a continuous sense of ethical development to a whole life.\textsuperscript{12}

As such, they parallel recent calls in philosophy to turn away from viewing lives as coherent, unified narratives at all; Galen Strawson, for example, has questioned the necessity of pursuing ‘ethical-historical-characterological developmental unity’ by construing the events of one’s life as a narrative.\textsuperscript{15}

Amid this climate in philosophy and cultural studies, in recent years historians have also sought to reinject sensitivity to contingency, variation, and discontinuity as key aspects of ageing, including – with reference to the medieval period – challenging the primacy of the ages of man paradigm.\textsuperscript{14}

But poets such as those of *Fortunes* and *Beowulf* have already built
sensitivity to such contingencies into their texts. Across the wider landscape of Old English poetry, the process of growing older is frequently presented as irregular and surprising, varying as an experience from person to person. At times, depictions of life courses resemble what Amélie Rorty calls ‘improvisatory accident-prone dramas of (what passes for) a person’s life’, impacted by multiple contingencies, varying across a wide range of parameters, and challenging ‘the typology of generic stage/developmental theories’. They even resemble, at times, Catherine Malabou’s theories of ‘destructive plasticity’, which she partly expounds through waterway metaphors: in the usual way of things, ‘lives run their course like rivers’, but sometimes, due to trauma or catastrophe, or for no reason at all, ‘they jump their bed’, such that a person experiences a major disruption in their identity.

In Old English poetry too, personal identity is not always clearly continuous as an individual moves through their life. Poets working in the vernacular tradition were acutely interested in age, as this monograph – the first book-length study of the whole lifespan in Old English verse – will demonstrate. But they approached it in a manner which allowed for various modes of experiencing the phenomenon. Often their descriptions of growing older operate according to a principle of male-as-default, but women’s experiences of maturation are depicted on numerous occasions (contrary to what has been asserted in the only previous study of the whole of life’s passage in Old English poetry). Moreover, given the unpredictable nature of the passage of life in Old English poetry, experiences of ageing differ from person to person, spanning a diverse range of affects and attitudes and including postures of reluctance, rebellion, and non-complicity. Several poems emphasise that humans (and other beings) are brought into the world without choosing it and are wholly dependent on their carers for their survival (see Chapter 1). Other texts stress open rebellion as a part of adulthood, including in the context of women’s elected virginity or chastity (see Chapter 2). Still others dwell on old age as a state of being that is intimately intertwined with the witnessing of the death of others and the work of understanding and describing such loss (see Chapter 3). A person’s experience of later parts of their life is often inseparable from their previous experiences, and the texts therefore reward an approach which does not isolate life stages – such as childhood and adolescence, or old age, both recently tackled by scholars – but rather strives to keep the whole life course in view.

This study is literary-critical at heart, but I borrow the concept of the life course from sociology, partly filtered through a recent wealth of
The term helpfully allows us to think outside of the commonly recognised developmental stages of human life – infancy, childhood, adolescence, midlife, old age – which tempt treatment in isolation, and which have been reified in the social sciences in a manner quite comparable to traditions of the ages of man. The label ‘life course’ encourages consideration of other kinds of narrative, such as gradual, accumulative growth, or interrupted, arrested, curtailed, and redirected paths. In its reference to a ‘course’, it points to fluidity, invoking multiple currents moving at once: some fast, some slow, some curling into eddies, or even (as Malabou would have it) breaking the riverbanks. The term also carries with it some well-developed sociological frameworks, such as a concept of life development which extends before birth and after death (‘the extended life course’), and a sensitivity to the ways in which experiences of ageing vary from person to person. As sociologists have noted, the label ‘takes account of how different early life identities . . . have their own particular implications for later life, rather than simply assuming a predetermined map of the ‘life cycle’’. As a further benefit, it removes us from the implication – confusingly latent in ‘life cycle’ – of an endlessly circular and repeatable sequence of stages, continually experienced in the same way and in the same order, with death somehow bringing us back around to birth.

Rather than focusing on static stages of life, this study is structured around transitional phases in the life course as depicted in Old English poetry, especially the process of becoming fully shaped by others early in life, the metamorphoses by which youth can become mature adulthood, the experience of feeling oneself to be old and living in the absence of loved ones, and entry into the suspended and unresolved condition of the death state. These changes are experienced at different times, to different degrees, and qualitatively differently by different subjects, and their meaning is inseparable from other facets of individuals’ lived experience, such as relationships with others, expectations of the future, and intentions or desires. Individual experiences of age-related transformations are inextricable from the myriad other ways in which time ‘is lived’, as Carolyn Dinshaw puts it, ‘full of attachments and desires, histories and futures’. This study thus tends towards the outward-looking in its treatment of human age, stressing how age-related experiences are deeply connected with other aspects of living through time.

As a result, this book draws on a range of theoretical frameworks, including – in addition to age studies and queer theory – trauma theory and some aspects of disability studies. The perspective of age studies
necessarily underpins the whole study, but to a lesser degree another set of theoretical touchstones is pivotal: the forms of new materialism which have developed as part of the ‘nonhuman turn’, and the ecological currents which surround and inform those theories (and which flourish also in the form of ecocriticism).29 On occasion, these perspectives have been brought into productive conversation with age studies, including with particular attention to medieval sources, which often challenge present-day commonplace assumptions about both age identity and the boundaries of the human. Most notable is J. Allan Mitchell’s Becoming Human (2014); this study, in its focus on childhood and infancy from the twelfth century to the fifteenth, anchors itself in the nonhuman by contemplating foetal and infant life as ‘the barely animate creatureliness that is nonetheless necessary for human flourishing’.30 Outside of age studies, new materialisms have been brought into conversation with Old English poetry by scholars such as James Paz, while several recent ecocritical studies have directed attention towards material phenomena in this body of poetry.31 The present study is inflected by new materialist thought because, as we will see, Old English poetry is consistently invested in what is nonhuman about the human when it offers narratives of ageing.

Many of the ‘histories and futures’ lived in this body of poetry (to return to Dinshaw’s phrase) operate on a plane far beyond individual human life courses, encompassing, for instance, the life course of a given community, as well as the life course of the cosmos. The latter time frame is commonly formulated in early medieval intellectual contexts as the six ‘world ages’ which parallel the ages of man (both of which parallel the days of Creation) according to Bede and others, following Augustine of Hippo. In this regard, the tradition of the ages of man itself constructs a more multi-layered and asynchronous set of temporalities than is often recognised, especially by those who perceive the model to constitute a straightforwardly ‘masculinist’ linear temporality: a march through time.32 A person’s individual experience of old age (senectus), for instance, does not only anchor them in a single life course, but also forms an analogue to the aged condition of the world in its Sixth Age. It furthermore constitutes a micro-manifestation of that cosmic decline, given that human old age in the Sixth Age (that is, the time that early medieval England considered itself to inhabit) must be the most extreme it has ever been.33 The Sixth Age of world history and the Sixth Age of humans furthermore share their identities with the Sixth Day of Creation. The days of Creation – as Dinshaw stresses – do not exist as a human would know them, but instead as a ‘single atemporal instant’.34 Schemes of the ages can therefore actually
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pull individuals out of linear time – linking their experiences of ageing with the vertical axis of Creation and the long view of world history – more than they enforce a straightforward, horizontal mode of comprehending being in time. Other formulations of the ages of man similarly complicate the temporality of a single life course: connections are forged between the ages and the seasons (when the ages number four) and the passage of a day (when the ages are five), further embedding the rhythms of human ageing in the ‘natural cycles’ of the cosmos.  

Partly in response to the subtle complexities of models of the ages of man, but also in many other ways, Old English poetry presents human ageing as bound up with the experiences, even the ‘lives’, of animals, things, and the cosmos. In the words of one set of bilingual verse proverbs, possibly from the eleventh century, ‘everything ages which is not eternal’ (‘Senescunt omnia que æterna non sunt. / Æghwæt forealdað þæs þe ece ne byð’, 5–6). Old English poetry often constructs life courses by sliding between human and nonhuman referents: poets refer to human development in terms of vegetative growth, juxtapose scenes of nonhuman and human maturation, and at times make it genuinely unclear what kind of body is growing older. One of its most vivid scenes of infancy takes a suckling calf as its focus, while elsewhere human death is likened to decaying fruit. The human life course keeps close company with – to the point of being embedded within – nonhuman life courses in Old English poetry. It is partly through overlooking discourses of age on a scale beyond the human that it has been possible for Jordi Sánchez-Martí to contend that depictions of maturation in Old English poetry are so ‘limited’ that the corpus must necessarily be supplemented by Old Norse material. On the contrary, this book will assert that Old English poetry is profoundly interested in life courses, but in a way which tends to keep the nonhuman in view, presuming connections between human ageing and phenomena in the wider world.

As a key part of this enterprise, the Riddles of the Exeter Book are at the heart of this study, fundamental to Chapter 1 and appearing intermittently throughout. One might expect these texts to be in the margins, because a more traditional place to anchor our discussion would be the gravitational centre of the Old English poetic canon, Beowulf, which J. R. R. Tolkien once influentially posited to fall into two halves, each concerned with the youth and age of the hero respectively. The figure of Cynewulf has also historically attracted attention for his relationship to youth and age, though primarily for the arc of his own ageing that we can supposedly construct on the evidence of his poems – which were once thought to
include the *Riddles*, taken in general terms by Stopford Brooke as the products of the ‘careless happiness’ of the poet’s youth. Looking closely at the *Riddles* themselves nonetheless allows us a fresh new perspective on age in Old English poetry, which from certain other directions (including the vectors of the ages of man and individual life stages) has been well discussed. The *Riddles* have not previously formed a major part of scholarly accounts of age-related discourses in Old English verse, although recent forays have been made. Nonetheless, as will be seen, they offer a valuable gateway to the depictions of life development in the wider corpus.

In their various intricacies, the *Riddles* frequently complicate the kind of common-sense assumptions about ageing that once informed studies of Cynewulf, in the track of Brooke’s efforts to recover ‘the biography of his soul’. The broad shape of the life courses they describe may not always be wholly surprising, but – as is often the case across this study – close examination of the poems reveals unexpected nuances in expected patterns. After introducing the *Riddles* and stressing their importance for this study, this introduction will go on to outline key material and linguistic aspects of the life course as contexts for the literary analysis offered in the rest of this book. Likewise, in these areas, certain facets of the early medieval English life course may feel predictable or indeed universal, but this is all the more reason to shine light on the more surprising elements. The cultural and literary meaning of ageing – and even the nature of some of its biological processes – are otherwise only too easy to take for granted.

**Human and Nonhuman Growth: The *Riddles***

The *Riddles* are a collection of around ninety verse enigmas surviving in the late tenth-century poetic codex known as the Exeter Book, the majority of which were likely composed in the eighth century. Each inviting an answer to the explicit or implied question ‘what am I called?’, the *Riddles* point almost exclusively to nonhuman solutions, mostly animals and objects, ranging from big to small, grand to meagre. These texts are often described as anthropomorphising their subjects, and this effect stems not only from their use of the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia, by which the inanimate speaks in the first person, but also from the tendency of the *Riddles* to describe nonhuman entities in terms of relationships, experiences, and affects which seem drawn from the human world; for example, many make use of the ‘implement trope’, by which objects are described as entering into a thegn-like relationship of service to a human operator.
A series of questions posed by this book: if the Exeter Book Riddles really are anthropomorphic, using the trappings of the human as a kind of disguise, what ideas of life development do they invoke in their narratives, and do these surface elsewhere in Old English poetry? If certain concepts of ageing are active in Old English poetry, approached through the gateway of the Riddles, then how might these models relate to wider intellectual, cultural, and material contexts? And, finally, if the Riddles do fundamentally imply an entanglement between human and nonhuman life development, then how is the same manifested elsewhere in Old English poetry? Recent studies have made initial strides in these areas, and this book ventures further down these paths. Ultimately, as outlined further in what follows, we must question whether ‘anthropomorphic’ is even the right term for what the Riddles do, implying as it does so much critical confidence in the fixed meaning of what is human and the separateness of the human mask placed on a nonhuman creature. The Riddles might more accurately be described as full of ‘isomorphisms’ – that is, they suggest experiences shared between the lives of humans, animals, plants, things, and the cosmos, without necessarily insinuating these are wholly imported or projected from the human realm. The Riddles can therefore be appreciated as offering accounts of the lives of nonhuman entities while possibly commenting simultaneously on human ageing.

We should therefore turn at this stage – strangely enough – to look at an oyster. Since antiquity, these creatures have been regarded as lying at the limit of animal life, so immobile, passive, and helpless that they ‘can barely be said to be alive, barely be said to be animals’. The oyster I am interested in appears in one of the Riddles, the later lines of which are slightly singed by a hot poker that was at some stage laid across the back of the Exeter Book. The text itself tells a story of an even more complete destruction:

Sæ mec fedde, sund-helm þeahte,
ond mec yða wrugon eorþan getenge, feþelease. Oft ic ðode ongean
muð ontynde.

Nu wile monna sum
min flæsc ðretan, felles ne recceð,
sìþþan he me of sidan seaxes orde
hyd aryþþan, ond mec hraþe sìþþan
iteð unsodene eac ... (Riddle 74)
The sea nurtured me, a water-cloak covered me, and waves spread over me, near to the ground, footless. I often opened my mouth towards the water. Now someone wishes to gobble up my flesh, does not care about my skin, after he rips off my hide with a knife’s point, and moreover hurriedly eats me uncooked ...

The story recounted here might initially seem of little pertinence to human experience. It is unanimously understood by scholars to point to the referent of an ‘oyster’ (ostre), although we can never be quite sure that this is right — the *Riddles*, on the whole, do not travel with their solutions. Yet while the creature’s subaquatic home and death met in consumption might seem far removed from human experience, there are traces of a human story in this text. *Riddle 74*’s speaker presents us with a narrative of its life in the first person, describes sequential phases of experience which are emotionally charged, and peppers its utterance with details that could conceivably describe a human body and its experience — the reference to a mouth, for instance, or the speaker’s *hyd* (which can just mean ‘skin’, including the skin of a person). If this text is in some sense truly about an oyster, shadows of human life lurk around the edges.

These facets of the poem come more clearly into view through comparison with an Anglo-Latin riddle with a similar solution and some similar features, composed by Aldhelm — poet, teacher, and abbot of Malmesbury — in the seventh century:

E geminis nascor per ponti caerula concis,  
vellera setigero producens corpore fulva;  
en clamidem pepli necnon et pabula pulpae  
confero: sic duplex fati persolvo tributum.  

(*Aenigma 17, Perna, ‘fan mussel’*)

I am born from a double shell in the blue waters of the deep, producing tawny coverings from my hairy body. See how I produce the covering of cloaks as well as the food of flesh: twice over I pay out the debt of fate.

Aldhelm characteristically places emphasis on birth in this text, demonstrating his deep preoccupation with viscera and processes of production. In mentioning birth, he may imply something like an arc of life development for the *perna*, particularly given the initial claim, ‘I was born from twins’ (‘E geminis nascor’), with the idea of the ‘shell’ (‘concis’) delayed to the end of the line. Also sounding potentially human are the ‘hairy body’ (‘setigero . . . corpore’) and the ‘debts’ (‘tributum’) paid twice. Nonetheless, the Latin poem forges no contrast between the creature’s ‘early life’ and ‘the final stage of its life’, as Corinne Dale has noted.