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Jasmine Bria

The Plights of an Ageing King: Old Age in Layamon's Depiction of King Leir

Ageing, just like any other complex period of life, can be experienced and therefore portrayed in a variety of ways. The appraisal of this late stage of human existence by poets, philosophers, and other visual artists usually depends upon their narrative's aims. Layamon's *Brut* is a chronicle-style account of legendary events involving the monarchs of Britain. Among the various approaches to power and ideas of kingship represented in the poem, the story of Leir — a king who prepares to succession after reigning for more than sixty years and asks his daughters how much they love him – takes on a pivotal role. As a matter of fact, the king's actions can be used to detect a form of ideal kingship, a primary concern that emerges from the *Brut*'s pages. This paper aims to explore the modalities through which Layamon depicts a king in his advanced years, thus raising fundamental concerns about all the issues that medieval kings faced once they reached old age.

[Layamon; Middle English; King Leir; ageing; kingship]

The experience of ageing is unique to each individual, as should be the modalities in which writers depict it. Yet in the Middle Ages, notwithstanding the question of the writing self and the authenticity of the first-person voice[1], old age is represented by literary *topoi* which do not necessarily reflect the actuality of the experience. Depictions of the ageing process usually blend vocabulary, attitudes, and images drawn from Classical and Late Ancient sources but also reflect the author's narrative aim[2].

[1] Medieval literature prefers to convey the human experience in its archetypal aspect, rather than as a personalized sequence of events, with the allegorical side of things taking precedence over the specific situation. As argued by, among others, Birge Vitz (1973: 51): "when speaking of himself, the writer was expected to transform himself, both aesthetically and morally, into a symbol of humanity as a whole, or, at the very least, of an entire class of men". For more on this, cf. also Spitzer 1946: 414-422.

[2] Cf. Dutton 1990: 75; Janssen 2007: 440; Feros Ruys 2007: 173. Furthermore, as noted by Classen (2007: 6) the notion of *old age* was often posited at the core of different conventional ideas and medieval intellectuals found the issue interesting as both a complex period of life and as part of the learned discourse inherited from classical antiquity. Cf. also Burrow 1988: 5-53.

Layamon's *Brut* is a sixteen-thousand-verse epic poem, extant in two 13th-century manuscripts[3] possibly composed between 1185 and 1205[4]. It narrates the events surrounding the mythical origins of Britain and its legendary history: starting from the journey of Brutus, Aeneas's grandson and the eponymous founder of the British people, the poem describes a long series of kingdoms, dynastic conflicts, and invasions until the reign of the last British king, Cadwalader, in the 7th century. Exemplifying the survival of the English literary language in the immediate aftermath of the Norman conquest, the poem is an English adaptation of Wace's *Roman de Brut*, an Old French poetic version of the prose-text *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

The range of events covered is vast. Layamon mentions a total of one hundred and fourteen distinct British monarchs[5], each with varying degrees of significance: some characters are simply mentioned, whilst others, such as Vortigern and Arthur, are central figures in longer narrative arches that cover thousands of words. Organized in this way, the poem mostly presents a chronicle-style narration and has thus been interpreted as lacking uniformity. Nonetheless, one of the main themes underlying the narration is the role of the monarch: Layamon's chief preoccupations regard the main qualities a good sovereign must possess and how to ensure a stable and fruitful kingdom. The *Brut* finds a unifying aspect in what seems to be the search for an *ideal kingship* (cf. Sheppard 2000: 52-60). Thus, the question as to what happens when a sovereign reaches the later stages of life and is not able to fulfil his duty informs the entire poem.

[3] Both codices belong to the Cotton collection of the British Library: London B. L. Cotton Caligula A. IX and London B. L. Cotton Otho C. XIII. The C manuscript contains the longest version of the poem; it uses an extremely archaic vocabulary, while the text in O is significantly shorter and lexically more in tune with 13th century English. For an in-depth study of ms C cf. Ker 1963; for ms O cf. Bryan 1999. For a lexical analysis of both manuscripts cf. Elseweiler 2011.

[4] In 1155, Wace completed his poem. The only clue regarding the composition of Layamon's translation can be deduced from the text itself. Any references to current events in the poem are few and often hard to discern. The only certain temporal reference is that of the relics of the Irish saints Columbkille, Brendan, and Bridget, 'discovered' in 1185, referenced in ll. 11179-81. Hence the poem could not have been written before 1185. A significant clue to posit the *terminus ad quem* is suggested in l. 15965. This alludes to King John's resistance to the collection of Peter Pence, a tribute due to the Church of Rome, an allusion that would seem unnecessary if the compilation of the poem were to extend beyond 1205. Cf. Le Saux 1989: 8; Corsi Mercatanti 1984: 306.

[5] As counted by Alamichel 2003: 265.

1. Elderly monarchs in the Middle Ages

Historically, the stability of a kingdom in medieval times did not rely on the administrative organization, but mostly on the personal and military power of the sovereign. The issues related to old age and decaying health were serious complications for a medieval monarch: significantly, these matters could easily become political. In an effort to reveal how the Carolingian state started to fall apart during the 9th century, Dutton (1990: 75-94 and 2004: 151-168) convincingly argues that the difficulties faced by Carolingian kings – Charlemagne, Louis the Pious and Louis the German – began with their entering the latter stage of life.

An elderly monarch in the Middle Ages was generally confronted with three main issues. Firstly, there was the question of physical mobility: an old monarch would be less likely to undertake his usual journeys across the realm. Touring one's dominions was one of the critical activities ascribed to medieval sovereigns since it was crucial in order to maintain authority over one's territories, especially those that were most distant from the central power. A king reluctant to travel was more prone to face dissatisfaction and uprisings among his subjects. Secondly, as a consequence of these sedentary habits, old monarchs were usually less likely to anticipate and respond to internal rebellions or foreign invasions. Elderly kings could hardly lead armies and thus might become liabilities on the battlefield. Finally, a third, critical problem encountered by elderly monarchs concerned their succession: the longer a monarch reigns, the more unstable his heirs may become; thus, the ageing king may encounter several difficulties in ensuring a secure succession for their heirs while also keeping those same heirs in place[6].

In Layamon's continuous battle-centred narration of British history, very few monarchs had the chance to reach old age; nonetheless, on at least three occasions the *Brut* illustrates the complications consequent upon a king's advanced age: most significantly, the episode depicting King Leir (ll. 1480-1880) delves into a succession crisis, but the last years in the reigns of Octaves (ll. 5680-5801) and Uther (ll. 9620-9880) also expose some of the drawbacks of old age for a king.

In particular, while Leir and Octaves had to choose a successor, Uther suffered a rebellion by the end of his reign. Having secured a safe succession thanks to the birth of two heirs, Arthur and Anna (safely married off to Lot), Uther reigns peacefully until old age brought with it an annoying disease for the king. This inevitably caused unrest among the Britons (ll. 9621-9626) and offered the imprisoned Saxon Octa a chance to sway them toward his cause (ll. 9627-9670).

[6] For further readings cf. also Porck 2019: 178-181.

Layamon highlights more than once the arrogance of the Britons, caused by their disrespect for the king's old age:

> Bruttes hafden muchel mode and vnimete prute,
> and weoren æielese for þas kinges alde[7].

Uther here is enduring the same difficulties of mobility delineated by Dutton: unable to show himself in his dominions for a long period of time, he is forced to deal with the malcontent of his subjects. Even if Uther has become a 'crippled man', as he is ungraciously called by his enemies[8], he overcomes this by building a horse-litter for his travels and by flaunting his authority: he summons each male subject (ll. 9691-9698) and leads his army from his horse-litter, thus eventually suppressing all attempts at rebellion.

> And þas word sæide Vðer þe alde:
> 'Sexisce men me habbeoð for hene ihalden,
> mine unhæle me atwiten mid heore hoker-worden,
> for ich wes here ilad inne horse-bere,
> and sæiden þat ich wes ded and mi duȝeðe aswunden.
> And nu is muchel sellic isiȝen to þissere riche,
> þat nu haueð þeos dede king þas quiken aqualden;
> and summe he heom flæmde uorð mid þan wedere!
> Nu iwurðen herafter Drihttenes wille!'[9]

Therefore, even though Uther has to endure the same difficulties as any other elderly monarch, he is portrayed as being perfectly able to conquer them. Layamon seems particularly keen to highlight the peculiarity of Uther's claim to power, which is sanctioned by God's will. Having generated a strong male heir[10],

[7] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 498, ll. 9685-86; "The British had great spirit and excessive pride and, because of the king's old age, were not the least in awe of him" (*ibidem*: 499).
[8] As in line 9720, where his opponents have given him the unpleasant epithet "Vðer þe lome mon".
[9] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 502, ll. 9775-9783; "The aged Uther uttered these words: 'The men of Saxony have treated me with contempt, taunting me with my infirmity in their scornful words because I was brought here in a horse-litter, and saying that I was dead and my followers helpless. And now a great marvel has come to pass in this kingdom, in that this dead king has now killed those living men; and some he drove before him like the wind! Now may God's will be done hereafter!'" (*ibidem*: 503).
[10] The crucial role assumed by Uther's son, Arthur, cannot be overstated, both in the chronicles of Britain since Geoffrey's narration and in the character's ensuing fame. The events leading to Arthur's birth are also a major plot point in the *Brut*, because they implicate both political questions and supernatural interventions (ll. 9433-9514).

Uther is exempt from any uncertainty about delivering a peaceful succession. On the contrary, this crucial motif informs the section on Octaves' last years and, significantly, the Leir episode.

Octaves (ll. 5583-5808) is depicted by Layamon as a Welsh duke who declares himself King of Britain in defiance of Roman power. After encountering several difficulties, Octaves eventually succeeds in his insurrection since, while hiding in Norway, his allies in Britain manage to assassinate Trahern, the great uncle of Emperor Constantine. When Octaves returns, he disperses the Roman legions and reclaims the crown. After twenty-two years of peaceful life, however, the old and debilitated Octaves, who does not have any male heirs, is confronted with the dilemma of finding a successor. To solve this conundrum, the king summons parliament. Eventually, one of his thanes suggests that the king should marry his only daughter to the new Roman Emperor, Maximien, thereby uniting the British and Roman crowns. It appears that here Layamon portrays Octaves' actions as particularly apt for a worthy king. Octaves accepts the advice of his retainers and, having listened carefully, he acts accordingly, thus ensuring a safe and peaceful succession to his kingdom.

It might be argued that King Octaves, who accepts the wise counsel of his retainers, has learnt his lesson from his ancestor, Leir, who was instead unable to discern honesty from falsity in the words of his daughters and, as a consequence, lost all his faithful thanes.

2. Old King Leir and his daughters

The folkloric tale of a king who demands his three daughters how much they love him can be found in numerous cultures[11]. In these legends, the quality of the daughters' love is often expressed through food-related comparisons. The eldest daughter associates her filial affection with honey, the second with sugar, and the youngest with salt. The response of the third daughter enrages the father**,** who reacts by forcing the girl to marry a poor passer-by. In some accounts, the monarch admits his error after eating a dish without salt; finally, he fully understands the meaning of his daughter's words. More often than not, the story ends with a reconciliation between the two.

In the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the king who makes this error of judgment is Leir, identified by Geoffrey as an English sovereign of the 8th century BCE.

[11] A collection of thirteen different versions (from England, France, Italy, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Pakistan) has been compiled by Ashliman (1998-2022) and can be consulted online <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/salt.html>.

The main plot of the tale is, therefore, passed down from Geoffrey to Wace and eventually to Layamon. Within the chronology of the poem, Leir of Britain is the sixth king after Brutus, the founder of the city of Kaer Leir, also known as Leicester[12]. Layamon's story begins when Leir decides that the time has come to think about succession. The king intends to partition his dominions among his three daughters, Gornoille, Ragau and Cordoille, but he first of all asks to know which of the three girls loves him the most. His intention is to give the best part of the kingdom to the daughter who would prove to love him more.

In all versions of the text, the king mentions old age as the reason for his decision to marry off his daughters and to divide his kingdom between them. Geoffrey (II.139-41) specifies:

> Cumque in senectutem uergere coepisset, cogitauit regnum suum ipsis diuidere easque talibus maritis copulare qui eadem cum regno haberunt[13].

Wace follows the Latin text in depicting Leir as an aged king, but focuses primarily on the necessity of marriage:

> Quant Leïr alques afebli
> Come li huem ki enveilli,
> Comensa sei a purpenser
> De ses treis filles marier
> Ce dist qu'il les mariereit
> E sun reign lui partireit[14].

Layamon adopts the same narrative framework but focuses more on the effect of the succession crisis and the fate of the kingdom: Leir's preoccupation is merely with dividing the kingdom among the three female heirs according to their degree of filial attachment.

In the *Brut* the events regarding each monarch are organized in a rather specific structure: following a direction derived from Wace's poem, Layamon generally narrates the sovereign's rise to power first, followed by all relevant events, i.e. war campaigns, weddings, and treasons, before describing how power is transferred

[12] He is the fourth in a series of founders of cities after Ebrauc, founder of York (l. 1334), Leil, founder of Carlisle (l. 1388) and Bladud, founder of Bath (l. 1241). Cf. Tiller 2013: 155.
[13] Reeve/Wright 2007: 37, 39; "When Leir began to grow old, he decided to share his kingdom with them and give them husbands worthy of themselves and their realm" (*ibidem*: 36, 38).
[14] Weiss 2002: 42, ll. 1675-78; "When Leir became rather feeble, as a man does on growing old, he began to think of marriages for his three daughters. He said he would marry them off and divide the kingdom between them" (*ibidem*: 43).

from one monarch to the other. The sections previously mentioned depict Octaves and Uther as strong young rulers: their ageing is an ensuing complication occurring after peaceful years and an additional reason for conflict. By contrast, the Leir episode is entirely focused on the king's relationship with his daughters and the succession crisis: here, the king's old age is the starting point of the narrative. In choosing to represent the transition from one sovereign to another, Layamon explores the processes and institutions through which a monarch is chosen. The author suggests that the virtues that allow a noble to ascend to the throne are the same ones that make him a worthy ruler[15].

Old age is thus a crucial element throughout this episode and it is a feature regularly applied to the king. The text informs us that, after actively founding his eponymous city, Leir reigned on the island for more than sixty years (ll. 1452, 1460). Layamon, just like his precursors, emphasises the king's age from the very start:

> Þa ældede the king and wakede an aðelan,
> and he hine biþohte wet he don mahte
> of his kineriche æfter his deie[16].

Furthermore, the poet defines Leir as "þe alde king" or variants[17] at least eight times, and allows him to express himself on the subject. While interrogating his first daughter, Leir explains his reasoning for stepping back and says:

> Ic eam for mire ælde swþe unbalded[18].

Leir feels himself to be *unbalded*, meaning 'less bold' or 'weakened, enfeebled' (cf. *MED*, s.v. *unbalden*). In a similar way, ælde and the verb *unbalden* are coupled later on, when describing King Octaves' reasons to abdicate ("vnhæle and ælde hæueð þene king vnbalded"[19]), suggesting an inevitable correlation between old age and weakness. Nonetheless, Leir's downfall is not caused by his physical frailty but, rather, by his intellectual dimness. Layamon built the episode out of

[15] The story of Leir therefore acquires particular relevance within the structure of the *Brut* as it allows us to understand the criteria according to which a monarch can be able to rule. Cf. Sheppard 2000: 50-65.
[16] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 76, ll. 1470-74; "Then the king grew old and weakened in authority, and he considered how he might provide for his kingdom after his lifetime" (*ibidem*: 77).
[17] The adjective for *old* is associated with Leir in ll. 1478; 1490, 1499, 1510, 1517, 1549, 1610, 1694, ms C uses *alde, olde, halde* while ms O uses the standardized orthography *holde.*
[18] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 78, l. 1493; "Because of my old age I am much enfeebled" (*ibidem*: 79).
[19] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 296, l. 5760; "Age and sickness had enfeebled the king" (*ibidem*: 297).

an opposition among two different criteria for developing royal authority: Leir's perception binds the nature of kingship to the possession of the land while his daughter Cordoille understands kingship as being derived from the ability to build solid bonds of trust between a ruler and his retainers. Leir's high regard for his skill to run the country informs the way he addresses the succession dilemma (cf. Sheppard 2000: 53). His primary aim is to secure the kingdom's protection after his death, which would be best ensured if the monarch had a son capable of safeguarding the country. Thus, when Leir decides to leave the kingdom to his daughters, he does so with the intent to find them a husband. Leir's actions, however, disrupt the unity of the land and of its people and also cause the progressive loss of his followers, thus marking his destitution from authority. Unlike Octaves, who acts in accordance with the advice of his retainers, Leir's decision is his own. The English poet firstly portrays the king while he is meditating on this resolution within himself:

> He seide to himsuluen þat þat vuel wes:
> 'Ic wlle mine riche todon allen minen dohtren
> and ȝeuen hem mine kineþeode and twemen mine bearnen.
> Ac ærst ic wille fondien whulchere beo mi beste freond.
> and heo scal habbe þat beste del of mine drihlichen lond'[20].

This speech, which Tiller (2013: 161) describes as "an overt dramatisation of Leir's arrogance and self-deception", is one of Layamon's personal additions to Leir's characterization and explicitly reveals the king's erroneous belief in his capacity to detect truth. Reading the episode alongside Layamon's sources, particularly Wace, it is evident that the English poet approaches Leir's narrative with the aim of increasing its dramatic tone, as demonstrated by the more extensive use of dialogue[21].

In so doing, Layamon allows us to witness Leir's daughters trying to flatter and deceive the old man's deteriorating mind. In order to satisfy their father's requests, the two eldest children, Gornoille and Ragau, respond with words chosen carefully and Leir is portrayed as being unable to determine their manipulative language. The theme of opposing honesty against a mere semblance of honesty is crucial in all the three versions of the story; however, what is especially sig-

[20] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 76, ll. 1470-74; "He said to himself something which was ill-conceived: 'I will divide my kingdom among all my daughters and give my realm to them, sharing it among my children. But first I will determine which one is best disposed towards me, and she shall have the best part of my realm'" (*ibidem*: 77).
[21] As usual in Layamon's treatment of Wace's material. Cf. Le Saux 1989: 49-58.

nificant is how Layamon mingles this play between truth and the appearance of truth with the perceived representation of Leir's advanced age.

Unlike his precursors, the *Brut*'s poet chooses to comment explicitly on his characters' actions; as already mentioned, the author describes Leir's decision to divide the kingdom as *vuel* ('ill-conceived', 'evil', or 'wrong', l. 1470) and, later on (l. 1510), the monarch's questioning of his daughters is branded as *sothscipe* 'silliness' (or *folie* 'foolishness, folly' in ms O). Moreover, while Geoffrey simply describes Leir as a gullible man[22], Layamon expands on Wace's lines regarding the cunning abilities of his daughters: for instance, in the light of Wace's observation that Gornoille has a great aptitude in deceitfulness (l.1691: "Mult par ert plaine de veisdie"), Layamon remarks more than once the malice behind the countenance of the two eldest daughters. Both resort to falsehood (l. 1482: "lesinge") in order to flatter the king. Thus, to their father's appeal for truthful words (l. 1479: "soðere worden"), Gornoille is *wær* 'wary, circumspect'[23], while Regau's answer is *rætfulle* 'prudent, discreet' (l. 1502)[24], with the added note in ms O that her words do not come from the heart ("and noht mid heorte"). Furthermore, as noted by Tiller (2013: 165), Layamon inserts other subtle signs of their falsities, hints unnoticed by the clueless Leir, such as the fact Gornoille does not answer the second element of her father's question – how worthy he is to rule.

Cordoille, on the other hand, is presented as young, loyal, as having a heightened sense of observation and an extreme desire to be truthful, even at a personal cost:

> Heo was alre ȝungest of soðe ȝær-witelest
> and þe king heo louede more þanne ba tueie þe oðre.
> Cordoille iherede þa lasinge þe hire sustren seiden þon kinge

[22] When the second daughter swore she loved her father above all living creatures, Geoffrey presents the man as "credulus" (Reeve/Wright 2007: 39, II.151).

[23] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 78, ll. 1482-83: "Gornoille was swiðe wær, swa beoð wifmen wel ihwær | and seide ane lesinge heore fædere þon king"; "Gornoille was very circumspect, as women always are, and told her father the king a falsehood" (*ibidem*: 79). Tiller (2013: 164) notes that *wær* was used by Layamon to denote the duplicity of traitors. For instance, Vortigern, the most notable traitor of the poem, was "of ufele he was wel iwar" (l. 6615: "he was well aware of the sin involved"). Nonetheless, being wary and cautious can hardly be defined as a bad thing and, as argued by Le Saux (1994: 200), can be also seen as "necessity for survival" as may well be the case for a woman in a patriarchal society.

[24] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 78, ll. 1502-06: "Þa answærde mid rætfulle worden […] | Ah heo ne seide naþing soð, no more þenne hiire suster. | Alle hire lesinge hire uader ilefede"; "Then she answered in prudent words […] | But she did not speak any more truthfully than her sister. Her father believed all her lies" (*ibidem*: 79).

Nom hire leaffulne huie þat heo liȝen nolden.
Hire fader heo wolde suge seoð were gun kef were him lað[25].

In a jocular tone she responds to her father's questioning by combining her directness with her willingness to unmask the hypocrisy of her sisters:

Þa aswarede Cordoille lude and nowiht stille,
mid gomene and mid lehtre, to hire fader leue:
'Þeo art me leof also mi fæder and ich þe also þi dohter;
ich habbe to þe sohfaste loue, for we buoð swiþe isibbe.
And swa ich ibide are, ich wille þe suge mare:
al swa muchel þu bist woruh swa þu velden ært,
and al swa muchel swa þu hauest men þe wllet luuien;
for sone heo bið ilaȝed þe mon þe lutel ah'[26].

Her smiling countenance and this reply do not satisfy Leir; enraged, he repudiates Cordoille, proclaims her dead to him, and forces her to live, from that moment on, locked in her own room. He then divides the kingdom into two parts, one part for himself and one for Gornoille and Ragau and their spouses (ll. 1529-47).

Cordoille is posited as a foil to her father: she is unassuming and humble in the face of the king's arrogance, she understands that any authority is derived from the ability to create strict bonds with one's retainers. Furthermore, she possesses the talent to discern truth in the other's words, a talent that is completely lacking in her father. Notably, she is also associated with youth, in contrast to Leir's old age.

With respect to the lifecycle of man, representations during the Middle Ages followed a fundamental division that distinguishes between youth and old age[27];

[25] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 78, ll. 1511-16; "she was the youngest of all, and most discerning of the truth, and the king loved her more than both the other two. Cordoille, having heard the lies which her sisters told the king, made a solemn vow that she would not lie, she would speak the truth to her father whether it pleased him or not" (*ibidem*: 79).

[26] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 80, ll. 1520-27; "Then Cordoille answered aloud and quite openly, gaily and smilingly, to her beloved father: 'You are dear to me as my father and I to you as your daughter; I have true love for you, for we are close kindred. And as I hope for mercy, I will say something further to you: you are worth just as much as you are possessed of, and just as much as you possess so much will men respect you; for he who possesses little is soon little esteemed'" (*ibidem*: 81).

[27] As noted by Minois (1987: 203) this is a concept typical of the Middle Ages: "Il n'y a pas de place pour la moyenne; on est jeune ou viex; jeune tant que l'on conserve sa force physique, vieux dès que l'on commence à décliner". Thus, in the representation of the stages of life, even though Medieval sources from England and Europe developed a better articulated form of

a dichotomy deriving from an analogy with other contrasting pairs: night and day, life and death, hot and cold. Locutions using *eald and geong* in Old English or *old and yong* in Middle English occurred fairly often[28]. Moreover, the opposition between youth and old age was seen as part of the moral order of the world, as recalled in the gnomic poem *Maxims II*. In this work, old age is aligned with evil, death, and darkness, implying a correlation between the physical decay resulting in ageing and a moral decay[29]:

> God sceal wið yfele, geogoð sceal wið yldo,
> lif sceal wið deaþe, leoht sceal wið þystrum,
> fyrd wið fyrde, feond wið oðrum[30].

It seems possible that Layamon might have drawn on this antonymy when delineating these two characters: if, as previously noted, Leir is repeatedly referred to as the 'old king', Cordoille, the 'youngest child', is frequently associated with youth. The English poet presents a different take on the stereotypical depiction opposing young people as impetuous and lacking in wisdom to their elders, generally seen as figures of tradition and knowledge[31]. Layamon emphasizes

classification, the primary partition usually stems from a distinction between *iuuentus* and *senectus*. Cf. Boll 1950: 161-162, and also Cochelin 2013: 7-8: "Almost all the definitions during these six centuries include two partitions that were clearly quite essential for the society that imagined them […]. The first fundamental partition distinguishes childhood (*pueritia*) from the subsequent ages, while the second distinguishes *iuuentus* from *senectus* (also called episodically *grauitas* or *senioris aetas*). Interestingly, these two divisions, which distinguished childhood from adulthood and also divided adulthood into two ages (*iuuentus* and *senectus*), are the oldest that can be found in the history of the Latin language with respect to the life cycle of man".

[28] The antonymic pair was frequently used to convey the sense of 'everyone', as attested in the *Metre 26* of Old English Boethius (Godden/Irvine 2012: 84: "Cnihtas wurdon, | ealde ge giunge, ealle forhwerfde | to sumum diore"; "The men, old and young, were all turned into a particular wild animal", *ibidem*: 85), but later on also in the 12th-century *Poema Morale* (Morris 1872: 71: "Bidde we nu, leoue freond, yonge and ek olde"; "Let us pray, dear friends, young and old", trans. by J.B.) and, crucially, in the *Brut* itself (ll. 3377, 7066, 14198).

[29] A similar association can be found in other gnomic poems, such as a Latin-English proverb extant in two manuscripts (London, B. L. Cotton Faustina A.x and B. L. ms Royal 2. B.v.). Dobbie 1942: 109: "Hat acolað, hwit asolað, leof alaðaþ, leoht aðystrað, aeghwæt forealdað þæs þe ece ne byð"; "Heat becomes cool, whiteness gets foul, love becomes hateful, light gets dark, everyone that is not eternal grows old" (trans. by J.B.). Cf. Semper 2013: 300.

[30] Dobbie 1942: 55-7, ll. 50-52; "Good must need contend with evil; youth must needs contend with old age; life must needs contend with death, light must needs contend with darkness, army with army, one foe with another" (Bradley 1982: 514).

[31] Contrary to the past historical consensus which saw an alternation between positive and negative visions of old age over the course of time, the most recent historical approaches have emphasized what Porck (2019: 52) defined as "the persistence, continuity and durability of a

Cordoille's youth in conjunction with her sharp intellect and desire to speak the truth, as in her first introduction, in l. 1512, "Heo is alre ȝungest of soðe ȝær-witelest", where *soð* 'truth' connects to the superlative form of *ȳare-witele*, defined as 'ready-witted, intelligent'. Nonetheless, her father does not recognize this sharp and honest mind until much later.

Cordoille's response could be construed as a narrative model for reading and analysing history (Tiller 2013) or as an exposure of Leir's fallacy in his vision of kingship (Sheppard 2000); nevertheless, it is notable how Leir himself understands his daughter's answer. When presenting the maiden to the King of France, who asked for her hand in marriage, Leir gives her away with neither dowry nor celebration, and explains why he reacted so strongly against her attitude and honest words. As the old king says, he interpreted them as a form of disdain for his authority and, in particular, for his age:

> Dohter ich habbe þa þridda ac ne ræcche ich wær heo libbe,
> for heo me forhuste and heo hold me for hæne,
> and for mire halde heo me unæðelede[32].

Here lies Leir's failings in reading truthfulness in others: he confounds his daughter's honesty with the generic contempt young people usually feel for their elders. Paradoxically for the king, the accusations he made against Cordoille are actually the fault of his eldest daughters. Shortly thereafter, in fact, the King of Scotland and the Duke of Cornwall, with the complicity of their wives, conspire to take over the English kingdom[33], providing the king with only a bare minimum of retainers. When deciding to cut her father's retinue, Gornoille expresses exactly the same disrespect that Leir mistakenly ascribes to Cordoille:

> Me þuncheð þat mi fæder nis nowhit felle,
> no he wurhscipe ne can, his wit he hauet bileued.
> Me þuncheð þe alde mon wole dotie nou nan[34].

dual image of old age" which, at the same time, is "despised for its loss of physical prowess, but revered for its wisdom and experience".

[32] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 82, ll. 1583-85; "I have a third daughter but I care not where she lives, for she scorned me and treated me with contempt, and because of my advanced age she dishonoured me" (*ibidem*: 83).

[33] As mentioned by Sheppard (2000: 54), Leir does not particularly object to this transfer of power, partly because this was customary and partly because the land passes into male hands. His loss of honour is mostly connected to his loss of retainers.

[34] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 86, ll. 1642-46; "It seems to me that my father is utterly unworthy, he has no sense of what is honourable, he has lost his wits. I think the old man will shortly be in his dotage" (*ibidem*: 87).

Disdainfully presenting her father as a feeble old man, destined to lose all his wit[35], Gornoille's attitude highlights a negative perception of old age that does not appear to be condoned by the poet. It seems appropriate to Layamon's role as a priest[36] that when the *Brut* depicts an old king, any contemptuous discourse is attributed to negative figures. The words pronounced by Gornoille are clearly similar in tone to the offensive epithets used by Uther's enemies to scorn him in order to depauperize his authority as king.

3. Musings on one's mistakes: Leir's soliloquies

Once the kingdom is divided, Leir is forced to face his diminished authority and, after suffering the loss of most of the men in his entourage[37], his scheming daughters and sons-in-law leave him with only one servant. Unwilling to endure this state of things any longer, the former king sets his pride aside and decides to visit his third daughter.

In Geoffrey and Wace, the sovereign's decision at this point is accompanied by a major speech on the inconsistency of Fate and on the king's past missteps. Geoffrey incorporates Leir's moment of meditation while he is travelling towards France (II.214-230): the old man realizes he ranked third among the princes aboard the ship, thus he laments his present circumstances, meditates vengeance, bemoaning his current incapacity to wage war and rule over his kingdom. While acknowledging the irony of the situation, this monologue is not an admission of guilt: the king actually blames Fortune, ("O inreuocabili seria fatorum […] O irata fortuna!"[38]) just as much as he blames himself (cf. Harrison 2013: 626-627). In the French poem, the king's significant moment of reflection occurs before he set sails to France. Leir does not hope for revenge, but does im-

[35] As denoted by the use of the verb *doten*, meaning 'To behave foolishly or irrationally, do foolish things; be or grow silly; be or grow upset or deranged, rave' or, when referring to aged people, 'to be or grow feeble-minded, be out of one's mind' (cf. *MED*, s.v. *doten*).

[36] Generally speaking, any teaching of the church appealed to a respectful treatment for old people. Early English homilists frequently referred to the fourth biblical commandment reminding everyone to honour one's parent. So, as observed by Porck (2019: 60), the elderly should not only be respected but also cared for in their old age.

[37] Numbers are extremely changeable features in the text: in the Latin version the eldest daughter left the king with thirty knights, reduced progressively to five by the second daughter, and then to one. Wace, instead, has forty, then thirty, ten, five, and finally, one; Layamon starts with forty knights, gradually reduced to five retainers until, exasperated, Gornoille reduced them to a single knight.

[38] Reeve/Wright 2007: 41-43, II.214-220; "O the implacable progress of fate […] O angry fortune!" (*ibidem*: 40-42).

pute his misfortunes to his two daughters (ll. 1913-72). Moreover, Wace grapples with the notion of Fortune, reflecting at length on how human beings are forced to endure their changing moods. Rather than inflaming his fury, this speech initiates what Wace defines as a significant period of contemplation ("Leir lunges se desmenta | E lungement se purpença"[39]).

This introspective moment in Wace serves as the basis for one of Layamon's most consistent expansions in this section. In the English poem, while he is forced to wander from one ungrateful daughter to another, Leir contemplates his situation over the course of three separate soliloquies. As a result, Layamon seems to build a climax in the episode, with each additional defection by the daughters correlating with a longer lament[40].

Leir's meditations start before he enunciates his plan to visit his second daughter; the king, described by the poet as "sorhful on mode"[41], pities all those people who entrust their possessions to ungrateful offspring while still alive:

> Wa worðe þan monne þe lond haueðe mid menske,
> and bitachet hit is childe þe while þe he mai hit walden,
> for ofte hit ilimpð þat eft hit him ofþincheð[42].

Layamon must have been particularly susceptible to this cause: little time had passed between the composition of the poem and Henry II's decision to divide his possessions amongst his sons, ultimately triggering a serious threat to the political stability of the English nation. In 1168, Henry II announced his intention to divide his dominions among his two eldest sons, Henry and Richard. Thus, in order to avoid a disputed succession Young Henry was crowned King of England (firstly in 1170 and a second time alongside his wife, Margaret of France, in 1172) while his father was still alive[43]. Yet Henry II's move did not produce the expected results. Young Henry was frustrated by his lack of actual power and constantly attempted to rebel against his father, aided by the King of France and

[39] Weiss 2002: 50, ll. 1972-73; "Leir spent a long time lamenting and reflecting" (*ibidem*: 51).
[40] Along with Leir's extended tirades, Layamon increased in number the dialogues between characters, whether between the two eldest daughters and their husbands or between Cordoille and his father's servant. Cf. Alamichel 1992: 175.
[41] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 88, l. 1677; "sad at heart" (*ibidem*: 89).
[42] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 88, ll. 1678-80; "Woe befall the man who governs the land with all honour, and yet gives it to his child while he is still able to rule it, for it often happens that he regrets it later" (*ibidem*: 89).
[43] For a recent in-depth study on the Young King Henry, cf. Strickland 2016.

other enemies of the elder Henry[44]. One of the pivotal moments of these wars was the counteroffensive by Henry II's forces against the city supposedly founded by Leir, Leicester, in 1173. The assault destroyed most of the city's homes and shops, thus also targeting innocent citizens. This specific situation might have been in Layamon's mind when, following Wace's clue[45], the English poet relates the continuous sufferings of Leicester townspeople:

> ȝeare, a þan holde dawen, heo wes swiðe aðel burh;
> and seoðden þer seh toward swiðe muchel seorwe
> þat heo wes al forfaren þurh þere leodene uæl[46].

As noted by Tiller (2013: 173), Young Henry's 1173-1174 revolt demonstrated "the same sort of failure of judgment and interpretation on the part of a historical ruler who, like Leir, had named a successor while he was still living". Indeed, Leir's failure of judgement is evoked repeatedly while the king outspokenly meditates on his situation, deprived gradually of every royal attendant except one and forced to move back and forth between his sons-in-law's courts.

In his laments against destiny, Leir recognizes the sharp contrast between past joys and his present misery, meditating on the ephemeral value of earthly glory. Lines 1704-1709 evoke a sense of defeat that is not limited to the old king's experience, but turns into a bitter observation on life's mutability (cf. Kossick 2004: 14):

> Wela weolla, wella, hu þu biswikest monine mon!
> Þenne he þe treoweðe alre best on þenne biswikes tu heom.
> Nis hit nowit ȝare, noht fulle twa ȝere,
> þat ich was a riche king and held mine cnihtes.

[44] Including some dissatisfied English lords such as Robert, Third Earl of Leicester.
[45] The first mention of Leicester's decay was hinted at by Wace, ll. 1664-1666: "Jadis fu la cite mult bone, | Mais par une dissentium | I out puis grant destruction"; "Once the city was a very fine one, but dissension has led to great destruction" (Weiss 2002: 42-43). Scholars debate as to which event Layamon and Wace allude. According to Madden (1847: xviii, 319, 658), Wace might have been referring to the city's destruction by Henry II in 1173. Allen (1995: 417-418) argues that the French poet could have been referring to the damage inflicted on at least three other instances by William the Conqueror, William Rufus, or Ivo de Grantmsnil under Henry I in 1101. She points out that Wace's *Roman de Brut* was certainly completed by 1173. Nonetheless, because it was the closest to the *Brut*'s period of composition, the 1173 attack may have been the one Layamon was most aware of as he translated this portion of the poem.
[46] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 76, ll. 1457-59; "Long ago, in the days of old, it was a most noble city; and afterwards there came upon it very great misfortune so that it was brought utterly to ruin through the loss of the inhabitants" (*ibidem*: 77).

Nu ich habben ibiden þat ich bare sitte,
wunnen biræued[47] –wa is me on liue!
[…]
Þer ich wulle wunie and þolie þeos wænen
ane lutele stunde, for ne libbe ich nowiht longe[48].

Layamon refuses to adopt the conventional imagery of the Wheel of Fortune found in the Old French text. As Alamichel (1992: 170-171) suggests, the English poet may have opted to omit from his adaptation, which he found too abstract. While the king's musings are clearly an expansion on Wace's lines, Leir's lament could be also read in parallel with other reflective monologues attributed to elderly people in both Old and Early Middle English poetry[49].

Layamon's insistence on the king's fall from grace seems to echo the tone often found in Old English elegiac poetry. For instance, Alamichel (1992: 171) argues for a comparison between the characters of Leir and Deor, who are both struggling with their share of tribulations, both trying to make sense of their change of fortune:

witig Dryhten wendeð geneahhe,
eorle monegum are gesceawað,
wislicne blaed, sumum weana dael[50].

Another thematic analogue can be found in the Old English *Rhyming Poem*, where the main character and speaking voice is a similarly disgraced old man, possibly

[47] The poem's two witnesses here provide two alternate readings: C reads "wunnen biræued" while O reads "of gode biræued". *Win*, from OE *wynn,* means 'joy, happiness, well-being'. It can refer to a spiritual feeling of delight, a state of material well-being, or even bodily pleasure (cf. *MED*, sv.). Layamon usually employs it to express interior emotions. *God*, as a noun, might have several definitions: as an abstract noun, 'goodness, good', 'good or useful knowledge', but also 'good deeds', and finally 'benefit, assets, goods, property'. Both readings are metrically valid (even though ms O's reading does not alliterate), and highlight different facets of Leir's tragedy.
[48] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 88-90, ll. 1704-18; "Alas, Fortune, alas, how many men you deceive! When they trust in you most of all then you betray them. It is not long, not fully two years, since I was a powerful king and maintained my followers. Now I have come to such a state that I sit here destitute, deprived of all happiness – alas that I am still living! […] There I will dwell and endure these misfortunes a little while, for I shall not live very long" (*ibidem*: 89-91).
[49] According to Harrison (2013: 624), Leir's meditations are an intentional application of a *topos* of retrospection, derived from the early Middle English notion that meditating on lessons learned from the past is especially appropriate for elderly people. The intellectual foundation of this juxtaposition of age and retrospection is the curriculum of medieval schools.
[50] Krapp/Dobbie 1936: 178-179, ll. 32-34; "the wise Lord frequently causes change: to many a man he shows grace and certain success, to some a share of misfortunes" (Bradley 1982: 365).

a king, who celebrates his glorious past at court, in contrast with his wretched current condition. Just like Leir, the speaker in the *Rhyming Poem* complains about the inconsistency of human fates ("Swa nu world wendeþ wyrde sendeþ | ond hetes henteð, hæleþe scyndeð"[51]) and recollects a time when he was surrounded by faithful thanes ("hygedryht befeold"[52]); a situation that parallels Leir's circumstances, encapsulated by Layamon in ll. 1731-33:

> Þa wile þe ich hæuede mi kinelond luueden me mine leoden;
> for mine londe and for mine feo mine eorles fulle to mine cneo.
> Nu ich æm a wrecche mon; ne leouet me no mon for þan[53].

Conversely, the attitude toward death is quite diverse. The Old English poem exhibits a more explicitly Christian flavour: Death looms over like the night and, quick as an arrow ("flanhred"[54]), represents humanity's unavoidable fate, which can only be overcome by God's eternal salvation granted to those who repent (ll. 70-86). Conversely, Layamon paints Death as a long-awaited form of liberation. *Brut*'s line 1726,

> Wallan Dæð, wela Deað, þat þu me nelt fordemen![55]

is an invocation to Death, it reads as Leir's appeal to be released from further woe and echoes the first line in the *First Elegy* that the late ancient Latin poet, Maximianus (ca. 490-560), wrote about his decaying age:

> Aemula quid cessas finem properare senectus?
> cur et in hoc fesso corpore tarda uenis?[56]

Maximianus' elegy was the model for a twelve-line-stanza poem in Early Middle English, known by its French title, *Le regret de Maximien,* and composed in the 13th century[57]. It reads similarly to Leir's monologue in that both are told by a

[51] Krapp/Dobbie 1936: 166-169, ll. 59-60; "So now the world goes, it sends fates, | and seizes hate, it shames heroes" (Lehman 1970: 445).
[52] Krapp/Dobbie 1936: 166-169, l. 21b; "A band of retainers surrounded me" (Lehman 1970: 444).
[53] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 90, ll. 1731-33; "As long as I had my kingdom my subjects loved me; because my land and my wealth my nobles bent the knee to me. Now I am a poor man; therefore no one values me" (*ibidem*: 91).
[54] Krapp/Dobbie 1936: 166-169, l. 72b; "arrow-swift" (Lehman 1970: 445).
[55] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 90, l. 1726; "Alas Death, alas that you will not destroy me!" (*ibidem:* 91).
[56] Juster 2018: 16-17, l. 1-2; "Jealous old age, why hold back hastening the end | And why come slowly to this weary body?" (*ibidem*).
[57] It appears in two codices: London, B. L. Harley 2253 (first half 14th century) and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 86 (end of the 13th century).

once-proud but now miserably aged figure contemplating on the vanity of past glorious days.

However, after lamenting the late arrival of death, Leir does not indulge on the awfulness of old age, but regretfully recalls his mistakes, appearing more concerned with finally acknowledging that he treated his most devoted child unfairly. Leir's words echo Cordoille's previous introduction: the king unequivocally associates the woman with her truthfulness, predominantly using the semantic field of *truth*, with *soð* and variants occurring four times in six lines (ll. 1725-1732), while in l. 1732, her status as a young woman is correlated through an imperfect rhyme with her remarkable wisdom:

> Seoð seide Cordoille – for cuð hit is me nouþe –
> mi ȝengeste dohter. Heo was me wel dure;
> seoðden heo me wes leaðest for heo me seiden alre sohust,
> þat me bið vnworð and lah þe mon þe litul ah,
> and ihc nas na wurdra þenne ich nes weldinde.
> Ouer soh seiden þat ȝunge vifmon hire folweð mochel wisdom[58].

Leir's final monologue acts as a turning point in which the king recognises the truth in Cordoille's previous comments: he feels like a poor man, because he no longer has his following of faithful servants and nobody values him ("ne leouer me no mon"), he has lost his royal dignity. Because Cordoille understood this, once Leir arrived in France she could begin to restore his household of forty thanes (ll.1779-80). The king's relationships with his nobility thus play an important role in both his loss of royal dignity and in his rehabilitation.

In some ways, the king's final meditation serves to reconcile the previously noted opposition between daughter and father: elderly Leir has become wiser as a result of his past failures, learning from the sincerity and wisdom supplied by his young daughter.

[58] Barron/Weinberg 1995: 90, ll. 1704-36; "For now it is clear to me Cordoille, my youngest daughter, spoke the truth. She was most dear to me; but afterwards she was most hateful to me because she spoke to me more truthfully than all others, saying that he who possesses little is worthless and contemptible, and that I was worth no more than I possessed of. The young woman spoke all too truly – there is much wisdom in her" (*ibidem*: 91).

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germanica;

Il nome ufficiale della nostra rivista continua a essere: "Annali. Sezione germanica", ma nel passare alla modalità online lo abbiamo abbreviato in "*germanica;*" – più sintetico, come nome d'uso, e al contempo quasi classico, nel suo riprendere il sostantivo neutro latino utilizzato per i concetti collettivi, nel senso dunque di 'cose germaniche'. Esso riunisce così in sé i differenti campi di ricerca che trovano spazio nella rivista, sulla quale dal 1958 pubblichiamo saggi (talvolta raccolti in numeri monografici) e recensioni, in italiano e nelle principali lingue europee, su temi letterari, culturali, filologici e linguistici di area germanica, con un ampio spettro di prospettive metodologiche, anche di tipo comparatistico e interdisciplinare.

Insieme al nome sintetico abbiamo scelto come nuovo simbolo il punto e virgola, per distinguere ma al tempo stesso collegare tra loro i vari ambiti disciplinari della germanistica. Un segno di punteggiatura sempre meno utilizzato e per questo forse un po' desueto, ma che ci sembra acquisire una particolare potenzialità semantica: pur marcando uno stacco più forte, il punto e virgola connette parti indipendenti e le pone in dialogo – ha qualcosa di interlocutorio, nella consapevolezza che voler costruire un discorso fatto di punti fermi sia oggi più che mai illusorio.

letterature e culture di lingua tedesca;
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