

Introduction

In 1504, the Veronese physician Gabriele Zerbi, self-proclaimed expert on retarding the aging process, responded to a summons—and the promise of a sizable reward—to cure the elderly, ailing Turkish leader Skander Pasha in Bosnia. It was widely known that the Pasha liked to indulge his appetites, both gustatory and sexual, to degrees that were at odds with the lessons of Western medical science on bodily preservation. Zerbi himself had counseled moderation in most things, abstinence in others, in his handbook on the problems of old age, *Gerontocomia* (1489), and he could cite authorities from Aristotle to classical humoral theory to bolster his opinions. As the human body aged, the prevailing belief went, it became colder and dryer. This slowly debilitating process could never be arrested—after all, God had set limits to man’s average life span, whether the 120 years proclaimed in Genesis 6:3 or the “fourscore” of Psalms 90:10—but it might be slowed if one followed the proper regimen. For example, eating too much resulted in a “density” of food in the stomach, a dangerous condition because “the old man who has little heat in him cannot change the dense food into nourishment.”¹ Wine drunk in moderation was salutary because it increased “innate heat” and partly compensated for natural thermal loss; on the other hand, excessive drinking could be deadly, threatening the “ultimate frigidity,” just as adding too much oil to a lantern extinguishes it.² A similar humoral justification underlies chapter 48 of the handbook, “Permission and Prohibition of Sex in the Resumptive Regimen.” Less permissive and more prohibitory, it begins, “Sex should simply be avoided by old men” because every emission of semen represents an irretrievable diminution of heat and moisture.³ For those, however, who simply cannot restrain themselves, Zerbi recommends certain precautions: for example, sex is always safer in autumn than it is in summer, daylight is preferable to nighttime, and one should never stay awake too long after the act. Finally, he acknowledges that sexual desire remains

¹ Gabriele Zerbi, “*Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged*,” in *Gabriele Zerbi, “Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged” and Maximianus, “Elegies on Old Age and Love”*, trans. L. R. Lind (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1988), p. 120.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 133–4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 273. Zerbi does not forbid sex in the first stage of old age, but asserts that its frequency should decrease with the onset of advanced old age and disappear before decrepitude sets in. Elsewhere in *Gerontocomia*, he states that this first phase “begins from the thirtieth or thirty-fifth or fortieth year more or less and is held to extend to the fiftieth or sixtieth year” (p. 29). In chapter 48, Zerbi further argues that old men should refrain from sex because abstinence brings them closer to God.

ardent in the old; it inspires much sinful behavior because, as Aristotle warned in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, concupiscence disobeys reason.

From what we know of him, Skander Pasha epitomized the unchecked sensualism Zerbi and his adherents considered nothing less than suicidal. The doctor and his son made the trip to the Turkish court and treated the patient successfully for dysentery. The Pasha showed his deep appreciation by bestowing on Zerbi numerous valuable gifts and jewels, and before the Italians left on their return trip, *il medico* must have stressed the dire, age-specific risks the patient takes in living the unregulated life. Unfortunately, once Zerbi had departed, the Turk “resumed his lustful habits and quickly died of their excesses.” His descendants promptly left the court, overtook the Italians on their journey, and brought them back east to be sawed to death as punishment.⁴

I present this historical anecdote here on account of certain typical qualities it shares with popular discourse on aging up to the early sixteenth century, but also on account of its signs of departure from long-held belief. To a point, Zerbi continues two centuries-long traditions in his medical work and in his writing: the physiological investigation into prolonging human life and the polemical defense of old age itself against its numerous vilifiers. In the second century, Galen published his *Gerocomica*, a medical advice book that agreed with Hippocrates on the essential nature of the aging process and shaped gerontological thinking up to the early modern period. This classical influence is easily traceable in various later treatises on old age, especially concerning their authors’ advocacy of quelling appetites, of stanching vital corporal losses. To mention one well-circulated example, the Englishman Roger Bacon, whose *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* (c.1250) found a sizable Continental readership in the early modern period, extended his call to moderation beyond eating, drinking, and sex—long-established potential causes of innate heat loss—to encompass other types of bodily decrement: the old should not exert themselves too much, should not waste words, should not even laugh unnecessarily so as not to squander their energy. This basically appetitive conception of the aging process was shared by Zerbi’s contemporaries as well. For this reason, the Venetian physician Alvise Cornaro stressed in his mid-sixteenth-century *Trattato de la vita sobria* that with advancing years, men fall victim to their own desires and aspirations, “which truly are those things that strike down men before their time.”⁵ These deadly temptations are:

⁴ L. R. Lind, introduction to Zerbi, *Gerontocomia*, p. 11. Lind summarizes this episode, which is recounted in Joannes Pierius Valerianus’ *De Litteratorum Infelicitate Libri Duo* (1620). My account of the story here abridges Lind’s.

⁵ Alvise (Luigi) Cornaro, *Scritti sulla vita sobria: Elogio e lettere*, ed. Marisa Milani (Venice: Corbo e Fiore, 1983), p. 120. The translation is mine. My practice here will be, when quoting from the dramatic texts which are the focus of this study, to provide an English translation along with the original Italian. For all other texts, typically I provide only an English translation, which is my own unless I cite an English-language edition.

The desire of concupiscence, of honors and of things, which are wont to increase in old people who do not have a regulated life, because, when they pass from the virile age, they leave behind neither sensual pleasure nor appetite, as they should, taking in place of those things continence and reason, virtues that are not lost by the man of the ordered life who passes this stage.⁶

For Cornaro, such unregulated, appetite-driven behavior was not only self-destructive, but unnatural and defiant of God, who wanted man to prolong his life at least until Cornaro's proclaimed "perfect age" of 80.⁷

We begin to see, then, in the story of Zerbi's last house call, volatile elements recurrent across centuries of medical discourse on aging—stern doctor's orders on self-restraint, in particular the proscription of sex; the physician's conviction that he can delay the body's inevitable decline; the inevitable costs of sin where passions are allowed to go unchecked. Skander Pasha's death would have illustrated the personal consequences of refusing to grow old with decorum and forbearance. Zerbi's execution stood as evidence of the broader annihilating power of human degeneracy, disruptive enough to threaten society beyond the guilty individual. Later in the century, Cornaro would have seen it so, as he held that immoral behavior could decimate Italian society as thoroughly as war or pestilence.

At first glance, this consistency of attitude toward wayward, desiring old men seems reflected in the comic drama written by Plautus and Terence, on one hand, and by Italian Renaissance playwrights on the other, who knew the classical plays and incorporated them into their work. The foolish old man in love, after all, serves as a stock character in both periods, while surfacing in other times as well. One may go so far as to say, upon surveying Western theatrical history, that the laughter this figure provokes has a timeless quality. But however reminiscent Italian Cinquecento *senes amantes* ("old men in love") are of Plautine originals—

The Italian originals of extended or highly nuanced quotations are included as footnotes. Where my translation owes any debt to one already published, the notes make that clear.

⁶ Ibid., p. 93. Cornaro wrote and revised his discourses on aging and the sober life in four stages, from 1550 to 1562, when he was in his eighties and nineties. The quotations before and after the indented excerpt are not from the *Trattato*, but from his own commentary on it in a letter to his patron Daniele Barbaro (c.1558), reproduced in the 1983 edition of the *Trattato* edited by Milani.

⁷ The thinkers referred to here describe differently the stages of human life and do not agree on when old age begins. Among others, Hippocrates thought it started at 56; Francis Bacon believed that man begins his decline at 40; English life expectancy in this period has been estimated in the mid-thirties, but was considerably higher if infant mortality is accounted for; see Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 78–81. Zerbi, as stated above, thought physical decline began, at first imperceptibly, in one's thirties. Cornaro (p. 80) blamed the common, premature onset of senescence at 40 on man's immorality and preached that this number could be raised significantly: "those who live a sober life should remain healthy until at least 80."

or, for that matter, of subsequent dramatic incarnations—this study insists upon the cultural specificity of some of the most successful Italian examples of the character. Comparison of Plautine comedies with their Italian Cinquecento adaptations reveals the later authors' singular aims, their modernizing projects, whose implications can best be grasped by juxtaposing analysis of the drama with scrutiny of its political, economic and social contexts. Doing so establishes that the scientific and the apologetic literature on old age also did not remain homogeneous from classical Rome to sixteenth-century Italy. Instead, ridicule of the comedic *senex* intensified in Italian erudite comedy⁸ even as writers in other genres were finding new reasons to champion old age. The heterogeneity of this comic type persists in early modern England, where playwrights added Italian models to the rich trove of sources their predecessors had mined, from classical drama and poetry to medieval sacred drama and *novelle*.

Italy, England, and the Renaissance Experience of Old Age: A Background to the Drama

Two resilient mainstays of classical and medieval thinking dominated scholarly speculations on senescence: the Galenic theory of the four bodily humors and the “ages of man” models. The former held that the health of the human body depended on the variable proportion of four basic corporeal fluids (blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile). According to humoral theory, senescence occurred due to the progressive loss of natural warmth and humidity. As the body became colder and drier, the effort to retain one's fluidic equilibrium—either passively, or by following medical advice to regulate behavior and diet—became a losing battle.

The second construct, the “ages of man” models, divided the human life span into distinct periods, each marked by its own physical and mental characteristics. Enamored with this idea, medieval and Renaissance thinkers developed competing models with varying numbers of segments, ordinarily four, six, or seven. Many of these systems place the beginning of senescence at ages that seem youthful to modern readers.⁹ Thomas Elyot's *Castel of helth* (1541), for one, defines

⁸ The *commedia erudita*, or erudite comedy, of the period is most simply defined as any comic drama containing five acts and being based on or reminiscent of the classical comedies of Plautus and Terence. Because Renaissance humanists' knowledge of these Roman plays was filtered through the work of the ancient compiler “Donatus,” who appears to have divided them into five acts himself, Cinquecento playwrights may have been imitating a dramatic structure not Plautine or Terentian at all. See Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 25.

⁹ The best treatments of this subject are J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986); and Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages*

“Senectute” as beginning at 40; Erasmus agreed with him.¹⁰ As for the passage between stages, historians are uncertain of the extent to which the life cycle was viewed as a continuum, as opposed to a series of discrete stages, but early modern texts do routinely emphasize specific years, or climacterics, when profound change was believed to take place. For example, the English physician William Vaughan warned in 1626 that every seventh year in a person’s life was “Climactericall” and thus perilous; the influence of Saturn, the planet associated mythologically with old age, was held responsible.¹¹

Humoral alteration drove behavioral change and caused each “age of man” to be characterized by its own virtues and vices. For instance, according to Stephen Batman, whose *Batman uppon Bartholome* (1582) recapitulates the five ages of man as described by St Isadore, Archbishop of Seville, the regrettable fact that the “blood waxeth colde” during “Senectus” presages death, but this cooling leads to both positive and negative effects over the short term. On one hand, advanced age “maketh an ende of bodilye lust, and breaketh the broydes of fleshly lyking, and hath wit and wisdom, and giveth good counsaile.” But growing old also causes men to “doate,” to become “nice and fooles,” and eventually, should they live long enough, to turn completely mad.¹² The *senex* might still live virtuously, notably if he succeeded in devoting himself to the contemplative ideal and renouncing material gain—but the sense persisted that such was precisely a *spiritual* victory, and took place only where one strove against the physical grain.

It is tempting to conjecture, however, that the early modern scholarly discourse on senescence described imperfectly the actual experience of the unlettered majority. Medical handbooks published in this period, with their recommendations of bleedings, purgations, and the taking of noxious drugs, were targeted to a more prosperous, literate minority. In contrast, the typical working family would presumably have had to confront a member’s senescence or illness with a mixture of home remedy and prayer. But class-based accessibility to medical care tells only part of the story of the mismatch between medical and popular beliefs on aging and humoralism. One can locate a strain of common-sense skepticism in popular works that question the directives of medical authority, as in this fictional (yet revealing) anecdote taken from *Wits, Fits, and Fancies*, published in London in 1614:

of Man (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Thomas Elyot, *The castel of helth* (London, 1539), p. 11. On the variety of opinions, see Herbert C. Covey, “The Definitions of the Beginnings of Old Age in History,” *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 36 (1992–93): pp. 325–57.

¹¹ William Vaughan, *Directions for Health, Naturall and Artificiall: Derived from the best Phisitians, as well Moderne as Antient* (London, 1626), pp. 124–5.

¹² Stephen Batman, *Batman uppon Bartholome, his book “De proprietatibus rerum”* (London, 1582), p. 71.

A noble man had attain'd to 86 yeares of age, & never in all his life had taken physicke: At last he sickened verie grievously: and at the earnest instance of his friendes condescended to take physicke: Then came the pothecary to him three or foure daies together with preparative sirrops and potions; all which he received, and bid his man after the Pothecary was gone to put it all together into a close stoole. At last came mister Doctor himselfe to visit him, and viewing what filthy stuffe was in the close stoole, hee said: Sir you are a happy man to be rid of these bad humours in your body: See here the benefit of Physicke, and your life preserv'd: The noble man answered: Gramercie close-stoole.¹³

Here we observe a dissonance that modern gerontologists would recognize at once, between the doctor's pathological approach to senescence (old age equals the inception of "bad humors" and calls for professional intervention) and the patient's positive experience owing in part to self-determination. The joke does not tell us explicitly that the old man's sickness has passed, yet its optimistic ending suggests it has. The humorally grounded understanding of old age becomes unmoored as all difference collapses within the "close-stoole," a receptacle in which life-preserving substances cannot be distinguished from life-threatening ones. All that the aging patient can trust is his own intuition, cultivated from lived experience and at odds with the self-professed medical experts who would take away his autonomy, despite its impressive track record ("86 yeares of age, & never in all his life had taken physicke"). Thus, an analogous gulf may exist, now and then, between the tendency of official voices to pathologize senescence and the contradictory ability of many people to grow old with undimmed hopefulness and vigor.

A representative comedy for dramatizing some of these contrasting perspectives on the experience of growing old is Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599), which features the most often quoted—though highly slanted—exposition on the ages of a man's life. One of the play's central juxtapositions is that of *senex* and *puer*, which occurs twice, in the pairing of the old shepherd Corin with young Silvius, and in the master-servant dyad of boyish Orlando and faithful Adam. Rosalind declares on the appearance of the first pair, "Look you who comes here, a young man and an old in solemn talk" (2.4.17–19).¹⁴ Their first exchange, overheard by Rosalind and Touchstone, conveys their irreconcilability, at least in amatory matters; Silvius suspects that his older counterpart has forgotten the anguish of unrequited love and thus cannot truly empathize with him. Corin's later dialogue with uncivil Touchstone about the respective virtues of country and city life, in Act 3, scene 2, again finds him juxtaposed with a younger man who doubts his wisdom (the clown calls him a "most shallow man" for having never visited the court) (3.2.62).

¹³ *Wits, fits, and fancies: or, A generall and serious collection, of the sententious speeches, answers, jests, and behaviours, of all sortes of estates, from the throane to the cottage* (London, 1614), pp. 188–9.

¹⁴ All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 2004), and are cited in the text.

In reality, the old shepherd does comprehend the youth's predicament—later, he anatomizes it perfectly to Rosalind as the conventional “pageant” of mooning swain and disdainful mistress (3.4.45–9)—and he extends far more courtesy to his city-bred interrogator than he receives in return.

The failure of these two younger men to appreciate Corin's capabilities suggests the gulf between generations. Yet Shakespeare offers a contrasting, more hopeful model. The cooperation and selflessness that mark Orlando and Adam's relationship demonstrate that productive harmony can exist between youth and age, although it is important to note that their partnership, deriving from a difference in rank and the fact that Adam used to serve Orlando's father, is unequal by definition. Still, their loyalty is mutual, befitting the terms of the “constant service of the antique world” (2.3.57). Adam offers all his gold to the banished youth and vows to attend him with all his remaining strength, while Orlando's sole concern later is to provide for the old man when he is weak and famished in Arden.

The two *senes* in *As You Like It* possess the very quality the descriptive medical literature would deny them: a staunch self-discipline. Both manage to keep their passions carefully in check, enabling an instructive juxtaposition between their dignified experience of aging and the model Jaques elaborates in his “ages of man” speech in Act 2, scene 7. According to Jaques's cynical view, a man's life progresses through seven phases, each of which has its sources of dissatisfaction, beginning with the “mewling and puking” infant years and ending with senile foolishness and pathetic insensibility. He describes the last two phases as equally lamentable and inevitable:

The sixth age shifts
 Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange, eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (2.7.156–65)

The description of the “pantaloon” figures forth all that is laughable about the storied Pantalone of the *commedia dell'arte*: his comic dress, his stinginess (the hose fits poorly because it is “well saved” from his younger days; his pouch allows him to keep valuables on his person), his effeminacy that shades toward childishness. Writing in the early seventeenth century, the French minister Simon Goulart accounts psychologically for covetousness, that fundamental sin of the stage *senex*, as a strategy aimed toward hoarding the old man's vanishing social esteem. Material possessions can win him credit with those who “disdain old age that is spurrgald with poverty.” Although old men cannot “recreate themselves,”

they can at least retain the economic status of being “cashiers at home.”¹⁵ Also, boastful or tedious speech (now self-defeating in its pitch) replaces deeds. But on all fronts, the old man’s desperate self-assertion only calls attention to his growing obsolescence. Jaques’s seventh age betokens helplessness, the condition of someone who has become little more than a burden to the relatives or fellow citizens who must minister to him.

By juxtaposing Adam’s stage presence with Jaques’s negative imagining in this scene, Shakespeare portrays two possibilities for advanced age. Certainly, neither of the opposed types, the pantaloon nor Adam, embodies the whole truth of old age. The sheer diversity of Shakespeare’s older characters argues against his reduction of the aging process to conform with traditional “ages of man” models. While it may seem that the former’s positive example may triumph, as the virtuous Adam undercuts the “ages of man” speech by entering immediately afterward, in actuality the discomfiture given rise to by old age persists beyond this moment. This happens because Adam’s rejuvenation occurs in the otherworldly, seemingly timeless Arden, a place its visitors inhabit only as a temporary escape from normal lived experience. The drama that unfolds there offers no solutions to the civil disorders that its domestic conflicts overlay and that Adam’s initial dismissal recalls most poignantly.

In Act 2, Adam reveals that he has long anticipated that advanced age would one day lead to his firing. He has saved 500 crowns for the unhappy prospect of forced retirement, when “service” should become “unregarded age in corners thrown” (2.3.41–2). His exemplary private behavior—the refusal of “hot and rebellious liquors” and other “means of weakness and debility” (2.3.49, 51)—has allowed him, he declares, to approach 80 years of age in robust physical condition, so that he can promise to perform for Orlando “the service of a younger man” in their travels (2.3.54). He does not manage to keep this promise: the hardships of their trip to Arden wear him down much faster than they do Orlando. However, the exaggeration of his physical prowess hardly condemns him, as sacrificing his own comfort for the sake of his late master’s son remains all that can give his life meaning. Also, Orlando has to suspect his limitations, for not long after having stated his qualifications, Adam lets slip his true motive for accompanying the youth, namely, “to die well” (2.3.76). What Orlando cherishes is the other’s epitome of an altruistic model of servitude, respectful of the differences of rank, that allegedly vanished with “the antique world” (2.3.57). This moment, like Charles’s earlier report of Duke Senior’s rumored activities (“they . . . fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world”) (1.1.113–14), evokes the ideal of a Golden Age unsullied by modern corruption. Shakespeare’s characters must retreat to the Forest of Arden because in the city virtue is an exception, because Adam is *not* a representative old man in his society. But whereas his righteous conduct in a hostile environment defies the courtly norm (making the *senex* exemplary),

¹⁵ Simon Goulart, *The Wise Vieillard, or Old Man* (London, 1621), p. 70.

his abject dismissal proves all too realistic (making him emblematic of the problem of the aged poor).

The portrayal of old age in *As You Like It* suggests that while awareness of early modern medical beliefs, including humoral theory, enriches an analysis of comic old men, such a study should also remain grounded in the distinct political and social contexts of the drama's point of origin. For example, early sixteenth-century Florence, which is treated in Chapters 2 and 3, was a city of merchants and bankers that arguably forged the prototype for today's international money economy. In the social hierarchies arising in such an environment, financial clout can be seen to supersede physical, martial valor. Similar to the Florentine *senex*, who in the dawning mercantile age founded his authority on his command of capital, irrespective of flagging bodily strength, the Florentine government, awash in money gained via international banking and trade, attempted to purchase political security, as opposed to fighting for it with a homegrown military. Its deep-pocketed methods—the employment of unreliable mercenary soldiers, the paying off of enemies to dissuade them of attack—proved unsuccessful, as the city's tumultuous alternation between republic and barely concealed tyranny attests.

While the city seethed, the ongoing debate over these methods reflected the profound intergenerational conflict in the city's politics. Two groups of Florentine youths, or *giovani*—the first, partisans of the charismatic (and often young) Medici princes, and the second, advocates of broad-based republican government, in defiance of the Medici—attacked the older generation, the *vecchi*, as impediments to their noble causes. The Medici faction argued that the city required strong individual leadership, a duke who would inspire confidence at home and respect abroad, and the head of the prominent Medici clan offered the best hope of this. Meanwhile the young republicans condemned the cautious, conservative ways of their elders as betraying an insufficient commitment to the hard task of restoring and safeguarding democratic principles. The four playwrights taken up in these chapters—Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena, Niccolò Machiavelli, Donato Giannotti, and Lorenzino de' Medici—all refracted elements of this particularly Florentine type of political, intergenerational conflict in their stage comedies.

The sixteenth-century Venetian Republic, the focus of Chapters 4 and 5, also had to negotiate the conflicting interests of the few most influential families, who wished to establish hegemony, and the rest of the citizenry, who demanded some level of government representation. Venice, like Florence, founded and perpetuated a republic more on financial than military strength. Unlike Florence, its success at doing so (the Venetian Republic endured until 1797) led to the political supremacy of aged citizens, as we might expect in a society that privileges mercantile gain over military service. Simply put, prominent old Venetian men had already made their fortunes. Promising young Venetians were in the process of seeking theirs. But as the youths struggled, their prosperous elders could—and did—defer satisfaction, as, for example, via the withholding of property or, more specific to Venice, the passage of age-based restrictions for public offices. The relative absence of intergenerational tension in Cinquecento and Seicento Venice reflects the city's

achievement in establishing what historian Robert Finlay has called history's "most successful gerontocracy."¹⁶ Old men enjoyed their political preeminence within a social context that, as in Florence, delimited the range of age-appropriate behavior based on equivalent medical, ethical, and aesthetic prejudices. Although it is probably true that early modern Venetians revered old age, it is more accurate to say that they venerated the socially constructed, sober model of it that city patriarchs strove to cultivate. As we will see, depictions of foolish old men in the comedies of Andrea Calmo and the nascent *commedia dell'arte* held departures from that model up to scorn, but were also capable (sometimes surprisingly) of painting a fuller, and more positive, picture of senescence.

In the third milieu examined here—Shakespeare's England—harsh economic conditions, which increased rates of unemployment, poverty, and vagabondage, affected aged persons disproportionately and caused, I maintain in Chapters 6 and 7, a genuine crisis of the elderly as part of a widespread social malaise. It seems, frankly, that many of the early modern English perceived the nation's older population as an economic burden. The institution of a new Poor Law in 1603, which provided marginal support to the indigent old and the unemployable, sparked considerable resistance, as documentary evidence indicates the unwillingness of many communities to provide more than the bare minimum to Poor Law beneficiaries, or to give anything at all to vagabonds wandering outside their jurisdiction.

While Elizabeth and James tried to confront these problems, both monarchs gave surprising credence to a radical interpretation of the causes of England's woes. Some thinkers argued that England was suffering from an epidemic of melancholy, the Galenic humor most associated with senescence. Believing that man represented a microcosm of his society, this contingent maintained that as the world aged, it must experience changes equivalent to those of an aging human body. Thus, just as an old person's constitution underwent an increase in melancholy, so, by the law of correspondence, did human society as a whole. Both processes were pathological, which accounted for the spread of worldly corruption. A related undercurrent of thought, by no means lacking devotees, took the belief in correspondences to its next logical step, namely, the putative link between microcosmic English society and the macrocosmic universe. From an eschatological viewpoint, the world's decline presaged the approaching Apocalypse, when Christ's Second Coming as divine judge would annihilate the earth as we know it and collapse past, present, and future into one eternal moment.

Paradoxically, then, the stage *senex* could evoke the advanced degeneration perceived to be afflicting town, country, and cosmos while also, with only a slight change of perspective, hinting at the imminence of all true believers' heavenly reward. When the moment of truth arrived, senescence itself would be eradicated forever, as according to Christian doctrine, the (deserving) dead would be

¹⁶ Robert Finlay, *Politics in Renaissance Venice* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1980).

reincarnated restored to their physical prime. The ambiguous position of the aged person within this eschatological framework defeats any attempt to essentialize this figure's symbolic properties. This framework, however, does provide a key for associating the multiple discourses—concerning the humors, alchemy, and the presumed system of correspondences—remote to us now, but connected with early modern English beliefs about the nature and meaning of old age. These discourses pervade the English comedies considered in my final two chapters: Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, Thomas Dekker's *Old Fortunatus*, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. I conclude by examining Middleton, Rowley, and Heywood's *The Old Law* and juxtaposing its own faux utopian project with that of Shakespeare's Prospero.

Intertextuality and Anglo-Italian Drama Studies

For this survey, Cinquecento Italian comedy has been selected as the chronological starting point because it subsequently influenced theatrical production in so many European nations, including England. It makes sense to ground a comparative study in a transnational phenomenon's point of origin. Yuri Lotman has discussed how from the fifth to the fourteenth century Italy acted primarily as a "text receiver," as classical influences acted with the new cultural currencies introduced by wave after wave of foreign invaders to create a "soil" with a high degree of saturation. At the beginning of the Renaissance, Italian artistic production exploded, disseminating countless verbal and visual texts across Europe. At this point, Italy became a "text generator," but one whose production exhibits more total "energy" than the old "systems" that helped generate the Italian texts. Lotman calls this type of "vigorous increase" normal in cultural history, and certainly such enrichment is visible in the innovative treatment Florentine and Venetian dramatists gave the *senex amans*.¹⁷ Based on Lotman's explanation of what happens to texts when they are transmitted in what he calls the semiosphere—the universe of signs—we can extend this notion of an "increased activity" even to those plays that do not transform the *senex* figure so radically. As Lotman explains, the purest act of mimesis—the most literal translation from one language into another—alters and adds meaning to the original text because the birth of the subsequent text takes place in a unique context. Imported texts become "entirely dissolved" in the receiving culture.¹⁸ For this reason, it is a mistake to view the reincarnation of the comedic *senex* on the early modern Italian stage as merely the continuance of a simple, static convention.

Many intertextual traces within Italian and English comedy cannot be proven the result of direct borrowing; often the existence of classical plays and other genres as mutual antecedents confuses the influence question. Yet there were

¹⁷ Yuri Lotman, *The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990), p. 145.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

ample opportunities for first-hand cultural exchange to occur. English writers like Thomas Nashe, and performers such as the actor Will Kemp, made well-documented trips to Italy, where they witnessed Italian theater firsthand. Likewise, Italian troupes made seven documented visits to England between 1546 and 1578, and historians presume there were many others.¹⁹ Many cultivated Englishmen could read at least some Italian, and thus would have been able to comprehend the printed volumes of *commedia erudita* readily obtainable in England.²⁰ But the identification of specific textual debts remains only one, rather limited, approach to Italian–English intertextuality. To a great extent, the simple awareness that Italy exerted such a powerful stimulus to the English creative imagination justifies the two regions’ juxtapositions here. As John L. Lievsay has pointed out, the very example of Italy as a prolific cultural center with a vital modern language and literature that could compete successfully against the classical literary and rhetorical precursors England shared with it inspired a “fairly constant interest in Italian letters,” one that helped shape theatrical production, even as Shakespeare and his peers experimented with Italian models.²¹

This study is also guided by the principle that the amount of conscious, or intentional, imitation demonstrated by English dramatists of their Italian forebears, while a provocative subject, does not determine the worth of the comparative project. Here I would invoke Keir Elam’s reminder that spectators understand a performance by employing their “dramatic competence.” The dramatic world of a play remains “discontinuous” and “incomplete” until observers construct meaning based on the various bits of visual and auditory information they have at their disposal.²² Some of this information is provided by the writer and actors who collaborate to create the specific performance, but the rest depends on the spectator’s knowledge of dramatic texts and conventions that antedate the performance. The fuller one’s dramatic competence, the more confident one feels making one’s way imaginatively in the illusory world. Thus, Elam defines the spectator’s (or reader’s) competence in terms of intertextuality: what someone has read or seen in the past promotes competence in the present, and constructs meaning, perhaps never exactly in the same way twice. The productive avenues this theoretical perspective has opened up for comparative research have been made clear by Louise George Clubb, who has encouraged scholars to move

¹⁹ Kathleen M. Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy: A Study in the Commedia dell’Arte with Special Reference to the English Stage*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934), pp. 362–3.

²⁰ John L. Lievsay, *The Elizabethan Image of Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp. 8–9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²² Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1980), pp. 98–9.

methodologically beyond the diminishing returns promised by a dedication to “influence” studies.²³

Clearly, the Italian and English comedies discussed here do derive from the same “gene pool,”²⁴ albeit in precise ways that frustrate the efforts of literary genealogists. Ancient Roman drama and early Renaissance figures such as Boccaccio served in some instances as “parents,” making the two types siblings. But Italian comedy itself served as a progenitor, for contributions it made to modulations of the genre elsewhere in Europe. We need not, however, know the exact lines of descent to find meaning in the convergences, to uncover intimations of the vexed status of old age within two cultures imbued with intergenerational tensions.

²³ Louise George Clubb, “Intertextualities: Some Questions,” in *The Italian World of English Renaissance Drama: Cultural Exchange and Intertextuality*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (Newark: University Press of Delaware, 1998), p. 182.

²⁴ Ibid.