Adapting Parental Grief in Early Medieval England

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It may seem obvious to a modern audience to say that parents in early medieval England grieved at the death of their child, but this view has not always been held by scholars. Most influential of all has been Phillipe Ariès's argument that childhood is a uniquely modern phenomenon and that in the Middle Ages they were perceived as merely miniature adults.[1] In general, the idea that children 'did not count' in the medieval period has been commonly repeated.[2] However, Sally Crawford has shown that archaeological evidence from early medieval England does not support this theory.[3] Skeletal evidence shows the attention given to infants and children even when severely ill or incapacitated, and that at least some survived into adulthood.[4] Likewise, as this paper will examine, parental grief is a reoccurring motif in Old English literature, suggesting a literary interest in the distress of losing a child.

In particular, this paper will focus on the way ideas of parental grief emerge in what I will refer to as 'adapted' narratives. Many Old English works draw on earlier sources and concepts, but here I want to differentiate those that based directly on pre-existing narratives. These four texts are the Old English translations of *Orosius* and *Boethius*, and two of the biblical poems *Genesis A* and *Exodus*. Since these texts follow a known source relatively closely it is possible to see where the Old English version deviates from the original. This makes authorial choices more obvious, and better exposes the influences and concepts that are unique to the Old English. By doing so I will illustrate how writers and

[1] While influential, Ariès's work has received significant criticism. For an overview of these issues see, Colin Heywood, 'Centuries of Childhood: An Anniversary-and an Epitaph?', *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 3 (2010), 341–65.
[2] A summary of these discussions can be found in Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), pp. 2–8.
[3] Ibid., pp. 92–101.
[4] Ibid., pp. 94–96.

translators are engaging with and being influenced by tropes of grief. In addition, each text will be contextualised against parental grief as it appears in other works. This paper will be divided into four sections, each based around the changes to a particular adapted text. First, we will examine the *Old English Orosius*, maternal grief, and revenge, then how parental grief is used to illuminate theological ideas in *Genesis A* and *Exodus*, before finally looking at the *Old English Boethius* and the literary motif of parents witnessing their child's death. Through the narrow lens of parental grief, it is possible to view a world of interrelated motifs and a rich textual tradition of depicting parental grief in the Old English corpus.

THE *OLD ENGLISH OROSIUS*, MATERNAL GRIEF, AND REVENGE

The first 'adaptation' this paper will examine is the *Old English Orosius*, which is a version of Paulus Orosius's *Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*, a fifth-century text. The Old English text runs to only five books instead of the original seven and contains many alterations, leading Janet Bately to describe it as a 'transformation' rather than a simple translation.[5] Malcolm Godden has proposed a likely date for the translation during the period 'substantially after 862' and before 930.[6] Simeon Potter has described some of these alterations as 'imaginative dramatization', in which speeches, motivations, and emotions have been added to make a more dramatic text.[7] Of interest here is one such change which expands on the maternal grief of Queen Thamyris, whose son is killed by King Cyrus of Persia.

In the *Old English Orosius*-version of the story, Cyrus invaded Scythia and was confronted by the young king and his mother Thamyris. The young Scythian king decided to advance to try and trap Cyrus, but he and his army were outwitted and killed by the Persians. His mother, Queen Thamyris, was

[5] Janet M. Bately, 'The Old English Orosius', in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. by Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 313–43 (p. 323).
[6] Malcolm Godden, *The Old English History of the World: An Anglo-Saxon Re-writing of Orosius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. xi–xii (quotation at p. xi).
[7] Simeon Potter, 'Commentary on King Alfred's Orosius', *Anglia*, 71 (1953), 385–437 (p. 410).

subsequently informed of the news of his death. In the Old English text, we are told she reacted thus:

> Heo ða seo cwen Dameris mid mycelre gnornunge ymb þæs cyninges slege hyre suna þencende wæs, hu heo hit gewrecan myhte.[8]

In this characterisation, Thamyris's great grief ('mycelre gnornunge') is the direct motivation for her desire to avenge her son, but in the Latin original she instead chooses to deal with her sorrow through vengeance rather than through weeping.

> Thamyris exercitu ac filio amisso uel matris uel reginae dolorem sanguine hostium diluere potius quam suis lacrimis parat. simulat diffidentiam desperatione cladis inlatae paulatimque cedendo superbum hostem in insidias uocat.[9]

Thamyris feels the sorrow expected of her as a mother, but Orosius highlights that she chooses an unexpected alternative, to lure Cyrus into a trap and kill him. The differences between the Latin original and the Old English translation are subtle, but they alter the way Thamyris is portrayed. For Orosius, she makes a choice to pursue revenge as an alternative to grieving. In contrast, the Old English translator links her grief directly to her decision to avenge her son. In the Latin, the expected response for a mother is grief and retreat; it is noteworthy and unusual that Thamyris chooses revenge instead and feigns her loss of confidence and despondency. The Old English translator does not see any surprise in the fact that Thamyris's grief leads to revenge: it is a logical

[8] *The Old English Orosius* ed. Janet Bately, EETS, Supplementary Series 6 (London: Published for EETS by the Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 44: 'Then the queen Thamyris with great grief about the king's, her son's, slaying thought of how she might avenge him'. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

[9] *Pauli Orosii Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*, ed. by Karl Zangemeister (Leipzig: Teubner, 1889), pp. 43–44: 'After losing her army and son, Thamyris made ready to assuage her sorrows as a mother and as a queen with the blood of her enemy rather than with her own tears. She pretended that she had lost confidence and was despondent because of the disaster, and, by slowly retreating, drew her arrogant foe into an ambush'. Translation by Andrew T. Fear, *Orosius: Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 85.

consequence of her emotions, and there is no need to portray them as feigned. This reflects the Old English translator's experience and perspective, in a fundamentally different cultural and literary framework to that of Orosius, in which grief was understood as a motive for revenge. For example, we can see a similar conceptual link between maternal grief and a desire for revenge in *Beowulf*, when Grendel's mother enacts revenge against the Danes for the killing of her monstrous son.[10]

Erin Sebo has compellingly argued for the grief of Grendel's mother as the main motivator for her desire for revenge against King Hrothgar.[11] Before her attack on Heorot, Grendel's mother is described as sorrow-minded ('galgmod'), and her journey to the hall as sorrowful ('sorhfulne').[12] Once her act of revenge is complete, the text makes no more mention of the mother's grief. Instead, it presents her as a confident combatant who becomes the aggressor when Beowulf seeks out her lair: her revenge has resolved her feelings of sorrow. There are strong similarities between the portrayal of Grendel's mother and the Old English version of Thamyris. Thamyris's confrontation with Cyrus likewise ends with the king's beheading, and the symbolic placing of his head in a bag full of human blood.[13] These lines in the *Old English Orosius* follow the Latin closely, and so this appears to be a literary trope common to the late antique and early medieval traditions (reflected, for example, in *Beowulf*).[14] When Beowulf and his men approach Grendel's mother's *mere* they are confronted by the decapitated head of Æschere. Beowulf beheads Grendel's mother, and then decapitates Grendel's corpse.[15] This is not to suggest a direct link between Thamyris and Grendel's mother, but rather that the translator of *Orosius* may have been

[10] *Beowulf*, ll. 1251–1650, in *Electronic Beowulf: Fourth Edition* ed. by Kevin Kiernan <http://ebeowulf.uky.edu > [accessed 27 March 2024].
[11] Erin Sebo, '*Ne Sorga*: Grief and Revenge in Beowulf', in *Anglo-Saxon Emotions: Reading the Heart in Old English Language, Literature and Culture*, ed. by Alice Jorgensen, Frances McCormack and Jonathan Wilcox (Farnham: Routledge, 2015), pp. 178–92 (p. 187).
[12] *Beowulf*, ll. 1277–78, ed. by Kiernan.
[13] *Old English Orosius*, ed. by Bately, p. 44.
[14] Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, trans. by Fear, p. 86.
[15] *Beowulf*, ll. 1420–21 and 1590, ed. by Kiernan.

drawing on an existing expectation, or literary trope, linking grief and violent revenge when rendering Thamyris's narrative.

There is another grieving mother in *Beowulf*, although one who does not take direct revenge against her son's killer. At the feast following Grendel's defeat, a *scop* sings of an ill-fated interaction between the Danes and the Frisians: the so called 'Finn Episode'.[16] The Danish princess Hildeburh had been married to the Frisian king Finn. During a visit from her brother Hnæf and his men, fighting broke out between Danes and Frisians. Hildeburh's brother and son were killed, and the poem contains an emotional description of the men's funeral and Hildeburh's lament at the loss of her kinsmen. Following this, Hnæf's successor Hengest kills Finn in retaliation, and Hildeburh is taken back with the Danes. There have been two main interpretations of Hildeburh in the Finn episode. On one hand, she has been seen as a passive victim in the violence of the Danes and Frisians, lacking agency and representing the grief and devastation produced by feuding culture.[17] Alternatively, her choice to place her son on her brother's pyre and her lament as they burn have been read as a deliberate call for Danish revenge against her husband Finn.[18] The funeral is viscerally described, with heads melting and wounds bursting open and spraying blood, serving to emphasise the tragedy of the situation. These descriptions are fanciful and do not reflect the actual way a body would burn on a pyre, suggesting a deliberate choice to portray the events shockingly.[19] As with Thamyris and Grendel's mother, Hildeburh is devastated by the deaths, lamenting ('gnornode') and singing mournful songs ('geomrode giddum') at the funeral.[20] If we view Hildeburh's actions as a deliberate provocation for Danish revenge, and we are told later that Hengest spends the winter thinking of

[16] *Beowulf*, ll. ll. 1071–1159, ed. by Kiernan.

[17] For example, Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), p. 300; Martin Camargo, 'The Finn Episode and the Tragedy of Revenge in *Beowulf*', *Studies in Philology*, 78.5 (1981), 120–34 (p. 126).

[18] For example, John Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 26; Leonard Neidorf, 'Hildeburh's Mourning and *The Wife's Lament*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 89.2 (2017), 197–204.

[19] Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in Beowulf: And the Structure of the Poem* (Manchester: University Press, 2000) pp. 54–55.

[20] *Beowulf*, ll. 1116–17, ed. by Kiernan.

'gyrnwræce' (literally, 'grief-revenge'), then again we see the link being made between maternal grief and revenge.[21]

The depiction of Thamyris in the *Old English Orosius* makes only slight changes from the Latin, but when compared with *Beowulf* there is a striking similarity between their presentation of maternal grief and revenge. This is not to suggest a direct relationship between the texts, but that they seem to be drawing on a similar idea of grief leading to a desire for violent revenge. Thamyris's grief exists as part of a wider literary world. When 'adapting' this part of *Orosius*, the translator understood Thamyris's revenge to be motivated by her grief rather than as an alternative to grieving. Perhaps this was informed by familiarity with the trope of grief and revenge in Old English. If we continue exploring these 'adaptations', we can see further changes that similarly align with wider ideas of grief.

GENESIS A, PATERNAL GRIEF, AND EXEGESIS

Turning from the grieving mothers of the *Old English Orosius* and *Beowulf*, we will now consider the emotional responses of fathers if *Genesis A*. *Genesis A* (and *B*) is an Old English poem contained in the Junius Manuscript alongside three other poems based on biblical narratives: *Exodus*, *Daniel*, and *Christ and Satan*. In this case, *Genesis A* is an 'adaptation' in that it retells the established narrative of *Genesis* with some alterations and additions. Of interest here is the way that emotions have been introduced to flesh out the motivations and feelings of the biblical characters. Britt Mize has observed that these 'subjectivizing moments', in which poets expand on characters' mentalities and emotions, are a traditional feature of Old English poetry, and appear frequently in *Genesis A*.[22] In this section we will look at two of these moments involving biblical fathers. Firstly, Adam's response to the death of Abel, and the birth of Seth; and secondly, Abraham's desire for, and inability to have, a son.

[21] *Beowulf*, ll. 1137.

[22] Britt Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities: The Old English Poetics of Mentality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), pp. 5–6 and 78–79.

After the death of Abel at Cain's hands and the birth of Seth in *Genesis A*, the poet has Adam give a speech expressing his emotional pain at the loss of his son and gratitude at the birth of another:

> […] Þa word acwæð
> ord moncynnes: "Me ece sunu sealde selfa
> sigora waldend, lifes aldor
> on leofes stæl, þæs þe Cain ofsloh,
> and me cearsorge mid þys magotimbre
> of mode asceaf þeoden user.
> Him þæs þanc sie!"[23]

The poet of *Genesis A* creates a version of Adam who is troubled with sorrow by Abel's death. A useful comparison, which underscores the uniquely enhanced emotions of Adam's word in *Genesis A*, is the text of the *Old English Heptateuch* for Genesis 4:25. In it, Adam merely says 'Drihten me sealde ðisne sunu for Abel ðe Cain oflsoh', a fairly literal translation of the biblical passage.[24] The *Genesis A* poet introduces Adam's love for Abel and the troubling sorrow ('cearsorge') that the death of his beloved son causes.

The addition of parental sorrow to the biblical narrative is not unique to this passage. Later in the text, Abraham is depicted as deeply distressed and sorrowful, not at losing his son, but at his inability to have another one. Abraham tells God 'ne sealdest þu me sunu, forðon mec, sorg dreceð, on sefan swiðe'.[25] Likewise, Sarah is 'sar on mode' ('sad in her mind') and 'ferhðcearig' ('troubled

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[23] *Genesis A*, ll. 1110–16, ed. by Martin Foys, Alex Fairbanks-Ukropen, Carsten Haas, Aaryn M. Smith and Kyle Smith, in *OEPF*: 'Then the head of mankind spoke words: "The Eternal Victory Ruler, Lord of All Life, has given me a son in place of the one I loved [i.e. Abel], that Cain slew, and with this child Our Prince has driven my troubling sorrow from my mind. Thanks be to him!"'.

[24] *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch: Ælfric's Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis*, ed. by S. J. Crawford, EETS, Original Series 160 (London: Published for EETS by Oxford University Press, 1922), pp. 81–417 (pp. 91–92): 'The Lord has given me this son for Abel who Cain slew'. Cf. Genesis 4:25: 'Posuit mihi Deus semen aliud pro Abel, quem occidit Cain' ('God hath given me another seed, for Abel whom Cain slew').

[25] *Genesis A*, ll. 2180–81, ed. by Foys, *et al.*: 'You have not given me a son, therefore sorrow afflicts me greatly in my mind'.

in spirit') at her inability to bear her husband a child.[26] As he did in the Adam episode, the poet of *Genesis A* inserts emotions into biblical narratives that are typically unemotional. The *Old English Heptateuch* (Genesis 15:2) records Abraham's words as so: 'þa cwæð Abram: "Eala þu min Drihten God, hwæt gyfst þu me? Ic fare butan bearnum"'.[27] The anxiety and sadness of Abraham comes from his concern about the future of his inheritance and legacy if he should fail to have a son. Adam too is facing a situation in which one of his sons is dead and the other a perpetual exile and, as such, neither can continue his line. He clearly has an emotional attachment to Abel who is described as beloved, but this concern for the future causes both men to be troubled and sorrowful. In both cases, it is only God who can resolve the situation by giving the men the sons that they desire. As before, when read alongside other Old English texts these adaptations illuminate how the trope of parental grief is employed by the *Genesis A* poet. By using early medieval exegesis to inform our reading of Adam and Abraham's sadness we can see how their grief is both literal and allegorical.

In early medieval exegesis, the birth of Seth was often identified as an allegory for Christ's death and the world's salvation. For example, in his commentary, *In Genesim*, Bede writes:

> And just as Abel having been killed by Cain signifies mystically that the Lord suffered, so Seth born in his place signifies that he was "aroused again" from death.[28]

When Adam speaks of his joy at the birth of Seth, the poem identifies him as the head of mankind ('ord moncynnes'), identifying him as representative of humanity. His grief can be read literally, as that of a parent losing his son, but also allegorically, as the sorrowful nature of the world prior to the resurrection. Frequently in early medieval texts the physical, fallen world is presented as one

[26] *Genesis A*, ll. 2215 and 2219.

[27] *Old English Heptateuch*, ed. by Crawford, p. 121: 'Then Abraham said: "Oh, my Lord God, what will you give me? I go without children"'. Cf. Genesis 15:2: 'Dixitque Abram: "Domine Deus, quid dabis mihi? ego vadam absque liberis"' ('And Abram said: "Lord God, what wilt thou give me? I shall go without children"').

[28] Bede, *On Genesis*, trans. by Calvin B. Kendall (Liverpool: University Press, 2008), p. 160.

of suffering and sorrow and is contrasted with the promised joyful world of heaven that awaits the righteous, discussed further in the following section. The birth of Seth cures Adam's 'cearsorge' ('anxious sorrow'), just as the resurrection provides a way for humanity to escape worldly pain. The parental grief of Adam is an acknowledgement of the pain of child loss, while also being a reminder of God's role in curing the grief of the world, and of the reader. In this way, the text's inclusion of Adam's parental grief engages with the theological notion of the world as inherently sorrowful, and of God as the only true salvation.

Just as Abel represents the crucified Christ, and Seth the resurrected Christ, so too do Abraham's two sons have exegetical significance. In the Epistle to the Galatians (4:21–31), Paul identifies Ishmael, Abraham's son by the servant Hagar, with the Old Covenant; while Isaac, Abraham's miraculous son by Sarah, is symbolic of the New Covenant, brought about through Christ. Paul's words are referenced by Bede in *In Genesim*:

> In Galatians the Apostle has discussed very fully how Hagar and Ishmael signify the Synagogue and the Old Covenant, just as Sarah and her son Isaac signify the Church and the New Covenant.[29]

In *Genesis A*, Abraham and Sarah's grief at their lack of a son prefigures the coming joy of Isaac, who represents the New Covenant and the possibility of salvation through Christ. This mirrors the sorrow of Adam at Abel's death, and his joy at the birth of Seth. Intriguingly, the language of *Genesis A* seems to link these two narratives together. In line 1108, Seth is described as a 'freolic to frofre' ('noble one as comfort'); in lines 2216–19, Sarah is pained that she cannot have a child with Abraham, which is described in the same terms as a 'freolic to frofre'. Of course, the theologically educated reader, or listener, would know that Sarah will have a 'freolic to frofre' in Isaac, her child by Abraham. Mize has noted that the phrase 'freolic to frofre' highlights a similar subjective position in the accounts of Adam and Sarah.[30] The phrase links the emotions of Adam and Sarah, while also linking the figures of Seth and Isaac, who are the two 'freolic to frofre'

[29] Bede, *On Genesis*, p. 278.
[30] Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*, pp. 52–53.

referred to. Literally, Adam, Abraham and Sarah are grieving parents, or potential parents, who are filled with anxiety and sorrow over their child's death, their inability to conceive, and their concern over continuing their lineage and legacy. Allegorically, the parents' emotions reflect the pain and suffering of the world without Christ and the hope of salvation. Seth and Isaac, the noble ones who bring comfort to their parents, both allegorically represent Christ's resurrection and the New Covenant, which brings comfort and salvation to the fallen world and humanity's suffering. As such, the paternal grief of Adam and Abraham can be read both literally and figuratively.

By emphasising Adam, Abraham, and Sarah's grief, the *Genesis A* poet not only creates a version of Genesis which conforms to traditional poetic expectations, but also a depiction that brings these characters into wider dialogue with literary and theological themes. The emotional suffering of parents is a common theme in Old English literature. By choosing to expand upon these emotions particularly, the parents of *Genesis A* begin to show similarities with those of *Beowulf*, the *Old English Orosius*, and the other texts that this article will discuss in the next section. Furthermore, within the poem itself the shared emotional distress of Adam, Abraham, and Sarah serves to connect their narratives together. Both sets of parents receive a child from God as comfort for their sadness and anxiety. Modelled in their experiences is the belief that God is the true solution to earthly grief, both the literal grief of the parents and the allegorical grief of the world. Parental grief serves to align *Genesis A* with the common tropes of Old English literature and early medieval theological discourse.

EXODUS, THE DEATH OF THE FIRST BORN, AND *TRISTITIA*

Genesis A is not the only biblical poem that engages with the theme of parental grief. *Exodus*, also in the Junius Manuscript, contains an unusually emotional portrayal of the Egyptians' reaction to the final plague and the deaths of their first-born sons (Exodus 12:29–30):

> hordwearda hryre, heaf wæs geniwad,
> swæfon seledreamas, since berofene.[31]

As with Adam's reaction to the death of Seth, rather than the straightforward, unemotional description of these events in the Exodus and its translation in the *Old English Heptateuch*, the *Exodus*-poet expands on the emotional devastation of the Egyptians at the death of their children.[32] Upon their deaths, the text relates that mourning is renewed ('heaf wæs geniwad') and in doing so engages with a formula for expressing intense loss found also in *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*.[33] Likewise, the poem also tells us that 'wop wæs wide, worulddreama lyt' ('weeping was wide, few worldly joys') underlining the intensity of the Egyptians' grieving. However, despite these similarities there is an important difference in the depiction of the Egyptians. Their grief is expressed through terms relating to the loss of worldly joys. In this passage, I have translated 'hordwearda' as 'the first-born' (following the Vulgate *primogenitus*), but it literally means 'treasure-guardians', reflecting how their deaths result in the ceasing of hall-joys ('seledreamas') and loss of treasure ('sinc').[34] As mentioned in the previous section, worldly-suffering and heavenly-joy are common motifs in Old English literature and theological texts.

We see this concept in line 93 of *The Wanderer*, when the sorrowful narrator asks '[h]wær sindon seledreamas' ('where are the hall joys?'), and in *Christ and Satan*, when Satan laments his exile from heaven.[35] In specific reference to paternal loss in *Beowulf*, King Hrethel chooses to give up mortal-joy ('gumdream') after the death of his son.

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[31] *Exodus*, ll. 35–36, ed. by Alex Fairbanks-Ukropen and Martin Foys, in *OEPF*: '[At] the destruction of the first-born, mourning was renewed, hall-joys dead, deprived of treasure'.
[32] *Old English Heptateuch*, ed. by Crawford, pp. 243–47.
[33] Elise Louviot, 'Grief, Resurrection & Renewal: *geniwad* in Old English Verse', *English Studies*, 102.8 (2021), 969–90 (pp. 973–76).
[34] 'hord-weard', in *Dictionary of Old English: A to I online*, ed. by Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2018) <https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/> [accessed 27 March 2024].
[35] *The Wanderer*, l. 93, ed. by Martin Foys, in *OEPF*. See also Katherine R. Norcross, 'Counter-Empathy and Elegiac Critique in the Old English *Christ and Satan*', *Philological Quarterly*, 96.2 (2017), 143–170.

> He ða mid þære sorhge, þe him swa sar belamp,
> gumdream ofgeaf, godes leoht geceas.[36]

Hrethel's choice follows his sorrow at seeing the wine-hall empty and 'reote berofene' ('deprived of joy'), as a result of his son's death.[37] The phrasing 'reote berofene' closely mirrors 'since berofene' ('deprived of treasure'), again part of line 36 in *Exodus* (see above). There is a clear similarity in the way the grief of Hrethel and the Egyptian is described, as both draw on a wider literary idea of sadness caused by the loss of worldly pleasures. The death of a first-born leaves the halls of their parents bereft and empty. However, this is not always portrayed as a helpful or healthy kind of grief.

For early medieval religious authors, earthly sadness was seen as a sign of the sin of *tristitia*.[38] For example, Ælfric of Eynsham describes the sin *tristitia* as being the kind of sadness suffered by people when they have suffered events, such as violent death, loss, or the passing of close friends:

> se seofoða heafodleahter is *tristitia* on leden, þæt is on englisc unrotnyss for mislicum gelimpum, þe mannum becymð on cwealme and on lyrum oððe on freonda forðsiðe.[39]

More generally, we see Old English poems such as *Deor*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Dream of the Rood* contrast the worldly-suffering of their characters with the peace and joy of God, with whom they can find resolution.[40] This is also a

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[36] *Beowulf*, ll. 2462–69, ed. by Kiernan: 'He then with his sorrow, that grief that happened to him, gave up mortal happiness, chose God's light'.

[37] Faulkner, 'Death and Treasure', p. 794.

[38] Christina Lee, 'De Profundis: Sadness and Healing', in *Emotional Alterity in the Medieval North Sea World*, ed. by Erin Sebo, Matthew Firth and Daniel Anlezark (Cham: Springer, 2023), pp. 151–70 (pp. 153–54).

[39] Ælfric, *Letter to Bishop Wulfstan*, ed. by Bernhard Fehr, in *Die Hirtenbriefe Ælfrics in Altenglischer Und Lateinischer Fassung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), pp. 210–11: 'The seventh cardinal sin is *tristitia* in Latin. That is in English *unrotnys* [sadness] because of various misfortunes which come to people, in plague and in losses or in the departure of friends'.

[40] Peter Stockwell, 'Cognitive Poetic Analysis: *The Dream of the Rood*', in his *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), pp. 82–88; Margret Gunnarsdóttir Champion, 'From Plaint to Praise: Language as Cure in "The Wanderer"', *Studia*

message preached by a number of homilies, both by Ælfric and others.[41] *Vercelli Homily I* contrasts the sorrow and unhappiness ('sorh and unblis') in this world, with the heavenly world without sorrow.[42] The sin of *tristitia*, or *unrotnes*, is discussed in *Vercelli Homily XX*, which says that this worldly-sadness will lead to the death of the soul: 'Ðonne is oðer, men ða leofstan, ðysse worulde unrotnes, seo gewyrcð deað þære sawle'.[43] As a final illustration, *Blickling Homily I* relates that Eve's original sin made it so 'þæt æghwylc man sceolde mid sare on þas world cuman, & her on sorhgum beon, & mid sare of gewitan' (cf. Genesis 3:16–17).[44] These texts span a range of genres and time periods, but they all express the idea that earthly-suffering can only be remedied by turning ones attention to God and future heavenly joys. Christ's birth and resurrection provide a way for the faithful to escape the sinful and painful material world.

The motif of the deprivation of the hall or of worldly joys intertwines with this idea of *tristitia*, portraying an over-attachment to the physical world contrasted with the pursuit of heavenly joy. In *The Wanderer*, the memories of the past and the *seledreamas* lead to the narrator's depression, and are only resolved at the end of the poem through turning to God.[45] Satan in *Christ and Satan* is similarly trapped in his misery by his longing for heaven, which is conceived in the poem as a wine-hall, having been deprived of joy by his rejection of Christ.[46] Hrethel's decision to choose God's light ('godes leoht geceas') and leave behind his *gumdream* is more difficult to interpret given the

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Neophilologica, 69.2 (1997), 187–202; Ruth Wehlau, '"Seeds of Sorrow": Landscapes of Despair in *The Wanderer*, Beowulf's Story of Hrethel, and *Sonatorrek*', *Parergon*, 15.2 (1998), 1–17; Anne L. Klinck, *Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), pp. 231–34.

[41] Lee, 'De Profundis', p. 154.

[42] *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, ed. by D. G. Scragg, EETS, Original Series 300 (London: Published for EETS by Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 26.

[43] Ibid., pp. 338–39: 'Then is the other, beloved people, this is worldly sadness, that makes death for the soul'.

[44] *The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century* ed. R. Morris, EETS, Original Series 58 (London: Published for EETS by Oxford University Press, 1874), p. 5: 'that every man should come with sadness into this world, live here in sadness, and with sadness depart'.

[45] *The Wanderer*, ll. 93, ed. by Foys.

[46] *Christ and Satan*, ll. 91–95, 136 and 182–86, ed. by Martin Foys, Kyle Smith, Aaryn M. Smith and Alex Fairbanks-Ukropen, in *OEPF*.

presumed paganism of Hrethel, but we can see similar phrasing used elsewhere in the corpus. In each of these cases, the individual is making a positive choice. In *Guthlac B*, Guthlac's soul leaves behind his body to seek glory in God's light ('in leoht godes sigorlean sohte'); in *The Death of Edgar* the king ended his earthly dreams ('eorðan dreamas') to choose other light ('ceas him oðer light'); and, in the *Fates of the Apostles* we are told that at his martyrdom Andrew chose long life and eternal light ('geceas langsumre lif, leoht unhwilen').[47] Considering this evidence, it seems that the idea of abandoning the worldly joys as a positive choice was a well-established trope for authors could use. To do so is a positive choice. In contrast, in the *Exodus*-poem, the Egyptians' grief is described in terms of the deprivation of material things. The Egyptians embody the sin of *tristitia* and of an unhealthy attachment to the world, their 'seledreamas' and 'worulddreama'. Like Satan, the Egyptians in *Exodus* were deprived of their joys by their rejection of God. This rejection is exemplified by their *tristitia* and their refusal to let the Israelites leave. As a result, the Egyptians are left bereft of their material wealth and worldly joy, and without God to provide them with a resolution (unlike King Hrethel or the Wanderer). The mourning of the Egyptians both reflects the devastation of losing a child, and their position as separated and punished by God.

The unhealthy grief of the Egyptians in *Exodus* can also be contrasted with the depictions of grieving parents in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*. Mindful of the dangers of the sin of *tristitia*, Ælfric contrasts the sorrow of the martyrs' parents with the saints' joy at his or her spiritual rewards in heaven. Saint Eugenia's mother weeps over her daughter's burial, 'ða weop seo modor mid mycelre sarnysse æt hyre byrgene', before seeing a vision of her daughter adorned with gold and accompanied by a heavenly host.[48] Eugenia comforts her mother and

[47] *Guthlac*, ll. 1366–70, ed. by George Philip Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, in *The Exeter Book* (London: Routledge, 1936), pp. 49–88; *The Death of Edgar*, ll. 1–4, ed. by E. V. K. Dobbie, in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (London: Routledge, 1942), p. 22; *The Fates of the Apostles*, l. 20, ed. by Aaryn M. Smith and Martin Foys, in *OEPF*.

[48] *Ælfric's Lives of Saints I*, ed. by Walter Skeat, EETS, Original Series 76, 2 vols (London: Published for EETS by Oxford University Press, 1881), II, pp. 48–51: 'Then wept the mother with great sadness at her grave'.

tells her she will depart and join her in heaven on Sunday.[49] Elsewhere, Saint Julian's mother comes to his martyrdom with 'mycelre sarnysse' ('great sadness'), before being told that she should not weep for him but for herself, as he will soon be in heaven.[50] Unusually, Saint Agnes appears in a vision to her parents, who are specifically described as not weeping for her, to warn them that they should not weep at her death, but instead rejoice: 'þa cwæð seo halige agnes to hire magum ðus warniað þæt ge ne wepon me swa swa deade. ac blyssiað mid me'.[51] As opposed to the sinful Egyptians of *Exodus*, the martyrs of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* are the perfect embodiment of Christian values, and their hagiographies were intended to both illustrate their sanctity and to serve as models for how people should live piously. In these accounts, the grief of the parents highlights the love they have for the martyred saint, and this models the veneration and love the reader should likewise have for the saints. The martyrs' admonishment of their parents not to weep illustrates how, as saints, they have transcended their attachment to the world and turned their attention to the rewards of heaven, which they readily recieve. Again, this models how the reader should respond to loss and sadness in the material world, finding comfort and reassurance in heaven.

As with *Genesis A*, the depiction of parental grief in these texts intertwines emotion and theology. The grief of the Egyptians creates a version of *Exodus* which aligns with poetic expectations and traditions. Reading the text alongside other Old English works also shows us how the Egyptians' grief interacts with theological discourse around the correct nature of sadness. Unlike Hrethel, the Wanderer, Ælfric's martyrs, or the parents of *Genesis A*, the Egyptians cannot find resolution to their grief. Instead, they remain attached to their worldly losses and continue to sin against God and the Israelites. While the other texts discussed here provide a model for real grieving parents to emulate, the Egyptian's serve as a warning of the dangers of over attachment. The popularity of the motif of parental grief in Old English literature allowed authors to communicate

[49] *Ælfric's Lives of Saints I*, pp. 50–51.
[50] Ibid., pp. 108–9.
[51] Ibid., pp. 184–85: 'Then said the holy Agnes to her parents. Beware that you do not weep for me as if dead, but rejoice with me'.

theological messages about the appropriateness of sadness, as well as to create versions of received narratives that align with Old English genre expectations.

THE *OLD ENGLISH BOETHIUS* AND UNRIPE DEATH IN YOUTH

My final example, the *Old English Boethius*, similarly reflects the persistence of parental grief as a feature of Old English literature and will be used here to examine the recurring motif of parents witnessing their children's death. An Old English adaptation of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* exists in a prose and prosimetrum version, both containing numerous changes from the Latin versions.[52] Of interest here is a particular line inserted into both versions. In it, personified Wisdom and Reason tell Boethius that the greatest gift to mortal men is that their sons are alive and are healthy, and that 'mænegum men is leofre þæt he ær self swelte ær he gesio his wif and his bearn sweltende'.[53] The assertion that many men would rather die than see their wife and child dying is unique to the Old English rendition of the text, but further reinforces Wisdom's argument that Boethius has no reason to weep as he and his family are still alive. For the early medieval reader, this argument may have seemed somewhat ironic given that Boethius and his father-in-law Symmachus would soon be executed.[54] Perhaps the additional statement that it is better for a man to die than to watch his family die is intended to acknowledge Boethius's execution while still arguing that he has no reason to be sad. Where the inspiration for this statement came from is unclear. There has been much debate as to whether King Alfred translated the *Old English Boethius* himself, and a highly speculative possibility would be that the line is based on his own experience of losing several children in infancy, which is recorded in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*.[55] However, in

[52] Paul E. Szarmach, 'Boethius's influence in Anglo-Saxon England: The Vernacular and the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*', in *A Companion to Boethius in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Noel Harold Kaylor and Philip Edward Phillips (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 221–54.

[53] *The Old English Boethius: An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Susan Irvine, 2 vols (Oxford: University Press, 2009), I, pp. 259 and 402: 'Many a man would rather die himself than see his wife and child dying'. Translation by ibid., II, pp. 15 and 109.

[54] *Old English Boethius*, ed. by Godden and Irvine, II, p. 259.

[55] *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of Alfred and other contemporary sources,* trans. by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 75; Nicole G. Discenza, 'The Old English

keeping with the arguments of this paper, it is possible it was inspired by another recurring motif of parental grief. More specifically, in the theme of a parent watching the death of their child, which as we will see recurs across Old English hagiography and poetry.[56]

Turning first to hagiographical texts, the pain of child death can be seen in the *Old English Martyrology*'s account of Saint Felicity. The text says she was far greater than an ordinary martyr, as she 'died' seven times, once for each of her sons:

> Þeos wyduwe ys mare þonne martyre; heo onsende hyre seofen suna to heofena rice; swa oft heo wæs dead beforan hyre sylfre.[57]

Similarly, Ælfric's homily *On the Purification of Saint Mary* describes the Virgin Mary as a spiritual martyr. When Christ was taken and crucified his suffering of the body was her suffering of the mind and this was a far greater torment than if she had been martyred:

> heo wæs mare ðonne martyr, forðon þe mare wæs hyre modes þrowung þonne wære hire lichaman, gif heo gemartyrod wære.[58]

For both the Virgin Mary and Saint Felicity, the experience of watching their sons' violent deaths is far worse than if they were to be merely martyred or crucified themselves. In these comments, we see the same understanding of

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Boethius', in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. by Nicole G. Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 200–26.

[56] For the biographical interpretation, see *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of Alfred and other contemporary sources,* trans. by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 75; Nicole G. Discenza, 'The Old English Boethius', in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. by Nicole G. Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 200–26.

[57] *The Old English Martyrology*, ed. by Christine Rauer, in *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation and Commentary* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), p. 218: 'This widow is greater than a martyr; she sent her seven sons to the kingdom of heaven; she died as many times, before [she died] herself'. Translation from ibid., p. 219.

[58] *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe, 2 vols (London: Ælfric Society, 1844), II, pp. 146–47: 'She was more than a martyr, because the suffering of her mind was more than her body's would have been, if she had been martyred'.

parental grief as expressed by the additional sentence in the *Old English Boethius*, that it is worse to witness a child die than to die oneself.

Alongside the brief statements in the Old English Boethius and hagiographical literature we also have several more graphic depictions of parents bearing witness to their child's death and the emotional pain this causes. The clearest example of this is the *Fortunes of Men*, a poem included in the Exeter Book which reflects on the process of child rearing, and the potential fates awaiting offspring in the world. The intended message of the poem and its overall theme has provoked much scholarly debate. The majority of commentators have interpreted the poem as a reflection of man's helplessness in the face of God and nature. For example, Jill Hamilton Clements has argued for a specific interest in 'sudden death', while Leonard Neidorf has drawn out a theme of control and mastery.[59] Regardless of the overall message, what is clear is that the *Fortunes of Men* harnesses the motif of parental grief to convey its meaning. For example, we are told of a woman who sees her child consumed by fire:

> Sum on bæle sceal brondas þencan,
> fretan frecne lif fægne monnan;
> þær him lifgedal lungre weorðeð,
> read reþe gled; reoteð meowle,
> seo hyre bearn gesihð brondas þeccan.[60]

The mother in this passage is forced to watch her child's death, described in vivid detail, with no other recourse than to weep. Clearly, the mother experiences

[59] Jill Hamilton Clements, 'Sudden Death in Early Medieval England and the Anglo-Saxon *Fortunes of Men*', in *Dealing with the Dead: Mortality and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Thea Tomaini (Carol Stream: Brill, 2018), pp. 36–67; Leonard Neidorf, 'The Structure and Theme of the *Fortunes of Men*', *English* Studies, 101.2 (2020), 97–111. For a summary of the scholarship in which the poem's theme is identified as helplessness, see Neidorf, 'The Structure and Theme', 97–98.

[60] *Fortunes of Mortals*, ll. 43–47, ed. by Robin Cummins and Martin Foys, in *OEPF*: 'One fire shall do to death on the pyre; greedy flame shall consume the doomed man, red fierce incandescence, where severance from life comes quickly, and the woman weeps who sees the flames engulf her child'. Translation from S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Orion, 1982), p. 342.

deep emotional pain at the death of her child.[61] We see a similar idea appear in *Beowulf*, when, as an analogy to Hrethel's grief at his son's death, an old man is described as watching his son on the gallows:[62]

> Swa bið geomorlic gomelum ceorle
> to gebidanne þæt his byre ride
> giong on galgan. Þonne he gyd wrece,
> sarigne sang, þonne his sunu hangað
> hrefne to hroðre, 7 he him helpan ne mæg […][63]

There is in fact a direct parallel between this description and the *Fortunes of Men*, although in the latter there is no parental figure watching on. One of the possible fates is that 'sum sceal on geapum galgan ridan' and will have a 'hrefn nimeþ heafodsyne'.[64]

Common to both these examples is the inability of parents to control what happens to their children, even though, as *Boethius* says, a father would rather die than see his child suffer that fate. The old man in *Beowulf* can do nothing to help his executed son, regardless of his age and wisdom; likewise, the idea that children will suffer, despite careful nurturing, is prominent in *The Fortunes of Men*. This theme is picked up and expanded upon in the Old English poem *Solomon and Saturn II*, a fictional dialogue between King Solomon and Saturn, prince of the Chaldeans. *Solomon and Saturn II* says of a mother that:

> Oft heo to bealwe bearn afedeð,
> seolfre to sorge, siððan dreogeð

[61] Christina Lee, 'Forever Young: Child Burial in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. by Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Boston: Brill, 2008), p. 22.
[62] Cf. *Beowulf*, ll. 2445–50, ed. by Kiernan. First discussed in Dorothy Whitelock, '*Beowulf* 2444–71', *Medium Ævum*, 8.3 (1939), 198–204.
[63] *Beowulf*, ll. 2445–49, ed. by Kiernan: 'Just as it is miserable for an old man to live to see that his son in youth rides the gallows. Then he makes a dirge, a sorrowful song, that his son hangs as comfort to ravens, and he cannot help him […]'
[64] *Fortunes of Mortals*, ll. 33 and 36, ed. by Cummins and Foys: 'some shall ride on capacious gallows' and 'a raven take [their] eyes'.

his earfoðu, orlegstunde.[65]

Despite the careful raising of the child, Solomon, the speaker in this section of the poem, states that the child will go on to cause great sorrow. Ultimately Solomon concludes that:

> Forðan nah seo modor geweald, ðonne heo magan cenneð,
> bearnes blædes, ac sceall on gebyrd faran
> an æfter anum.[66]

These passages share similar ideas to those of *Beowulf* and the *Fortunes of Men* mentioned above. The mother is unable to control the fate of her child, just as the hanged man's father can do nothing to help his son and the fate is shown to be beyond the hands of human control in the *Fortunes of Men*. While the subject matter of these poems may otherwise seem quite different, they are unified in their depictions of the helplessness of parents to control their child's fate and the sorrow that this causes.

Another important element of the grief is death in youth. The unnaturalness of a young person's death is shown by Ælfric, when he writes of three kinds of death: the *bitera* ('bitter') death of children, the *ungeripod* ('unripe') death of youth, and the *gecyndelica* ('natural') death of the old.[67] In the description of the hanged man in *Beowulf*, the youth of the son is directly contrasted with the age of his father watching on. Similarly to the *Old English Boethius*, the *Beowulf* poet relates that it is a miserable experience to see one's son perish. This is particularly painful partly because the unnaturalness of the younger dying before the older. This unnaturalness is further strengthened by the violence and suddenness of the deaths discussed, whether the children are martyred, executed,

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[65] *Solomon and Saturn I*, ll. 195–97, ed. and trans. by Daniel Anlezark, in *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2009), p. 88: 'Often she nurtures the fierce one for ruin, to her own sorrow, later endures his torment at the fated hour'. Translation from ibid., p. 89.

[66] Ibid., ll. 206–8, p. 88: 'Therefore the mother does not have control, when she gives birth to her son, over her child's success – but one must go after the other in birth'. Translation from ibid., p. 89.

[67] Victoria Thompson, *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), pp. 10–11.

or fall foul to one of the multitude of scenarios in the *Fortunes of Men*. Jill Hamilton Clements notes that 'a "good death" in the Middle Ages was not a quick death', as time was needed to get one's earthly and spiritual affairs in order.[68] In early medieval England, 'sudden death' was of great concern and something to be avoided, as evidenced by the late Old English *Prayer Against Sudden Death*, extant in three eleventh-century manuscripts.[69] With this in mind, the death of the children in these texts becomes even more distressing for their parents, and serves as a reminder to real parents to make sure that they and their children are following God's word.

While these examples come from a range of textual genres and varying dates, they share strong similarities in their presentation of the experience of a parent witnessing their child's death. The emotional turmoil of the parent, the unnaturalness of such an event, and the cruelty of fate typify these depictions. As the previous sections have likewise shown, there appear to be common ideas and motifs of parental grief that span across Old English literature regardless of genre or type.

CONCLUSION

Throughout Old English literary texts there is a persistent interest in parental grief. Through the lens of 'adapted' texts it is possible to see how translators and authors have introduced such ideas to their work. Thamyris's pursuit of revenge for her son's death becoming a consequence of her grief, the fathers of *Genesis A* grieve for their lost and desired sons, the Egyptians of the *Exodus* poem grieve for their first born and worldly treasures, and Wisdom tells Boethius about the pain of witnessing a child die. These inclusions align these texts with depictions of parental grief in more 'original' Old English works, as well as allowing authors to explore early medieval theological and philosophical ideas. In turn, this suggests the strength and appeal of parental grief as a theme for authors, as does the appearance of grieving parents in a wide range of genres from varying time

[68] Clements, 'Sudden Death', p. 37.
[69] Ibid., p. 46.

periods. Regardless of whether it was always viewed as appropriate for early medieval parents to grieve for their child, a parent's emotional distress is a powerful and frequently reoccurring literary theme.