Of Fathers and Mentors to Sons and Disciples: English Medieval Literature and Beyond

“et convertet cor patrum ad filios et cor filiorum ad patres eorum” (Mal. 4:6)

In Hamlet 1.3.57-81, Polonius, the chief councillor of King Claudius, addresses his son Laertes with instructions which are meant to guide him throughout his stay in France. Polonius’s remarks are made of concise, tightly-structured proverbial utterances. Scholars have analysed its gnomic nature and shed some light on the topos of a father counselling a son – or a mentor his disciple. Polonius’s speech might be divided as follows:

1. Give thy thoughts no tongue,  
   Nor any unproportioned thought his act.

2. Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.

3. Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
   Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;  
   But do not dull thy palm with entertainment  
   Of each new-hatch’d, unfledged courage. [Beware]

4. Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,  
   Bear’t that the opposed may beware of thee.

5. Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;

6. Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment.

7. Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
   But not express’d in fancy; rich, not gaudy;  
   For the apparel oft proclaims the man,  
   And they in France of the best rank and station

Polonius’s instructions to Laertes are imparted in the form of either advice or admonition: precepts 1-2 and 6 are counsels, whilst the remainder are warnings.

There is still debate amongst scholars as to the sources Shakespeare might have had in mind in writing these maxims. The purpose of this work is not only to consider the source behind Polonius’s precepts; it also aims to show the main occurrences of such a theme in the Bible and in English literature up to Shakespeare’s time.

1. Wisdom Literature in the Bible and its Analogues

The Israelites believed that the Lord of Hosts was at the helm of their lives. Since they were not always obedient, the prophets regularly warned them not to harden their hearts and beseeched them to hearken unto their God and learn His ways. In Jer. 17:23 one reads how the Lord rebuked them: “et non audierunt nec inclinaverunt aurem suam sed induraverunt cervicem suam ne audirent me et ne acciperent disciplinam”. The Chosen People prospered solely when they abided by the commandments and the prescriptions of the Law of Moses.

Along with some other sapiential writs in the Masoretic Text, The Book of Proverbs is a collection of short adages, aphorisms, apophthegms, maxims, paroemia, pithy sayings, and sententiae in use amongst the children of Israel. It is a summa of Judaic spirituality and knowledge of the world meant to instruct the Chosen People on righteous living and on how to acquire celestial wisdom.

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The Hebrew word for “proverb” is *mashal* – it does not denote just a gnome; it has a wider meaning, since it can indicate a similitude, a parable, or an allegory.⁵ The first section of The Book of Proverbs (chapters 1-9) is a eulogy of wisdom. There a wise father addresses his child as “fili mi” and gives him advice and a number of admonitions. The precepts imparted are of various kinds. They can be summed up as follows: escape the paths of vice (1:7-19), seek wisdom (1:20-33), recognise its fruits (2:1-22), follow the Lord in all wisdom (3:1-26), live with neighbours in peace (3:27-35), seek the blessings of the wise (4:1-26), embrace not immoral women (5:1-23), be not a guarantor, sluggard, deceitful (6:1-15), avoid six things the Lord hates (6:16-19), beware adulterous women (6:20-35), escape a whorish woman since she leads to hell (7:1-27), desire wisdom greatly (8:1-36), know the call of wisdom and avoid the enticements of folly (9:1-18). Since fools despise such wisdom and instruction (Prov. 1:7), the sage father firmly advises his son to be righteous in deed and in thought in order to seek God better. *Timor Domini* is both the beginning of wisdom and the key to heavenly knowledge (Prov. 9:10). Hence, those who abide by such precepts, not only shall prosper, but will find celestial wisdom and will acknowledge the mystery of God “in quo sunt omnes thesauri sapientiae et scientiae absconditi” (Col. 2:3). Such a fundamental principle of eschatology is found in the first section of The Book of Proverbs and it is rendered deliberately by the image of a father imparting some precious counsels and admonitions to his son.⁶

There is a close association between parts of The Book of Proverbs and some Near Eastern sapiential texts such as the Aramaic *The Words of Ahiqar*,⁷ the Akkadian *The Instructions of Šarruppak Son of Ubartu* and *The Counsels of...*

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⁶ Even though to a lesser extent than in chapters 1-9, the father-son topos also occurs throughout the remaining parts of The Book of Proverbs at 10:1; 15:20; 17:6; 19: 13, 18, 26-27; 23:15-28, 24:13-22; 27:11; 29:17; 31:1-9, 28-29. There are also a number of verses which aim to beseech children not to frustrate the teachings of their fathers and mothers, see Prov. 13:1; 17:25; 29:3; 30:17.

Wisdom, and the Babylonian The Wisdom of Šúpê-Amêlî. These writings are also characterised by the formulaic invocation “O my son!” and the warnings or exhortations are imparted by means of imperatives or in the form “you should (not)” or “you will”. The precepts therein are mainly of a practical nature; they deal with matters of daily life, economy, guidance on talk, proper behaviour and advice in terms of social relationships. But one also finds some counsels on religious issues and worship matters.10

There are also some close affinities between Proverbs 1-9 and Old Egyptian instructional literature. The Egyptian word sbôyet (“instruction” and/or “teaching”) is quite unique for the sapiential genre.11 Wisdom poetry of the Land of Pharaohs is often characterised by admonitory sayings and counsels from aged officials in the kingdom at the end of their successful career. The precepts imparted are rather practical. Their setting is the home of the viziers whose children are usually training as scribes or officers.12 Amongst these writs, the content of The Instructions of Amenemope is the closest to that of the Book of Proverbs. Amenemope shares several ethical principles on successful living.13

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exhorts his son to become a learned man,\textsuperscript{14} and beseeches him to seek heavenly knowledge and wisdom unceasingly.\textsuperscript{15}

Egyptian and Judaic traditions have always had a strong influence on each other. Both content and structure ("from an X father to a Y 'my' son") of these writings are a common stock of far-off, pan-oriental wisdom literature.\textsuperscript{16} Yet, there is a difference between Masoretic sapiential writs and its apocryphal, pseudo-biblical and heathen analogues of the aforementioned Akkadian, Aramaic, Babylonian and Egyptian sources. In fact, the latter texts contain lofty and trivial precepts to guide a young offspring. The addressee is generally the literal son of the addressor. Instead, Proverbs 1-9 is a collection of admonitory sayings and counsels to live righteously in order to come back to the presence of Yahweh. In the Book of Proverbs, the father/addressor is a prophet or a leader in Israel. His addressee is not as explicit as in non-Masoretic writs. Biblical precepts are extended to all of God’s sons in virtue of the promise which Yahweh made unto the Patriarchs of old (Gen. 18:19, Ex. 12:24, Deut. 4:9-11). Such a higher wisdom is imparted by means of heavenly maxims. The Father Himself leads and guides His children here on Earth. If one abides by those celestial gnomes, God’s plan will not be frustrated and the hearts of the fathers and those of their children will be sealed throughout eternity by those very bonds of heavenly wisdom.

2. Late Antiquity and the Anglo-Saxon Period

The \textit{Regula monachorum} (534) was written by Saint Benedict at the end of his contemplative life and hermitage at the grotto of Subiaco. It is a handbook of precepts meant to guide a coenobitic community under the jurisdiction of an abbot. It is divided into a prologue and seventy-three chapters. It is worthy of note that the former begins with a father’s heartfelt appeal for a son in Christ to labour in obedience: "Obscuta, o fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis


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tui, et admonitionem pii patris libenter excipe et efficaciter comple” (§ 1). The words of Saint Benedict recall “fili mi ausculata sermones meos et ad eloquia mea inclina aurem tuam” in the Book of Proverbs, 4:20. Yet, the father in the prologue of the Regula monachorum cannot be interpreted as God the Father exhorting one of His own servants to develop celestial virtues, since both the addressor and the addressee are to work out their own salvation “ut et regno eius mereamur esse consortes” (§ 49). Hence, one ought to read pius pater either as a father master counselling a novice, or rather as an abbot addressing a brother under his stewardship. In both cases, the use of the term filius for the addressee is fully appropriate. Instead, the addressor in the prologue is both magister and pater. Yet, he is not characterised either by traits of senility, nor by some outstanding sageness.

In Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (i.25), the Venerable Bede relates that the Roman Catholic faith reached Anglo-Saxon England in 597, when Pope Gregory the Great sent missionaries to the Bretwalda Æthelberht, king of Kent. The Anglo-Saxons were soon baptised; they had to give up the pagan beliefs and traditions of their forefathers. The Benedictine monks led by Saint Augustine planted the seed of a prolific monastic tradition. In the British Isles, monasteries soon became the only repositories of knowledge and made Anglo-Saxon England a true beacon of learning and scholarship throughout medieval Europe.

Besides the contemplative time of study, prayer and the Liturgy of the Hours, the major part of the daily routine of a monk was spent in the scriptorium. There poems were written down, copied and expurgated from

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their pagan content or references. They were revisited in a Christian perspective by the zeal of the new, fervent faith.22

Along with *The Fortunes of Men*, *Maxims I* and *Maxims II*, *The Rune Poem*, *The Second Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn*, *Soul and Body I*, and *Vainglory*, Old English *Precepts* is part of the body of sapiential poetry once prevailing in Anglo-Saxon England. Yet, *Precepts* is the only sapiential text in Old English literature where one finds the topos of a father/mentor giving advice or counselling his own son/disciple. For Ten Brink, *Precepts* is similar to the *Disticha Catonis*; its compiler was possibly influenced by The Book of Proverbs.23 If one interprets *Precepts* as a Christian text, the *frod fæder* (“a father of experience”) at l.1a represents a continuum of the biblical patriarchs of old instructing their sons or, in general, the Children of Israel.24 Instead, Hensen sees a close relationship between *Precepts*, biblical wisdom poetry and its corresponding Old Egyptian literature.25 Leaving aside any influence or a would-be source for a while, Lerer is right when he observes that the structures and methods of *Precepts* (and, in most cases, of wisdom poetry in the Exeter Book) employ the techniques of education.26

At the dawn of Anglo-Saxon studies, several scholars concurred that the poem had a heathen origin – especially if one compares *Precepts* to Old Norse

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Sigdrífsamál, Loddfáfnismál and Hávamál. The latter is a large collection of warnings and counsels from a wise father, Wodan, for the good living and survival of the offspring of men. Hávamál does not begin with and is not characterised by the recurring formulaic structure “from an X father to a Y ‘my’ son”. Yet, at the end of stanza 164 the þulr says: Nú ero Háva mál qveðín, | Háva hǫðlo i, | allþref yta somon “now the sayings of the High One are over, in the hall of the High One, they are precious to the sons of men”.\(^{27}\) One should also consider the figure of the þulr as an old sage, a man of wisdom and experience, meant to instruct the offspring about the ways of life. It is also noteworthy that, whether in disguise or not, Wodan himself is referred as a þulr. In the first stanza of Loddfáfnismál, one also reads: Mál er at þylja | þular stóli á “it is the time to declaim from the stall of the þulr”.\(^{28}\) At stanza 134, Loddfáfnir is counselled: At három þul | hlæðu aldregi “you should never laugh at the grey-haired þulr” – i.e. at Wodan. One cannot but associate the figure of Wodan as a þulr with his endowment of deep knowledge and wisdom at Mímis brunnr (see Völuspá 28 and Gylfaginning 14). That event made the High One also a powerful þulr and entitled him to impart heavenly precepts to the sons of men.\(^{29}\)

Despite the literary similarities with pagan Eddaic lays from Medieval Scandinavia, Old English poetry is often the result of Christian expurgation. Precepts clearly recalls the Decalogue and many issues in Proverbs 1-9.\(^{30}\) Hensen thinks that the frōd fæder must be taken literally as a parental title,


\(^{28}\) Loddfáfnismál is a collection of gnomes addressed to a mythological character called Loddfáfnir; this lay is contained in Hávamál 111-138.


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while McEntire projects the content of the poem in a monastic perspective. Thus, the father and son would refer respectively to a father master and a novice.\(^{31}\) Ralby’s research has further confirmed the influence of the Benedictine scriptorium behind the poem by showing the likeness of *Precepts* and the *Poenitentiale Pseudo-Ecgberti* IV.ixiv, lxvi in CCC 190 – especially for the counsel of silence.\(^{32}\) One ought also to consider the characterisation of the father in *Precepts*. At l.1a, the compiler introduces him as a *frod fæder* (“a father of experience”). He continues with a number of variations: *modsnottor mon, 1 maga cystum eald* (“a man wise in the soul, a person who waxed old in virtues”) at l.2, *poncsnottor guma* (“a learned man”) at l.21b, with the formulaic repetition together with a variation at l.53a: *fæder, frod guma* (“the father, a man of experience”), then he carries on with *eald fæder* (“the old father”) at l.59b, *gomola* (“the aged man”), *eald uðwita* (“the old sage”) at ll.65b and 66a, and *eald* (“the old man”) at l.77a. The aged and sage man counsels “his” young son, who is described as a *freobearn* (“noble son”) at l.1b and as a *modleof[m]ealga* (“beloved child”) at l.28a. The occurrence of variations for the child is not as rich. Attention must be paid to the delivery of the maxims and the feelings that prompt the father to counsel his offspring. The former wants to share some *wordum wisfæstum* and *mildum wordum* (“wise words” and “kind words”), respectively at ll.3a and 60b. He addresses his son with his very *breostgehygdum* (“the thoughts of his heart”), at l.22a. The final admonition *ond pec a wid firenum geheald* (“and always keep yourself from sin”) at l.94b confirms the solid Christian nature of this poem. Thus, whether a real father, a mentor, an abbot, or a father master, the *fæder* in *Precepts* offers all his wisdom and knowledge to a cherished *bearn*, disciple, or novice for the benefit and salvation of a youthful, precious soul.

Though it is widely considered a heroic poem, *Beowulf* shows a high density of gnomes. Hrothgar’s speech is another instance of a mentor who is eager to endow with old wisdom the prince of the Geats – a sui generis foster son.


The Danish king praises the heroic ideal of *mægen mid modes snyttrum* (“the strength within a wise spirit”) that he perceives in Beowulf (l.1706a). He also wants to train a young man to become a powerful king once back in his homeland. Hrothgar warns Beowulf since he catches a glimpse of unreflective confidence in the hero’s behaviour. The sermon can be divided into seven parts: introduction (ll.1700-1709a), illustrative narrative (episode of Heremond, ll.1709b-1722a), first admonitory advice and gnomic observation (ll.1722b-1727), second illustration (the arrogant man, ll.1728-1757), second admonitory advice and gnomic observation (ll.1758-1768), third illustration (personal experience, ll.1769-1778a), and conclusion (ll.1778b-1784).

Hrothgar’s speech contains three separate gnomes of different length. But the maxims he utters are characterised by a dominant reminder of the inevitability of death. At ll.1724b-1757, Hrothgar calls upon the power of God in saving humankind and His mighty blessing. It is a powerful *memento mortis* that stresses how the doomed must fall. Then the king imparts some advice on how

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a prince should behave – especially on the importance of putting arrogance away (ll.1760b-1768). This gnome also deals with the widespread medieval theme of sapientia et fortitudo. The third maxim (ll.1774-1775a) expands on the transience of mortality. It describes the sorrow-after-joy which is typical of proverbial didacticism: *hwæt, me ðæs on eþle ðæwenden cwom, ðægryrn æfter gomene* (“Lo! What a change of fortune befell on my land, grief after delight”).

Maxims I A 4a reveals that *gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan* (“wise men must exchange wise words”). To the Anglo-Saxons, wisdom is meant to be shared. At ll.22-23a, one further reads that *red sceal mid snyttro ðæryht mid wisum ðæl til valum * (“counsel shall go with wisdom, justice with the sage, a good man with good men”). Maxims are a compilation of thoughts based on the knowledge of the world; they aim to instruct by the authoritative force of some ancient learning. It is the duty of the sage to counsel his son or any disciple under his stewardship. The maxims in *Precepts* are a true cross-section of Anglo-Saxon society, of its rules, values, and beliefs on the ethical code. In *Beowulf* and in other non-wisdom poems, the scop often turns to gnomic poetry to elevate his register to make his lay or narration more solemn. He creates a binding link of social interdependence. Thus, gnomes are the supreme literary device used as a didactic instrument. Through them, fathers or mentors impart truth and wisdom to their sons or disciples by the ancient power of authoritative lore to teach them the most important lessons of life.


3. Later Medieval Influences and Shakespeare’s Hamlet

Albertanus of Brescia’s De amore et dilectione Dei et proximi et aliarum rerum et de forma vitae (1238), Ars loquendi et tacendi (1245), and Liber consolationis et consilii (1246) are three social treatises addressed to his three sons Vincent, Stephan, and John. Albertanus’s works are based on both Biblical and secular sources. They contain a number of sacred and ethical principles from the Book of Proverbs and Seneca the Younger’s Epistulae morales ad Lucilium. Amongst the three treatises, Liber consolationis et consilii is the most significant as for the father-to-son topos. Due to its prosaic nature, it does not show the recurring formulaic device “fili mi” at the beginning of each chapter, save for the introductory words of the text. Afterwards, Albertanus instructs his son John on the causes of human violence and urban vengeance by telling him the story of Melibee. In the incipit, Albertanus also explains the reason why he dedicates Liber consolationis et consilii to John: “Quoniam multi sunt, qui in adversitatibus et tribulationibus taliter affliguntur et deprimuntur, [...] ut de malo in pejus cadant: ideo tibi, filio meo Johanni, [...] circa prædicta consilium et consolationem impertiri”. Albertanus asserts the importance of imparting counsels to one’s children. His statement recalls Saint Paul’s words: “ut iam non simus parvuli fluctuantes et circumferamur omni vento doctrinae in nequitia hominum in astutia ad circumventionem erroris” (Eph. 4:14). Hence, Albertanus’s aim is not only to inform his son of the causes of human violence and urban vengeance in his society. Besides, Albertanus’s counsels are meant to offer John some guidelines in order to deal successfully with such issues.

Middle English literature witnessed the production of courtesy books. Sometimes they are written in verse and contain admonitory sayings for prospective, young courtiers – mainly aristocratic, male children. These texts are often addressed to a child, calling him by name. They were meant to advise on

a variety of aspects: from domestic issues to table etiquette, personal conduct, outward appearance and behaviour, and clothing. Both language and vocabulary are straightforward. These texts are made of pithy utterances and instructions are generally imparted with imperatives.

Amongst fifteenth century courtesy books, How the goode man ta\textsuperscript{3} hys sone deals with the need of personal righteousness and of avoiding backbiting. The father wants his son to learn good manners and self-control in speech: “And, son, thi tongue thou kepe also, \| And tell not all thynge that thou maye, \| For thi tongue may be thy fo” (ll.33-35). Besides, the father exhorts his son to develop Christ-like attributes and keep the commandments. By doing so, his offspring will be able to “[…] purchasse paradys” (l.92). How the goode wife ta\textsuperscript{3} hyr daughter is a collection of reflections on Christian duties and virtues, and the importance of church attendance – for instance, the mother counsels her "dere daughter” to “Serve God and kepe thy chyrche” (l.5) and “Gladly loke thou pay thy tythes” (l.11). Like How the goode man ta\textsuperscript{3} hys sone, the parental counsels are meant to guide both mother and daughter back to God’s presence – to the “hyghe blysse, \| That never more fro us schall mysse” (ll.207-208).

In the first book of his Instructions to his Son (ca. 1450), Peter Idley offers a verbatim translation of Albertanus of Brescia’s treat De amore et dilectione Dei et proximi et aliarum rerum et de forma vitae (1238). Idley just substituted his and his son’s names for Albertano’s and his son’s. His concept of the duties of parenthood (and the role of a father in sharing wisdom with a child) is the same as the Italian jurist’s two centuries earlier. The second part of Idley’s writ also deals with keeping the commandments and offers advice on the deadly sins.

The father-son theme also occurs in Shakespeare’s Hamlet when Polonius imparts some admonitory sayings to Laertes on his relationship with friends, the choice of clothing, and behaviour when challenged by danger (1.3.57-81). Scholars have questioned whether such advice has wisdom of some sort even if

47 See Shuffelton, pp.35ff.
49 Albrecht Classen, Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005, p.207.
several lines have passed into our ordinary speech in the forms of proverbs and they end in a way that raises the remarks to a higher ethical standard. Polonius’ main purpose seems to teach Laertes aurea mediocris. Berkelman believes that “if Laertes is intelligent enough to profit from such equivocal guidance, he is intelligent enough to prosper without it”. One may wonder why Shakespeare had Polonius state such outwardly banal, commonplace truths to his son. Besides, one should then consider whether this was an ordinary genre in Elizabethan literature or, rather, the echo of a long-lasting tradition. For Dowden, Polonius’s wisdom “is not the outflow of a rich or deep nature, but the little accumulated hoard of a long and superficial experience” and he takes them as a copy-book of maxims.

Some critics believe that Shakespeare turned to several sources to write this passage. Rushton shows how John Lyly’s Euphues, or the Anatomy of Wit (1578) parallels Polonius’s precepts, whilst Bond indicated a closer correspondence to similar clusters one finds in the advice given by Euphues to Philautus. Bennett, in analysing the passages in Lyly’s work, pointed out how the latter seems to have borrowed from the Latin versions of Ad Demonicum, an epistle by Isocrates to the son of his friend. From 1517 onwards, this work spread rapidly throughout Europe by means of Erasmus’ Latin translation, which lent it additional prestige. Beardsley points out how Shakespeare in

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55 To Lathrop, the latter work was widely accepted with “reverence and enthusiasm as a systematic outline of practical duty”; see Henry B. Lathrop, Translations From
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Hamlet – and Pedro Calderón de la Barca in El alcalde de Zalamea (1636)66 – had paraphrased and adjusted Isocrates’s original for both cultural and dramatic purposes. This is a vivid witness that Isocrates’ precepts were regarded as suitable advice for young men.

Burrant suggests that Shakespeare derived several proverbs used in his plays from Erasmus’s commentary on the Disticha Catonis and he had possibly turned to a number of translations of the Cato-book.57 Baldwin believes that Shakespeare might have also been influenced by an additional Latin primer, Sententiae Pueriles by Leonard Culmann (d. 1562). In Shakespeare’s time, Erasmus’s translation of the Disticha was available through Richard Taverner’s Catonis Disticha Moralia ex Castigatione D. Erasmi (1540). There were also two other works from Erasmus, Mimi Publiani and Flores Sententiae (ca. 1525), both designed for the instruction of children.58 Taverner’s Catonis Disticha Moralia is addressed to “the tender youth of England”. However, in the latter texts, the theme of a father imparting precepts to his son is extended from its main patriarchal domain to a wider mentor-disciple context.59

Bowers claims that Shakespeare might have also had in mind some late medieval sources such as Idley’s Instructions to His Son or Chaucer’s Tale of

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57 See Preceptes of Cato, with annotacions of D. Erasmus of Roterodame, verye profitable for all menne, transl. Robert Burrant, London: Grafton, 1553. Shakespeare seems to echo the content of such a source in the mock-lecture on keeping bad company, which Falstaff gives to prince Hal in I Henry IV (1.4).


59 For Taverner’s work see Catonis Disticha Moralia ex castigatione D. Erasmi Roterodami una cum annotationibus et scholiis Richardi Tauerneri Anglico idiomata conscriptis, London: Bankes, 1540.
Melibee (ca. 1380)\textsuperscript{60} – both inspired by the proverbial wisdom devised by Albertanus of Brescia’s aforementioned treatises addressed to his three sons.\textsuperscript{61} Nonetheless, despite the popularity of Idley and Chaucer in the sixteenth century, Shakespeare’s knowledge of these authors is chiefly a conjecture as there is no specific reference in Hamlet. Some critics picture Polonius’ warnings to Laertes as a recurrent theme used in Elizabethan England. Doloff explains that Shakespeare had drawn from Thomas Tusser’s *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* (1573).\textsuperscript{62} For Berkelman, another conceivable source could be Sir Thomas Hoby’s *The Courtyer of Count Baldesser Castilio* (1561), a translation of Castiglione’s *Il libro del cortegiano*.\textsuperscript{63} And French proposes that one might consider a possible relationship between Polonius’s advice to Laertes and William Cecil, Lord Burghley’s precepts to his son Robert Cecil (1584).\textsuperscript{64}

Despite the sources Shakespeare might have turned to, the occurrence of such a theme in Hamlet recalls sapiential literature and especially the far-flung tradition of father-to-son wisdom one finds in Proverbs 1-9. Even though Polonius’s speech is part of a secondary episode in the play, like the compiler of Beowulf, Shakespeare renders it by means of a compact sequence of aphoristic, gnomic lines. In Hamlet, one cannot but notice a narrowing in the number of the precepts imparted. Nonetheless, the father-to-son theme is still characterised by


\textsuperscript{61} It is worthy of note that Chaucer’s tale is a faithful rendering of the *Livre de Melibée et de Dame Prudence* (1336), ascribed to Renaud de Louen, which is in turn a translation of Albertanus’s treatise *Liber consolationis et consilii*. See Hildegard L.C. Tristram, “Aggregating versus Integrating Narrative: Original Prose in England from the Seventh to the Fifteenth Century”, in *Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im englischen Mittelalter*, ed. Willi Erzgräber and Sabine Volk, Tübingen: Narr, 1988, p.54.


\textsuperscript{63} Berkelman, p.380.

the need of a loving parent to instruct a child, so that “audiens sapiens sapientior erit et intelligens gubernacula possidebit” (Prov. 1:5).

All in all, the works considered in this essay have the same topos: they are the endeavour of a father/mentor to guide his child/disciple on some specific issues. The sage often speaks to the addressee calling him by name and utters his maxims in the imperative. The addressee is never fictional. Writers turn to such a father-to-son pattern not only to instruct their own children, but also to reach out to all those who seek guidance and words of wisdom on a specific matter. This theme has never lost its peculiar essence despite the different literary sensibilities and styles. In fact, throughout history, children always needed warnings and counsels in order to be successful in their own lives; the advice is delivered by a caring father/mentor who, by means of his wisdom and example, will lead them in the world in which they live. Despite cultural, religious and national differences, the rich legacy of moral instructions is an unfailling path which accompanies sons or disciples on a successful course. The hearts of the fathers will turn to those of their children (Mal. 4:6). And the hearts of the children will be filled with the knowledge provided by their fathers. Hence, they will pursue a successful course and will be guided by the wisdom of old – the truest of all compasses.