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The Poetics of Old Age in Greco-Roman Epic

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Oral Presentation 1.6

THE POETICS OF OLD AGE IN GRECO-ROMAN EPIC

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The following presentation will explore the respect given and the prejudices toward old men in ancient Greece and Rome through evidence given in its epic poetry, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid*. By studying the characters in such works, it becomes apparent that while elderly men were held with high esteem by the populace for their wisdom and experiences, they were also seen as senile and physically incapacitated. Moreover, old age in itself was feared for its physical degradation and its imminence to death. We shall uncover such beliefs with respect to old men through the elderly characters in epic and their functions of wise counsel and family head, then by studying their physical weaknesses and general apathy toward life.

In the area of wise counsel, we shall peruse the gift of experience that the elderly give the younger generations, their interest for fulfilling the common good, and their connection to the past. In the next sub-topic, the family structure of Greco-Roman society will be touched upon to stress the importance of father figures in epic, both on the battlefield and at peace. Furthermore, the discussion will continue on the *pathos* or 'suffering' of old age in the areas of loss of heroic stature, the concept of the "threshold of old age," and the pity and loss of respect bestowed upon the elderly by the younger generations. The presentation will then end with a realization of the overall importance of old men in Greco-Roman society.