

“FORE ÐÆRE MÆRÐE MOD ASTIGE”:
TWO NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE OLD ENGLISH *GIFTS OF MEN*

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ABSTRACT

The Old English poem *The Gifts of Men* has received little attention in contemporary scholarship, and when it has been referenced in recent decades, the primary trend has been to comment on its unique structure and position within the discourse of catalogue poems. As a gnomic and Christian religious text, the poem is most likely a composition that found influences in both Germanic and patristic traditions, and source study tended to drive the earliest scholarship on the poem. This thesis seeks to expand the scholarship on *The Gifts of Men* by offering a linguistic study of the poem’s terms of cognition, thereby situating it within the discourse focused on the concept of the mind in Anglo-Saxon England. This thesis also complicates the poem’s position as a religious text by offering a new interpretation of its opening and closing lines through a comparative reading with the Old English poems *Genesis A* and *Genesis B*. The semantic study of the Old English word *mod* (“mind”) and other cognitive terms demonstrates the poet’s conception of the mind-space as the receptacle for God’s gifts, and the comparative reading with the *Genesis* poems contends that the poet alludes to the narrative of the fall of the chief angel as a means of warning against pride. The two new perspectives argued for within this thesis seek not only to renew interest in the poem, but also to recuperate the poet, whose complex use of language and intricately framed allusion to the creation narrative both work to show that he was a more accomplished author than earlier critics have recognized.