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**ATTITUDES TO OLD AGE AND AGEING
IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY**

By

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A thesis submitted for the Doctorate of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

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This thesis begins by exploring the threshold of old age in the Middle Ages. The subjectivity of ageing is rehearsed and the difficulties of identifying the elderly by physical or mental traits. A discussion on fixing the starting point of old age using the *aetates hominis* and relevant medical and legislative sources follows.

The thesis continues with an examination of attitudes towards biological ageing. Chapter Two adopts the physiology of Galen (129-199) in relation to ageing as a starting point and follows its development in the Middle Ages. Ancient and medieval attitudes to the fundamental question of whether ageing is natural or pathological are also considered. The pathologies which were associated with old age in the medieval period are identified and the various lines of treatment which were prescribed for them are assessed.

The theological view on ageing in relation to sin is determined next. The attitude of spiritual physicians to elderly penitents is explored by examining the *libri poenitentiales*. Theological and physiological attitudes are then compared. The theme of wholeness and disintegration which is highlighted by that comparison is carried into the following chapter which considers images of old age in medieval literature. In particular, the old person's proximity to physical corruption is explored against the background of medieval society's fascination with death and the cadaver.

Chapter Five attempts to mitigate the harsh view of life in old age in the literary sources by analysing notions of the debt which children owed to aged parents and considering the means of social security which were available to the elderly when the family failed to support them. The ultimate purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the knowledge of medieval society's understanding of how and why humans aged and the attitude of that society to its liminal members.

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INTRODUCTION

The author of *Dives and Pauper* tells the story of an old man who transfers all of his wealth to his son and moves into his son's house. His son and daughter-in-law soon resent the aged father's presence in their home. They banish the old man to the porch where he falls ill. Suffering from cold and neglect the aged parent sends his grandson to beg for a blanket. The son responds by giving the boy a sack for his grandfather. The child, having learned from his father's attitude to his own father, tells his parent that he had better cut the sack in half and keep one part for himself when he is old.¹

This brief morality tale, written between 1405 and 1410, is a concentrated essay in the anxieties which afflict the aged regardless of the historical period to which they belong. The fear of financial loss, of social liminality, of lack of affection, of being sick and defenceless at the end of one's life are timeless fears.

At the end of the twentieth century the percentage of elderly people in society is increasing steeply. In a study published in 1994, the population of Scotland was calculated to be five million, one hundred thousand persons. Those over pensionable age (sixty years for women, and sixty-five for men) numbered nine hundred and nine thousand, nine hundred and forty-eight, which is slightly less than eighteen per cent of the population. By the year 2031 projections indicate that those of pensionable age will have risen by forty-four and a half per cent. Statistics for the population of the United States predict a similar surge suggesting that by 2050 people of pensionable age will form approximately twenty-five per cent of the population.²

¹ *Dives and Pauper*, ed. Heath Barnum, P., 2 vols., EETS, nos. 275, 280, London; New York; Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976, vol. 275, p. 311.

² Fell, S. and Foster, A., *Ages of Experience: A Survey of Attitudes and Concerns Among Older People Living in Scotland*, Age Concern Scotland, Scottish Consumer Council, Senior Studies Institute, University of Strathclyde, March 1994, p. 2. For United States statistics, see Posner, R. A., *Aging and Old Age*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 39.

The impending swell of aged persons has considerable implications for society in general. The elderly will possess substantial economic power. The issues which concern them and the attitudes of younger people who will service their requirements will have added significance.

The importance of the greying population has already been recognised by the emergence of the “Third Age”.³ This euphemism for old age is more than a label. It signifies the beginning of the transformation of the image of the elderly from ground down and worn out men and women to one of biological, social and spiritual culmination. Since the classic concerns of the old man in *Dives and Pauper* still apply today and are likely to become even more pressing in the next century, an enquiry into the management of the same problems in medieval society becomes increasingly pertinent.

The fear of loss of physical and mental wholeness is one of the major anxieties of ageing. In cases where this anxiety is extreme there are two classic types of response; either the subject refers to himself as old at a relatively early age and exaggerates the pathologies which are associated with ageing or, conversely, the reality of physical decline is denied.⁴

The latter case, where the inevitability of ageing is rejected, results in complex and sometimes fantastical schemes to preserve youth. Modern medicine is paying ever-greater attention to old age as a biological engineering problem. Geneticists are in pursuit of the elusive “ageing gene” which could be disabled to prevent the onset of decline.⁵ Genetic research may or may not produce results but the pursuit of the elusive gene is reminiscent of the historical quest for the “Fountain of Youth”.

³ See Laslett, P., *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age*, 2nd edn., Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996.

⁴ Michaelangelo and Erasmus exhibited the former type of response to ageing. See below, pp. 18-19.

Although interest in magical rejuvenation was more pronounced in the Renaissance than in the Middle Ages there are medieval texts on the prospect of prolonging life indefinitely. “Mandeville’s Travels” identifies the location of the “Fountain of Youth” as the centre of an Indian jungle, and quasi-medical texts such as the “Book of Quinte Essence” hinted at the possibility of lifespans of hundreds of years similar to those recorded in the Bible for the antediluvian period (Gen. 5: 1-32).⁶

This thesis however, is not concerned with fantasy and quackery. The first part of the chapter entitled “Ageing and the Body” is an exploration of the medieval understanding of the physiological mechanism of how humans aged. Concepts such as the biological “innate heat” and the “radical moisture” which are fundamental to the medieval understanding of ageing are discussed.

Part two of the same chapter continues with the practical approach to the problem of attitudes to ageing by identifying the pathologies which were associated with senescence in the Middle Ages. Wherever possible documents by practising physicians are utilised to discover the medieval approach to the treatment of pathologies which are common in old age. The Arabic physician Avicenna (c. 980-1037) is of universal importance in this respect. Avicenna’s “Canon of Medicine” and complementary works are considered in association with records of the practice of two English physicians, John of Gaddesden (c.1280-1361), and Gilbertus Anglicus (c.1207-1240).⁷

⁵ For references on the genetic theory of ageing, see below, p. 44-5, n. 3.

⁶ *Mandeville’s Travels*, ed. Hamelius, P., EETS, (2 vols. in 1), no. 153-4, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1919-23, p. 113. *The Book of Quinte Essence or the Fifth Being, that is to say, Man’s Heaven (attributed to Hermes Trismigistus)*, ed. Furnivall, F. J., EETS, no. 16, o.s., London: Trubner, revised, 1889. For an overview of ideas on rejuvenation see, Gruman, G. J., “A History of Ideas about the Prolongation of Life: the evolution of prolongevity hypotheses to 1800”, in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*; 1966, n.s. vol. 56, pt. 9, pp. 5-97, “The Fountain Theme”, pp. 24-7. Also, Minois, G., *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, tr. Hanbury Tenison, S., Cambridge: Oxford Polity Press in assoc. Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 240-1.

⁷ Gruner, O. C., *Avicenna and the Canon of Medicine: Incorporating a Translation of the First Book*, London: Luzac, 1930. Cholmeley, H. P., *John of Gaddesden and the Rosa Medicinæ*,

Another Englishman, Roger Bacon (1214-92) also produced a text on old age which is of clinical interest. *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* is concerned with both the theory of ageing (derived from classical and Arabic sources), and with practical intervention or prevention of disease.⁸ Bacon's use of alchemical notation has tainted the treatise with the suspicion of occultism thus degrading it to some extent as a piece of serious medical writing, but there is much to commend the work as an early essay in preventative medicine rather than as a manual of magic potions. Bacon's awareness of the influence of environmental factors on disease is not unique but it is unusually acute.⁹ Equally, the existence of a medical treatise devoted to ageing is evidence that the importance of the elderly and their complaints was recognised.

In a theocentric society such as the Middle Ages, the spiritual dimension in ageing cannot be disregarded. If it is important to understand medieval beliefs concerning how men aged in biological terms it is also necessary to explore medieval attitudes on why mankind was subject to ageing in relation to salvation history.

Theological views on the Christian significance of ageing in relation to both original sin and personal sin are examined in the first part of "Ageing and the Church". The gradual disintegration of the ageing body was a convenient analogy for the corruption brought about by sin. Some ecclesiastical writers therefore portrayed the elderly as living essays in the consequences of the "Fall of Mankind".¹⁰ Furthermore, since each stage of life in the medieval period was associated with particular vices, the elderly had a specific profile in relation to sin, which theoretically distinguished them from their juniors. How far this

Oxford, 1912. Handerson, H. E., *Gilbertus Anglicus, Medicine of the Thirteenth Century*, Cleveland: Cleveland Medical Library Association, 1918.

⁸ Bacon, R., *De retardatione accidentium senectutis cum aliis opusculis de rebus medicinalibus*, ed. Little, A. G. and Withington, E., Oxford, 1928.

⁹ See below, pp. 70-1.

¹⁰ This image is prevalent in the *Contemptus Mundi* literature. See below, pp. 156ff.

theoretical image of the elderly had any practical relevance is gauged by examining the attitudes of ecclesiastics as spiritual physicians towards aged penitents. In particular, the comparison of physiological and theological attitudes to the aetiology of despair, a condition which is often associated with the elderly, is useful in illuminating medieval attitudes on the flexibility of the administration of penance.¹¹

A similar comparison is also of value in identifying contrasts between ideas of wholeness and disintegration in relation to ageing. In the early Middle Ages St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote of ageing in terms of the fulfilment of the pilgrimage of life and spiritual rebirth while the physiologists stressed degeneration. In the twelfth century ecclesiastics adopted somatic spirituality and came closer to the negative attitude of the physiologists in the *Contemptus Mundi* literature; a genre which accentuates, among other things, the inevitable disintegration of the flesh through old age and death as a means of provoking repentance.

The theme of wholeness and disintegration in relation to old age, which emerged from the physiological and theological sources, is pursued in part two of the chapter dealing with attitudes to old age in medieval literature. The old person's proximity to death and corruption is explored against the background of attitudes to death in general. Special attention is given to medieval versions of the "Danse Macabre" and related sources to discern attitudes to death through old age in a society accustomed to sudden extinction in youth. The period after the plague of 1348 is interesting in relation to this. Statistics suggest that in the aftermath of the Black Death, the percentage of elderly in the population rose.¹² The resulting inter-generational conflict as the young competed unsuccessfully, particularly in the marriage market, with their seniors may have perpetuated and enhanced the

¹¹ See below, pp. 118-19.

¹² For confirmation of the rise in the elderly population see Razi, Z., *Life and Death in a Medieval Parish: Economy Society and Demography in Halesowen 1270-1400*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980, discussed below, p. 21, n. 23, and Minois, *History of old Age*, pp. 212-217.

predominantly negative images of old people in medieval literature.¹³ The evidence of inter-generational conflict suggested by medieval literary sources as the result of a rise in the elderly population is of some interest in the light of the demographic surge of the elderly, which is predicted for the early twenty-first century.

The negativity of the majority of medieval literary sources in general is rehearsed in part one of Chapter Four and although their pessimism is indisputable, an attempt has been made to search out and discuss any positive literary strands concerning old age.

The relentless pessimism of the literary sources indicates that a test of the extent to which such negative images influenced actual attitudes to the elderly is necessary. The last chapter of the thesis “The Debt of Rearing” returns, therefore, to the issues which concerned the old man in *Dives and Pauper*. The balance between natural affection and mutual advantage between parent and child is a perpetual problem. Furthermore, the nature of this father-child relationship acquires added significance in a feudal society which emphasized the duty of reciprocal obligation. Contemporary texts and Biblical passages underlined the duty of children to care for parents.¹⁴ Similarly, community pressure, such as that brought to bear on Margery Kempe (b. c.1373) to remain at home and nurse her aged husband may have protected the impoverished elderly to some extent.¹⁵ It is nevertheless impossible to gauge how many families who appeared to be caring for elderly dependants, actually subjected them to elder abuse. The presence or absence of affection between individuals in medieval families is hard to ascertain but the letters of the fifteenth-century Paston family suggest that filial affection, in that family at least, was not strong.¹⁶ The level of influence which the aged person could retain through control of family resources was therefore of immense

¹³ See below, pp. 129ff.

¹⁴ Below, pp. 197ff.

¹⁵ Below, p. 212.

¹⁶ The Pastons are discussed below, pp. 201ff.

importance for security in old age. The childless elderly or those with insufficient resources to press relatives into caring for them were at the mercy of the almshouse authorities or from other ad hoc sources of charity such as the commercial or religious guild.

The elderly who had a little land or property with which to bargain could ensure a relatively comfortable old age by recourse to law. Records of retirement documents in the English manor courts, and similar contracts drawn up between the elderly and religious houses or hospitals show that some individuals were active in providing for their own security in old age. Furthermore, the contracts are of particular interest because, most unusually, they provide an indication of the practical anxieties of old age in the medieval period which were written (indirectly) by the elderly themselves. The documents reveal that independence, stability, and a measure of privacy were of utmost importance to the medieval aged.

The paucity of sources which complement the various types of retirement documents, that is those which were written by the elderly themselves, is a fundamental problem of research in this subject. At thirty-five years of age, Roger Bacon was still a young man when he wrote his treatise on old age. Equally, although St. Jerome's portrait of the centenarian Paul of Concordia is an optimistic view of old age, we hear nothing of the reality of being one hundred years of age from Paul himself.¹⁷ Margery Kempe bewails the difficulties of ministering to an aged husband but apart from scarce material such as the petition of Thomas Hostelle to Henry VI (1429) there is little direct witness of dependency in old age.¹⁸

A direct route to the elderly is thus unavailable but they are not absent from the sources. They exist as shadowy presences which are amalgamated into the larger

¹⁷ For Jerome to Paul of Concordia, see below, p. 80.

¹⁸ Below, p. 219-20.

classes of the poor and sick. A pictorial analogy is useful in defining the problem; the elderly can be viewed only in the negative not in the photograph. Thus, although sources such as the medieval handbooks of penance make very little direct reference to age, it is nevertheless possible to learn something of attitudes to the elderly as penitents by lateral investigation.¹⁹ In the case of the penitential material this involves scrutiny of the treatment therein of the particular sins which were associated with the elderly, that is, of avarice and sloth. An assessment of the complex system of relaxations and commutations of penance which were available generally for the physically frail is also useful.

In the case of the medical sources on ageing the most obvious limitation is that they are based on the erroneous physiology of Galen which persisted until Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood in the seventeenth century.

It is chastening to read the seventeenth-century physician Richard Browne's English translation of Roger Bacon's thirteenth-century treatise on old age in the knowledge that the translator's purpose in making Bacon's work available to his colleagues was not an historical exercise but a contribution to "modern medicine" since he considered that Bacon's remedies were still of value four hundred years later. However Browne's commentary on the alchemical notation which was used by Bacon to protect his work from unsuitable readers is immensely helpful.²⁰

Another drawback of the medical sources is that the majority were written by theorists and not by clinicians. It is impossible to know to what extent medical practitioners adhered to the lines of treatment prescribed by Galen and Avicenna with regard to elderly patients since there are few sources which could legitimately be called specific case histories.

¹⁹ See *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A translation of the principal libri poenitentiales*, McNeill, J. T. and Gamer, H. M., New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990.

²⁰ Bacon, R., *The Cure of Old Age and the Preservation of Youth*, tr. Browne, R., London, 1683.

The practitioner's handbooks produced by John of Gaddesden and Gilbertus Anglicus alleviate this problem to some degree but there is little direct mention of old age. Treatment regimes for the elderly have to be inferred from outlines of treatment plans for conditions which were known to be common in old age but which are not referred to by the authors as pathologies which were associated with the elderly.

The mention in John of Gaddesden's work of the efficacious treatment of victims of smallpox by local wise women is however intriguing.²¹ In mentioning these women the author is admitting that unqualified practitioners worked successfully alongside professional men. The treatment regimes which the women advised would have been influenced by knowledge derived from the observation of disease and its treatment which had been transmitted orally from generation to generation rather than by contemporary medical theory. It is likely that the majority of the elderly received treatment from this source. It is regrettable that local wise women were not of the literate class and have therefore left no record of their approach to the pathologies of old age.

In the study of historical gerontology, there is no particular class of source whether documentary, medical or literary which can be called rich but literary material on age is relatively the most abundant. The difficulty with this class of document is the artistic distortion of the physical and mental traits of the elderly. Old men and women as avaricious, whining, aching physical wrecks appear with disturbing regularity. George Coffman has traced this literary topos from antiquity in the works of Horace and Maximian to the age of Chaucer.²² The theme is tenacious and extends throughout the fifteenth century and beyond.

The popularity of the negative image was not the result of the lack of a positive template for literary old age. In *De senectute*, Cicero (106-43 B.C.) rehearses the

²¹ See below, p. 66.

²² Coffman, G. R., "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer: Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea" in *Speculum*, 9, 1934, pp. 249-277. See below pp. 137-8.

attractive features of ageing. An old man could still enjoy the wise exercise of authority, the company of friends or devoting himself to the land. The author believed that any negative character traits in the elderly person were congenital faults and not the product of age.²³ Yet there is barely a glimmer of Ciceronian old age in the medieval sources. Epic poems such as the “Song of Roland” and to some extent “Beowulf” which present an attractive picture of the aged war veteran are concerned with legendary old men and not with reality.²⁴

One of the most interesting literary pieces on old age concerns not old men but old women. This is the “Danse Macabre des Femmes”.²⁵ It is heavy with the formulaic artistic distortions which mar other literary sketches of the aged but it is unusual in that it concentrates on feminine characters and contains four aged roles and three others which are of value in relation to attitudes to old age in a genre which is generally lacking in direct references to old age. It is puzzling that it appears to have been overlooked by historians of medieval gerontology.

Although historians have not been slow to tackle the study of marginal groups of medieval society such as women or children there has been a certain reluctance to study gerontology. It is true that there has been a constant trickle of periodical material on the subject since the 1930s notably by Coffman (1934), Creighton (1967), Neibyl (1971), and Covey (1992).²⁶ The flow of books is slower but quickening. In 1983 Philippe Ariès predicted that: “There will now be studies about old people; ...if someone tackles the undergrowth, the university bulldozers

²³ Cicero, *De senectute*, Bennet, C. E. ed., 2nd edn., Bristol: Classical Press, 1985.

²⁴ *Beowulf*, ed. Radice, B., tr. Alexander, M., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988; *The Song of Roland*, tr. Sayers, D. L., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971. For a discussion of old age in epic poetry see below, pp. 142ff.

²⁵ *Danse Macabre of Women*, ed. Tukey Harrison, A. with Hindman, S. L., Kent, Ohio; London: Kent State Univ. Press, c. 1994. Discussed below, pp. 181ff.

²⁶ Coffman, “Old Age from Horace to Chaucer”; Creighton, G., “When Did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old?” in *Studies in the Renaissance*, 14, 1967, pp. 7-32; Neibyl, P. H., “Old Age, Fever, and the Lamp Metaphor” in *Journal Hist. Med. and Allied Sciences*, vol. 26, 1971, pp. 351-368 and Covey, C., “The Definitions of the Beginning of Old Age in History”, in *Int. Jnl. Of Ageing and Human Dev.*, 34, 4, 1992, pp. 325-337.

will soon follow and that there will soon be a whole library on old age".²⁷ The publication in the last sixteen years of a number of textbooks which are either wholly or partly concerned with old age perhaps confirms that Ariès' prediction is beginning to materialise.²⁸

A further problem in researching medieval gerontology is the complexity of the nature of old age and ageing. The subject is vast, many stranded, and the difficulty of identifying the elderly in the sources which are available makes the subject more amenable to wide-ranging studies such as those produced by Minois and Shahar rather than to more narrowly focussed enquiries.²⁹ The works which are cited with legitimate enthusiasm by Rosenthal as evidence of the surge of scholarly interest in medieval gerontology are all general in character and deal with old age only as a brushstroke on a bigger canvas.³⁰

T. G. Parkin has commented on the problem which the exhaustively disparate nature of the sources poses for every researcher in historical gerontology. He warns of the temptation of producing little more than "an unmade jigsaw puzzle" - a catalogue of references to old age which one hopes to fit together into an image of reality.³¹

This thesis attempts to avoid criticism on these lines by selecting representative specimens from the four classes of source with which it is concerned, namely:

²⁷ Ariès, P., "Une histoire de la vieillesse", in *Communications* no. 37, 1983, p. 54, cited in Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 4.

²⁸ Rosenthal, J. T., *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996; *Ageing and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. Sheehan, M. M., Univ of Toronto: Pontifical Institute Med. Studs., 1983; Minois, *History of Old Age*; Shahar, S., *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: Winter clothes us in shadow and pain*, tr. Lotan, Y., London; New York: Routledge, 1997.

²⁹ Minois, *History of Old Age*; Shahar, (1997), *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*.

³⁰ See Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, p. 192, n. 3. John Burrow's, *The Ages of Man: A study in Medieval Writing and Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, is an inquiry into the intellectual games which medieval scholars used to define age, similar to the earlier work, *Ages of Man* (1986), by Elizabeth Sears. Michael Goodich's approach in *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought 1250-1350*, Lanham MD: Univ. Press of America, 1989, is also broad in scope.

physiological, theological, literary and documentary. In addition, English samples have been preferred wherever the sources are of sufficient quantity and quality.

Rosenthal is in the vanguard in responding to this need for more detailed studies of senescence by providing a number of case studies of old age in the literate classes of late medieval England and by re-examining the age-related material of the “Inquisitions Post Mortem” which was researched by J. C. Russell in the 1940s.³² But at the present time, Sheehan has produced the best attempt at stimulating historians from a variety of disciplines to apply their particular skills to the problems of medieval old age.³³

In addition to focussing wherever possible on English attitudes to old age and ageing, this thesis endeavours to contribute to the knowledge of senescence in the Middle Ages by considering a hitherto neglected line of research in medieval gerontology, that is, to discovering to what extent the medieval approach to ageing was holistic. This line of research was undertaken by comparing and contrasting physiological and theological attitudes in both theory and practice. In particular, it is hoped that information gleaned from the *libri poenitentiales*, a relatively unexplored source in relation to gerontology will contribute to the knowledge of practical rather than literary responses to the elderly.

Perhaps the most perplexing question which confronts the gerontologist is the definition of the term “aged”. The word means different things to different people at different times. In the Middle Ages, the elderly had no group ethos, no rites of passage, no specific retirement age, no particular physical or psychological trait which identified them. Chapter One therefore concentrates on setting the parameters which define the elderly in this thesis.

³¹ Parkin, *Age and the Aged in Roman Society*, pp. 3-4.

³² Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*; Russell, J. C., *British Medieval Population*, Albuquerque: Univ. New Mexico Press, 1948.

³³ *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. Sheehan.

The attitude of any society to its weakest members; the disabled, the liminal, the worn out, says much about that society. Thus the purpose of this thesis is to comment on the ultimate value which medieval society placed on the human being through an assessment of the prevailing attitudes to its elderly population.

CHAPTER 1

The Perception of Old Age in the Middle Ages**(i) The Problem of Definition**

The aged human cannot be described with ease. The terms “elderly”, “old man” or “aged” are in common use but they defy straightforward definition.¹ Gerontology is a multidisciplinary subject, which involves biological, psychological and sociological lines of study. In an historical work concerning the Middle Ages it is permissible to add theology to these disciplines. None of these fields of study have produced a common standard or characteristic by which the person who is vaguely “full of years” may be roundly identified. Any research into human ageing must therefore address the problem of definition by drawing on all four categories.²

¹ The Old English words for old: *ald*, *elde*, and *eald* are derived from the Gothic verb *alan*, to nourish, (cf. Old Norse *ala*, and Latin *alere*). Ashley Crandell Amos discusses the etymology of these words in “Old English Words for Old” in *Ageing and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, pp. 95-105. In the *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, tr. Thorpe, B., 2 vols., London: Aelfric Society Publications, 1844-6, the elderly are referred to as *forwerod-worn-out men*; see vol. 1, pp. 201-2, 237 and vol. 2, p. 77. In medieval Latin literature *senex* is the term for old man. *Vetula* and less commonly *anus* denote an old woman. Chaucer refers to an old woman as *ribibe* or *rebeck* which is a musical instrument noted for its inharmonious sound when it is old and cracked; see *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. Saunders, J., London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1889, p. 275. The condition of old age is described as *senectus* and occasionally *canities* for the early stages of age and *senium*, *decrepitus* and *decrepita etas* for the final stages which would be the equivalent of senility in modern terms. T. G. Parkin refers to the etymology of the Indo-European base *sen-* in the Latin vocabulary in *Age and the Aged in Roman Society*, D. Phil. Oxford, 1992, p. 9, n. 1. Isidore, Bishop of Seville (560-636), rehearses many of the words used to describe age and ageing in *Etymologiae*, ed. Lindsay, W. M. and Wallace, M., 2 vols., Oxford: Clarendon 1911, vol. 2, Book XI, entitled, “On Man and Monsters”. The term *senpectae* to describe old men is unusual and occurs in the *Rule of St. Benedict* (c.480-526). It has been translated as “mature and wise monks” in *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, tr. Fry, T., Minnesota Liturgical Press, 1982, p. 52. Benedictine scholars are divided about the exact meaning of *senpectae*; Dom Benedict Hardy, Pluscarden Abby, Elgin, Morayshire. Personal Communication, May 1998; cf. *The Rule of St. Benedict*, tr. McCann, J., London: Burns, Oates Washbourne, 1952, (2nd imp. 1960), p. 183, n. 47.

² There is a vast literature on the nature of ageing. The most recent and accessible treatment is by Medina, J. J., *The Clock of Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Discussion on the problem of definition can also be found in Victor, C. R., *Old Age in Modern Society: A Textbook of Social Gerontology*, London: Croom Helm, c.1987, pp. 1-28, and in Strehler, B. L., *Time Cells and Aging* 2nd edn., New York; London: Academic

In the biological category, the most obvious method of identifying an elderly person is by judging the physical appearance and function of the subject. Does the absence of hair or its colour distinguish the old man? Perhaps his mottled skin, stiffness of joint or his loss of visual acuity identifies him? While the passage of time does in every case produce observable deleterious changes in the tissues and a decrease in the efficient functioning of the body, the extent to which each person experiences these changes varies. All of the above signs and symptoms may be present in a person of eighty but it is not impossible that an individual of thirty-five years or younger may present with one or more of the same conditions. Old age is not a convenient syndrome which can be identified by diagnosing the presence of three or more invariable signs of disease. On the contrary, the signs and symptoms which are associated with old age are diverse; individuals may experience many of them or very few and, to a greater or lesser degree at any stage of life. Some gerontologists believe that ageing as a process means nothing. Ageing is simply an increasing susceptibility to one disease or another. Richard A. Posner has described the situation thus:

...the only difference between an old person and a young one is that the former is likely to be sicker. If he happens not to be sicker, then he will be identical to a young person.³

Similarly, the old person cannot be marked by a particular state of mind. There are optimists and pessimists and a range of attitudes between these two extremes at any age in the general population. The subjective psychology of old age is illustrated by a remark attributed to Bernard Baruch (1870-1965) when he was eighty-five years of age, "To me, old age is always fifteen years older than I am".⁴

Press, 1977, pp. 1-16. The chronological and social aspects of ageing will be discussed in this chapter. Theological aspects will be reserved for Chapter Three.

³ Posner, *Aging and Old Age*, p. 17.

⁴ Baruch, B., "News Reports", 20 August, 1955 in *International Thesaurus of Quotations*, ed. Tripp, R. T., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 440, 646.8.

Simone de Beauvoir also explores the subjectivity of ageing in her book, “Old Age”.⁵ She assumes that a person of sixty years is on the threshold of old age⁶ and comments that perception of the self for such a person comes from two sources: from the information about self which the person receives from the objective onlooker regarding sixty year olds and secondly, knowledge which arises from within the self. She writes, “...our private, inward experience does not tell us the number of our years,..” The mind grasps old age with difficulty because the inner self regards old age as an alien condition relating to others. Thus de Beauvoir asks the question: “Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?”⁷

The authoress records her own consternation when she overhears two students who have just attended a lecture she has given. One remarks to the other: “So Simone de Beauvoir is an old woman”. The subject of their exchange was shocked to hear herself described thus and might have derived some comfort from the words of Moses Maimonides who also wrote on the subjectivity of age: “And who is an old woman? All those who are called old, and who do not care”.⁸

Modern research on the psychology of ageing supports the literary models mentioned above. In “The Psychology of Ageing: Theory Research Intervention” Janet K. Belsky says that older people are reluctant to attribute advanced years to themselves:

⁵ de Beauvoir, S., *Old Age*, tr. O’Brien, P., London: Deutsch: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1972.

⁶ Anthropologists determine sixty years as a reasonable threshold of old age. Similarly sociological and medical investigations into old age take sixty as a convenient starting point. Developmental psychologists also treat sixty as the beginning of old age. See Levinson, D. J., *The Seasons of Man’s Life*, New York: Knopf, 1978, pp. 20, 28.

⁷ de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, pp. 283-4.

⁸ Maimonides, M., *Misha Torah Sefer Kedusha, Hilkhoh Issure Bi’ah*, c. 9 par. 5, cited in Shahar (1997), *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 13.

In a study of people aged 60 and over (Bultena & Powers, 1978), when respondents were asked whether they thought of themselves as middle-aged, elderly, or old, 75% checked the first choice, only 10% the last. When the same subjects were interviewed 10 years later – now all aged 70 or more – their answers had changed, but not as much as we might expect. One third still called themselves “middle-aged”. Only one-fourth felt they deserved the label “old”.⁹

Even after the age of eighty years, one quarter of the men interviewed and one fifth of the women said that the word “old” did not apply to them. People who had shifted their identity to old over the ten year period attributed their changed position to negative events. It appears therefore that for the majority of people the impetus to think of themselves as old does not come from within but is the result of extraneous information. The onlooker such as the student who called Simone de Beauvoir an old woman in her hearing informed the writer that she was old. She had not thought of herself in those terms before that event. The transformation of age had overtaken her slowly and largely unrecognised.

Writing in the early Middle Ages, St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) had already described this gradual and imperceptible nature of ageing, which so shocked Simone de Beauvoir. Augustine divided the process of ageing into six stages. He writes that the boundaries between each age are not clearly defined but on the contrary merge into each other. To the “self” one age does not terminate so that another can begin. The sense of self is constant, whole and untouched throughout life. He says:

By means of these divisions or stages of age, you will not change from one stage to another, but staying the same, you will always know newness. For the second age will not follow so that an end may be put to the first; nor will the use of the third mean the ruin of the second; nor will the fourth be born so that the third may die; nor will the fifth envy the staying power of the fourth; nor will the sixth suppress the fifth. Although the ages do not come into being at one and the same time, they continue together in

⁹ The study referred to in the extract by Bultena, G. L. and Powers, E. A. is “Denial of aging: Age identification and reference group orientations” in *Jnl. Of Gerontology*, 1978, 33, pp. 748-754. Belsky, J. K., *The Psychology of Aging: Theory, Research, Interventions* 2nd edn., Pacific Grove, Calif.:Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, c.1990, p. 4.

harmony with one another in the soul, whose relationship with God is right, and they will conduct you to the everlasting peace and tranquillity of the seventh stage.¹⁰

By Augustine's reckoning there can be no real appreciation of the beginning of old age since the real self is ageless. In this view the old man is the only complete man since he alone is ripe with all the other stages of life. The same appreciation of the gradual and imperceptible nature of ageing which was researched by Belsky and experienced by de Beauvoir in the twentieth century is evident in Guillaume de Deguileville's, "Pilgrimage of Human Life" written c. 1330-31. In this piece, the personification of old age as an old crone says:

I am the one you never thought to see when you were with Youth. You said, "She is far away, she will not come for a long time. She goes along slowly, with feet of lead. She cannot move along. I have plenty of time to enjoy myself." Now I tell you truly I do have feet of lead and I go along slowly but, as they say, little by little one goes a long way. Even though I have gone slowly, I have still caught up with you. And I bring you news that Death, who spares no one, is coming to you. I am her messenger and you could have no more truthful messenger. My companion [Sickness] sometimes lies, often because something opposes her that will not let her deliver her message, but nothing can keep me from telling it truly. My name is Old Age, the feared, the pale, the one with wrinkles and a white head – and very often a bald one – the one people should honour greatly and look to for counsel, for I have seen the past and I have seen much that is good or evil put to the test.¹¹

Although Belsky's work indicates that most of her subjects did not think of themselves as old until they had completed at least two thirds of the human lifespan,¹² it is nevertheless true that anecdotal evidence suggests that the temperaments or situation of some people prompt them to label themselves as old well before they have completed half of the lifespan. Both Erasmus (1469?-1536) and Michaelangelo (1475-1564) called themselves old while

¹⁰ *Sermo ad Competentes* P. L. vol. 38, c.8, col., 1081. The English translation quoted in the text is by Dove, M., in *The Perfect Age of Man's Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986, pp. 48-9. Also quoted by Shahar, S., in "Who were Old in the Middle Ages?" in *Social Hist. Med.*, Dec. 1993, 6, pp. 313-341, (p. 315).

¹¹ de Deguileville, G., *The Pilgrimage of Human Life*, tr. Clasby, E., New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1992, p. 181.

¹² The maximum human lifespan is 120 years. See Victor, *Old Age in Modern Society*, p. 3. In the ancient and medieval period opinions ranged between seventy and one hundred and twenty years. See Sears, E., *The Ages of Man*, New Jersey; Guildford Surrey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986, pp. 40, 41, 43, 51, 101, 117-118.

they were still relatively young men.¹³ However Gilbert Creighton has expressed the view that Renaissance society did consider as old people of forty years of age.¹⁴ The author uses “Vasari’s Lives of the Artists” as his main source. There is no comment made in any of Vasari’s biographies about the untimely death of anyone over thirty-five years of age. Creighton deduces from this that persons of this age or more must have been considered timely deaths as far as chronological age was concerned. Shulamith Shahar has replied that the only conclusion, which can be drawn from the lack of comment regarding deaths over thirty-five is that “Vasari was aware of the low life expectancy at the time and had been acquainted with people who had died at that age or earlier”.¹⁵

The attitude to old age identified by Creighton arises from a subjective state of mind which calculates the stage of life from the number of years one suspects may be left of life rather from the number of years actually lived. This subjective state of mind may be produced by the experience of the ages at death of one’s peers. In a study of the longevity of a group within the English secular peerage during the Wars of the Roses (c.1455-89), T. H. Hollingsworth found that few males lived beyond the mid forties. It is not surprising therefore that a man in this situation might consider himself in the evening of his life at forty years of age.¹⁶ However according to J.C. Russell in “British Medieval Population”, a man of forty in this period could expect to live just short of another twenty years.¹⁷

¹³ *The Letters of Michaelangelo*, tr. and ed. Ramsden, E. H., 2 vols., London: Peter Owen, 1963, vol.1, no. 116, pp. 105-107, (pp. 106, 107, n. 2). Michaelangelo called himself old at forty-two years of age and continued to use old age as an excuse for uncompleted work into his eighties. Erasmus was approximately thirty-seven years of age when he wrote *On the Approach of Old Age*, see *The Poems of Desiderius Erasmus*, tr. Reedijk, C., Leiden: Brill, 1956, pp. 280-290.

¹⁴ Creighton, G., “When Did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old?” in *Studies in the Renaissance*, 14, 1967, pp. 7-32.

¹⁵ Shahar (1993), “Who Were Old in the Middle Ages?”, p. 324.

¹⁶ Hollingsworth, T. H., “A Demographic Study of the British Ducal Families” in *Population Studies*, 11, 1957-58, pp. 4-26.

¹⁷ Russell, J. C., *British Medieval Population* Albuquerque: Univ. New Mexico Press, 1948, p. 186, Table 8.11.

The position of the aristocracy during the Wars of the Roses is an example of how a particularly negative environment could influence a man's attitude to ageing in believing that he was old before his time. This introduces the question of whether the opposite may be true. Although it is a speculative notion, it may be the case that if an individual was used to seeing a reasonable percentage of elderly people in his society, he may have been influenced positively to believe that his chance of reaching the same age was a reasonable proposition.

There is of course the problem of finding the quality of statistical evidence from which to calculate the percentage of elderly people in medieval society. Don Brothwell has conducted a paleodemographic study of early British populations, which offers some insight into this problem.¹⁸ The author acknowledges the difficulties of assessing age from skeletal remains and the hazards of drawing conclusions from the distribution of bones in burial sites. Nevertheless Brothwell has calculated that the average life expectancy in medieval England according to paleodemographic evidence was 35.3 years for males living in the town or country and 30.1 years for females living in a town and 31.3 for those living in the country in the medieval period.¹⁹ This tallies roughly with expectation of life at birth calculated by Russell based on statistical material derived from the English "Inquisitions post Mortem and other documentary sources". If one did survive until thirty-five years of age it appears from paleodemographic evidence that at least another twenty years of life could be expected throughout most of the Middle Ages.²⁰ The paleodemographic evidence also suggests that in Anglo-Saxon England the percentage of people of fifty

¹⁸ Brothwell, D., "Paleodemography and the earlier British populations" in *World Archaeology*, 4, June 1972, pp. 75-87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83, Table 25.

²⁰ Russell, *British Medieval Population*, p. 186, Table 8.11

years and over was 7.9% and in Medieval England it was 9.9%.²¹ In comparison, a modern study of age statistics for the population of Scotland (just over five million people) published in 1994 records that 17.8 % of the population were of pensionable age.²² On a daily basis therefore, medieval people were used to seeing about half the number of elderly persons in their communities as their modern counterparts.²³

(ii) Ageing and Chronology

The chronological age of an individual is the most convenient indication by which the start of old age may be gauged although as with the other categories, it cannot stand alone. Chronological age is more useful in modern society than it was in the Middle Ages for the following reasons.

At the end of the twentieth century, when individuals are aware of and can prove their exact age in years by means of registered birth certificates, chronology becomes a convenient index of eligibility for legal responsibility, benefits and retirement from work. Although there is some variation between cultures the average age of retirement in the modern

²¹ Brothwell, "Paleodemography and the earlier British populations", p. 84, Table 26. Fifty years of age is chosen to delineate youth and age in skeletal remains since certain bony sutures fuse at this age thus allowing the conclusion that the individual whose remains are being examined died at a minimum age of fifty. Similarly metabolic diseases which affect the skull such as Paget's Disease show macroscopic pathology at the age of fifty or more and not before.

²² Fell and Foster, *Ages of Experience*, p. 2.

²³ By the end of the fourteenth century medieval people may well have been used to numbers of elderly persons in the community brought about by the long-term demographic effects of the Black Death. Evidence from the *Inquisitions Post Mortem* suggests that during the 1348-9 outbreak of plague in England, likelihood of death rose with age; Russell, *British Medieval Population*, pp. 216-217. Similarly in the subsequent outbreaks of 1361-2, 1369 and 1375 mortality was highest in older age groups; see, Razi, *Z. Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish: Economy, Society and Demography in Halesowen 1270-1400*, Cambridge:Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980, pp. 107-9, 128. However infants and children had a higher mortality rate in subsequent outbreaks of plague. By 1393 tenants in their twenties and thirties comprised only 38% of the population of the parish as opposed to 65% in 1350. Razi notes that: "...the population of the parish was overwhelmed at the end of the fourteenth century by the middle-aged and elderly..." idem. p. 151.

world is sixty to sixty-five years.²⁴ To call someone “a sixty year old” is convenient. It suggests much the same biological and social picture for everyone. When we are concerned with a much earlier culture, largely illiterate and in the absence of the registration of births, it is questionable whether chronological age can still be used as an index so cavalierly.²⁵ Even so, the age-index is an attractive frame of reference for medieval historians because the identification of a particular fixed age in years is the least subjective of all the methods of determining the threshold of old age.

A rich seam of medieval documents concerned entirely with the chronology of the human life cycle, known as the *aetates hominis*, therefore requires consideration. Although it has been said that these texts concern the human life cycle, it would be more accurate to say that they describe the male cycle. None of the schemes refer specifically to women. Even in a penitential book of the twelfth century written for the female sinner (*peccatrix*) the illustrations accompanying the various life stages are of men.²⁶

Yet, in relation to the biological cycle women experience a major event in a mature phase of the cycle which men do not. The age at which the menopause occurred in medieval society may be taken as one indicator of the beginning of old age for women in that society. Several contemporary general medical and gynaecological texts mention the age of menopause.

²⁴ See Victor, *Old Age in Modern Society*, p. 164, Table 8.1

²⁵ It is probably not true that medieval people had only a vague idea of their age in years. See Shahar (1993), “Who Were Old in the Middle Ages”, p. 339. Difficulties arose when people were required to prove their age in years such as in the *Inquisition Post Mortem* proceedings. In the “Borough Customs of Waterford” (c.1300), it is recorded that a father is not bound to answer for the sins of a child until he can count twelve, that is, when the child has reached twelve years of age. It is assumed that the boy’s age in years is known; *Borough Customs*, ed. Bateson, M., Publications of the Selden Society, 2 vols., vol. 1, xviii for 1904, Waterford, cap.12-E, p. 63. Similar comments on age by witnesses recorded in the *Calendars of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, vol. 1-, London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office by Mackie, 1904-, suggest that people were aware of their exact age in years; see William de Aula aged 19, *CIPM*, II, Edward I, p. 81, Robert le Vyte aged 66, *CIPM*, V, Edward II, p. 81.

“The Canon of Medicine of Avicenna” states that thirty-five to fifty is the age at which the menses lapse. The text attributed to “Trotula” the twelfth-century Salernitan physician or medical patroness, favours the fiftieth year but in some cases it is earlier at thirty-five and in others later at sixty years. The thirteenth-century English physician Gilbertus Anglicus believed that the menopause began at around fifty or more years of age. Similarly the fourteenth-century *Rosa Anglica* of John of Gaddesden is of the opinion that menstruation stops at around fifty years or shortly thereafter but in atypical cases as early as thirty-five.²⁷

Returning to the *aetates hominis*, a general description of the documents will be followed by a discussion of an English example of writing in the genre. The physical and psychological characteristics which some of the documents associate with old age, will not be dealt with here. They will be discussed below in Chapters Two and Four.

Schemes which divide the life of man into four, six, seven or more stages originate in Antiquity.²⁸ The ancient Greeks favoured a scheme of four: childhood, adolescence, youth and old age. The four-age scheme, in common with all of the *aetates hominis*, is strongly influenced by number mysticism, that is, by the belief that every number from zero to nine was associated with particular qualities and powers.²⁹ The number four was an extremely potent numeral because of its associations with the seasons, the elements (earth, air, fire and water) and the qualities (hot, cold, wet, dry)

²⁶ Sears, *The Ages of Man*, p. 85.

²⁷ An examination of medieval beliefs on the age of menopause and references to the gynaecological texts mentioned in this chapter can be found in Post, J. B., “Ages at Menarche and Menopause: Some Mediaeval Authorities” in *Population Studies*, 25, 1971, pp. 83-87; Avicenna, p. 84, Trotula, pp. 84-85, Gilbertus Anglicus, p. 86, and John of Gaddesden, p. 87.

²⁸ The most prominent texts on the *aetates hominis* are Sears (1986), *The Ages of Man* and Burrow (1988), *The Ages of Man*.

²⁹ Sears, *The Ages of Man*, pp. 9-37.

which were believed to govern human health and temperament.³⁰ The time periods attributed to each age: childhood, adolescence, youth, and old age varies. However the fourth-century *Epistula ad Pentadium* and the sixth-century *Sapientia artis medicinae* both state that birth to fourteen years constitutes childhood, fourteen to twenty-five as adolescence, twenty-five to forty-two as youth and forty-two to death as old age.³¹ Thus old age begins at forty-two.

Alternatively the *Pantegni* of the Arabic physician Haly Abbas which was transmitted to the medieval west in the eleventh century via the translation into Latin by Constantinus Africanus names the stages as *pueritia*, *iuventus*, *senectus* and *senium*. The stages of transition for one age to another occur at thirty, forty, and sixty years of age. *Pueritia* is divided into two, each lasting a period of fifteen years.³² The period of old age has also been distinguished as two stages: *senectus* and *senium*. Therefore according to the *Pantegni*, which was an immensely influential medical text throughout the Middle Ages, real old age, that is *senium*, did not begin until almost twenty years after the dates specified in the earlier schemes cited above.

Similarly “The Canon of Medicine of Avicenna”, written by another of the Arabic physicians available in the medieval west, also marks sixty years as the beginning of old age.³³ However the physician whose opinions dominated the understanding of physiology until the seventeenth century, the Greek physician, Galen of Pergamon is doubtful about placing any numerical value on the start of old age, although he admits that it is the physician’s duty to make a guess. His opinion is that old age begins at some

³⁰ Anthropological research indicates that attitudes to time vary in literate and non-literate societies. Non-literate cultures measure time in cycles such as the yearly seasonal cycle which is employed in many of the *aetates hominis*. Literate societies measure time linearly. As literacy and a sense of history develops in a society time is seen as more objective, quantitative and less directly related to the natural world. See Lock, R., *Aspects of Time in Medieval Literature*, New York: Gailard, 1985.

³¹ Sears, *The Ages of Man*, p. 26.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

time when a man is past his prime. (The prime of life was thought to be at about thirty-five to forty years of age.)³⁴ But although every ageing person in this category will show a certain weakening of all the bodily functions the “old” man, in contrast, will show a clear decline in these leading the way to death which had not been apparent before.³⁵

Although the scheme of four remained popular throughout the Middle Ages due to the potency of the number and its adoption by the Arabic physicians, schemes based on cosmology and Biblical sources also flourished. Schemes of three were associated with “The Three Wise Men”, (Matt. 2:1-12). Robert of Torigni favoured this scheme stating that old age began at sixty years.³⁶ The scheme of three is notable however since in the thirteenth century, Bernard of Gordon’s scheme of three puts the start of old age at thirty-five years, which is the earliest in any of the plans.³⁷ Schemes of five were relatively common derived from the five hours of the day at which the “Workers in the Vineyard”(Matt. 20:1-16) were called to labour. It has already been noted above that St. Augustine devised a six age scheme based on the description of the creation of the world in seven days in the Old Testament, (the seventh day or age is death and not a stage of biological life).

Although a seven-age scheme was first attributed to Solon (6 cent. B.C.), the division of life into hebdomads or periods of seven years was also popular in the Middle Ages. Seven was a critical number in astrological, medical and arithmological terms. Hellenistic astrologers had described seven planets occupying seven spheres above the earth, physicians believed

³³ Gruner, *Avicenna*, p. 68.

³⁴ See Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life*, pp. 10-20.

³⁵ Theoharides, T. C., “Galen On Marasmus” in *Jnl. Hist. Med and Allied Sciences*, vol. 26, 1971, pp. 369-390, (pp. 378-379).

³⁶ Sears, *The Ages of Man*, p. 93.

³⁷ Bernard of Gordon, *De Conservazione Vitae Humanae seu De Regimine Sanitatis*, (Leipzig, 1570) 1-5, quoted in Shahr (1993), “Who Were Old in the Middle Ages”, p. 316, n. 14.

that there were seven parts to the human body, seven apertures to its inner parts, seven viscerae. The critical points in the seven age scheme: *puerulus*, *puer*, *adolescens iuvenis*, *vir*, *senior*, *senex*, occurred at intervals of seven years, 7, 14, 21, 28, 35, 42 and 63. A particular planet governed each age. Thus from young child to old man the individual was under the influence of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, respectively.³⁸

From the examples of this voluminous genre cited above it is apparent that there are two problems associated with using the *aetates hominis* as evidence of medieval attitudes to the age at which an individual could be called old. In the first place they are heavily tainted by numerology; and secondly there is a huge disparity in the ages at which old age was said to begin. Opinions on the start of old age range from thirty-five to sixty years in the examples cited. Others which will be mentioned later in this chapter place the start of old age at seventy years or more.³⁹

The *aetates hominis* indicate that the Middle Ages had no sound appreciation of an exact chronological start to old age. Medieval people were as curious about how many years a man had to live before he could be called old as generations of modern sociologists and historians who have tried to fix a number to age in contemporary society or that of the past. The *aetates hominis* are not the result of the work of medieval scholars who have garnered contemporary opinions on ageing and tried to impose some order

³⁸ A man's temperament was believed to be influenced by each planet in turn. Old age was governed by the heavy, cold, planet Saturn.

³⁹ A selection of chronological estimations of the beginning of old age follows to illustrate the diversity in opinion over the age at which old age was believed to begin. Except in one case, references have been admitted for brevity since they can be found elsewhere in the text. Psalm 90:10 – 70 years, Hippocrates – 56, St. Augustine of Hippo – 60, Isidore of Seville – 50 (*gravis senectus*), 70 (*decrepita etas*), Avicenna – 60, Roger Bacon – 45-50, Pope Innocent III – 40-60, Bernard of Gordon – 35, Chaucer – 50, Robert of Torigni – 60 years, Author of the *Parlement of the Thre Ages* – 100, ed. Offord, M. Y., EETS, no. 246, London; New York; Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959, p. 5,

on them. They are the attempts of medieval people to draw down information on this matter from the mind of God.

In order to illustrate this preoccupation with deciphering metaphysical information about ageing rather than assimilating it from contemporary sociological sources, two texts will be examined in more detail. These are: the *Computus* (1011) of Byrhtferth of Ramsey and Macrobius' "Commentary on the Dream of Scipio" (fourth or fifth century).⁴⁰ The former is an example of the four-age scheme and the latter that of the scheme of seven. Little is known of the polymath and encyclopedist Macrobius although it is believed that he was not Christian and either African or Greek in origin. The "Dream of Scipio" on which the commentary is based is the closing part of Cicero's *De Republica*.

Although Byrhtferth's manual will be discussed here, the earliest English commentator on the *aetates hominis* was the Venerable Bede (673-735) in *De temporum ratione* (725). This manual was written with the purpose of promoting understanding of the calendar. Bede lists the six ages of man as infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, old age and decrepitude.⁴¹ The manual will not be treated further in this chapter since the author does not attend to the ages in years at which each stage terminates and therefore offers little insight into the threshold of old age.

In contrast to Bede, Byrhtferth is precise about the chronological limits governing each stage of life. His manual is written in both Latin and Anglo-Saxon and includes diagrams. The continuing importance in the medieval

⁴⁰ *Byrhtferth's Manual*, ed. Crawford, S. J., EETS, o. s., no. 177, London: Oxford Univ. Press, (1929, for 1928). "Commentary on the Dream of Scipio", ed. Evans, A. P., tr. Stahl, W. H., Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies, no. 48, New York; London: Columbia Univ. Press, c. 1952.

⁴¹ Bede, The Venerable, Saint, *De natura rerum et temporum ratione libri duo* Basileae: Excudebat Henricus Petrus, ed. Sichard, J., 1529; see *De Temp. Rat. Liber*, p. 48, ch. 65.

period of the pagan pre-occupation with the characteristics of certain numbers is evident in the attention given to the qualities of the numbers one to twenty and certain multiples of the decad, that is: forty, fifty, one hundred and one thousand.

Byrhtferth describes four ages of man which are associated with the seasons. Spring and boyhood correspond: early manhood and summer are alike: autumn and manhood are allied: winter and old age are periods of decay. The age at which each stage terminates is not mentioned in the text but an accompanying diagram indicates that boyhood lasts from birth until the age of fourteen years. Early manhood is from fourteen to twenty-eight years. Manhood begins at twenty-eight years and lasts until the onset of old age at the beginning of the forty-ninth year. Although this is a scheme of four, the influence of number seven is obvious since life alters in multiples of seven years. In this case however the potency of the number is not based on the pagan scheme of planets and their associated deities but on the mathematical characteristics of seven which have been described at length earlier in the manual. The significance of seven in the *Computus* is derived from its association with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁴²

Although Byrhtferth states definite terminations for the period of manhood and for that of old age which follows it, it appears that he was aware of grades of age within each category. There is no raw transition in the text from the prime of manhood to old age which the diagram seems to suggest. In describing the accumulation of black bile in the autumn of life he uses unusual terminology:

colera nigra in autumno crescunt; ...id est melancholia, in transgressoribus viget, id est qui [in] iuventute sunt.

⁴² *Byrhtferth's Manual*, p. 217.

Black bile, that is to say melancholy is strong in those who are getting on in years, that is in manhood.⁴³

If Crawford's translation of *transgressores* in this context is accepted as "those who are getting on in years", it may be deduced that Byrhtferth considered those still in the category of manhood but nearing senectus at around forty-nine years or less as "getting on" or aged.

Later in the manual he elaborates his conception of manhood and old age by interposing an intermediate category between the two, that of "ripe manhood". To accommodate this category, Byrhtferth redefines the four-fold scheme after the parable of the "Workers in the Vineyard" (Matt. 20: 1-16). This scheme is traditionally one of five. Byrhtferth describes it in the following way:

Prima hora nostre scilicet vite, conspicienda est, similiter tertia, nona ac undecima, id est pueritia quam celestis flatus examinavit spiritu suo baptisate, oleo igne, trina submersione et episcopali confirmatione.

The first hour, I mean of our life, is to be noted, likewise the third, ninth and eleventh. By the first hour I mean childhood which the wind from heaven has tested with its breath, with baptism, oil, fire, the triple immersion and episcopal confirmation.⁴⁴

The stage which Byrhtferth calls "ripe manhood" corresponds to the ninth hour and appears to be synonymous with the last part of "manhood" and perhaps the early part of old age of the earlier scheme, that is, those persons of perhaps forty to fifty-five years of age according to the author's chronological computations for each age. This gives a different complexion to the *transgressores* of the first scheme. *Transgressores* in the second scheme are ripe, at the height of their powers, rather than Crawford's slightly negative description of "those who are getting on in years".

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 218-19.

This concept of ripe manhood and a transitional phase between maturity and old age invites comment on whether the medieval attitude to middle age is similar to modern definitions of this stage in life. The common perception of middle age in this century carries a negative charge. It is associated predominantly with decline or at least the beginning of it rather than ripeness. In “The Season’s of a Man’s Life”, D. J. Levinson defines this middle age or “middle adulthood” lasting from forty to sixty years of age.⁴⁵ This chimes with the chronology of Byrhtferth’s age of ripeness which describe a transitional phase between adulthood and old age.

According to Levinson, the twentieth-century view of middle age is a period of life in which the majority of individuals experience some degree of crisis and despair. The sense of mortality is heightened as the “middle-aged” come to terms with the dying self of youth. Although there is only a slight biological decline, middle age, according to Levinson, is a period of psychological stagnation. The often-harsh disparity of what one had dreamed of achieving in youth and the reality of what is, of what use one has made of life, becomes clear. This middle-aged predicament is tempered for some people by the possibility of the development of wisdom and deeper creative and social faculties. However the modern reaction to middle age is largely negative. It arises from the perception that the era from forty to sixty years is a period of stasis hovering on the brink of either rapid or gradual collapse of the abilities and sense of self which has been constructed earlier in life.

To the medieval mind the term “middle age” provoked an entirely different response from the one just described. In the first place medieval middle age lasted about half the time of the twenty or so years described by Levinson. It was believed to persist about ten years beginning at around the age of thirty-

⁴⁵ See diagram entitled: “Eras in the Male Life Cycle” in Levinson, *The Season’s of Man’s Life*, New York: Ballantine, 1978, p. 20.

five. It has none of the negative aspects of modern middle age. Medieval poets described these ten years as the “perfect age”. Middle age was the crest of the arc of life. The thirteenth-century Franciscan, Roger Bacon, does describe it as *tempus consistendi* but this was not a period of stagnation since there was no tension between seasoned maturity and decline.⁴⁶ It was a period of healthy stasis in which all of a person’s faculties had reached their keenest, fullest state. The modern term “middle age” and the medieval notion of “mydell age” are therefore not interchangeable.

The idea of a period of healthy stasis preceding the start of old age is also described in Macrobius’ “Commentary on the Dream of Scipio”. This work adheres to the cosmological seven-stage scheme of ageing. The mathematical and symbolic qualities of seven and eight and the products of their multiplication are well rehearsed. Macrobius writes:

Again, seven is the number by which man is conceived, developed in the womb, is born, lives and is sustained, and passing through all the stages of life attains old age; his whole life is regulated by it.⁴⁷

Macrobius goes on to make a comment, which illustrates the unreliable nature of the *aetates hominis* as indicators of actual biological events. He is obliged to convince the reader that all significant events in the life cycle occur in multiples of seven years. He writes therefore that the human deciduous dentition occurs at seven months and the permanent teeth at seven years.⁴⁸ Although the eruption of teeth may vary considerably in individuals, these estimates are late for the appearance of the primary and secondary dentition which appear generally at six months and six years or earlier. Macrobius’s later age of eruption may reflect retardation of physical development due to adverse dietary factors in the classical world but it

⁴⁶ Bacon, R., *De retardatione accidentium senectutis*, p. 8, ch. 1.

⁴⁷ Macrobius, *Commentary*, p. 112, [62].

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-14, [69].

seems more likely that he was determined to fit the event into his seven fold scheme at the cost of biological accuracy.

This determined adherence to the properties of the number seven must therefore be kept in mind when Macrobius goes on to describe biological developments later in life. He appears to be precise in each stage:

After thrice seven years a beard covers the cheeks. This year also marks the limit of increasing stature. After four times seven years the body ceases to grow broader. At the thirty-fifth year the man attains the full vigour of his physical powers; no one is able to increase his strength later.... At the forty-second year the man still retains his full vigour, experiencing no lessening of his powers unless he has been injured. From the sixth to the seventh hebdomads of years a decline does set in, it is true, but imperceptibly, so that it does not betray the change by evidence of weakness. On this account some states observe the custom of not drafting a man for military service after his forty-second year, while in a greater number retirement is granted at the age of forty nine.⁴⁹

In this extract Macrobius has identified the “perfect middle age” at between thirty-five and forty-two years of age. There is a weakening from forty-two years to forty-nine years of age, which nevertheless is insignificant functionally. From around fifty years weakening begins to impair a man’s abilities. He is suggesting therefore that old age begins at fifty. However Macrobius goes on to describe various degrees of old age and the development of certain qualities as one ages. As the subject leaves his forties he is:

...considered ripe in wisdom and not unfit for the exercise of his physical powers. When the decad, which has the highest degree of perfection of all numbers, is joined to the perfect number seven, and ten times seven or seven times ten years are reached, this is considered by natural philosophers the goal of living, and terminates the full span of human life. When anyone exceeds this age he is retired from active duty and devotes himself solely to the exercise of his wisdom; his whole occupation is in persuading others, and he is honoured by release from other obligations. From the seventh to the tenth hebdomads of years each man’s duties vary according to his physical capacities.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 114-15, [72].

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 115, [75-76].

So Macrobius says that in the early stages of old age, although the body is in observable decline, a man is thought, “not unfit for the exercise of his physical powers”. He makes a distinction between the biological decline of ageing and functional capacity. Functional capacity continues to decline between the ages of forty-nine and seventy but during that time it is recognised that although a man is old, he continues to perform his duties as far as he is able. At seventy he is advised that according to natural law it is fitting that he should withdraw from active life. Macrobius is speaking of what the modern world would consider a suitable “retirement age”.

This excerpt from Macrobius and those cited above from Brythferth of Ramsey and Augustine of Hippo reveal a more complex attitude to the progress of ageing than might have been expected. Macrobius has described the gradual decline through maturity until the age of seventy. Augustine spoke of the ageless self, one stage of life flowing into another. Brythferth wrote of the intermediate stage of ripe manhood, which was neither young nor old. Galen expressed reservations about specifying the start of old age. Clearly they did not believe in a sudden change from the lightness of youth to the heaviness of old age. Indeed as Macrobius says, a man was only truly old when his functional capacity had declined to the extent where he was unable to carry out his duties in life. He estimates this as seventy years but it is obvious that this could vary widely from individual to individual.

Isidore of Seville agrees with the chronology described by Macrobius in his six stage scheme: *infantia*, from birth to seven years, *pueritia*, seven to fourteen, *adolescentia*, fourteen to twenty-eight, *iuentus*, twenty-eight to fifty, *gravis senectus*, fifty to seventy, and *decrepita etas*, seventy until death.⁵¹ Isidore’s use of the term *gravis senectus* for the age of fifty to seventy years is interesting. Macrobius has said that it was the time when the decline of physical capacity began to become apparent. Isidore describes

⁵¹ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, vol. 2, Book XI, i:ii, 1-8.

this quickening of biological decline as a weight. At fifty the individual begins to feel the downward pull of age. Illustrated versions of the *aetates hominis* portray this descending and weighty notion of ageing.⁵² The stages of life are depicted as an arc. The “perfect age” occupies the crest of the arc but as soon as this stage is completed the downward slope of the arc begins. Figures representing stages on the downward slope often stoop, supporting themselves with a stick. They appear stiff and bent towards the earth with the burden of age, which Isidore describes as *gravis senectus*. In addition to the physical interpretation of *gravis senectus*, when the years begin to pull a man down, Isidore may also have intended to echo St. Augustine in referring to the spiritual maturity or fullness of grave old age.

Georges Minois has expressed the importance of the loss of functional capacity when deducing the start of old age in the Middle Ages but he has perhaps over-emphasized the harsh contrast between youth and old age. He writes that old age:

was made to begin at around 50 years, thus following directly on youth. We have grown used to this characteristically medieval idea of contrasts, which left no room for the average; one was either young or old; young so long as one retained one’s physical strength, old as soon as it started to decline.⁵³

Minois emphasizes the loss of functional capacity as the start of old age but it is not possible to agree that medieval attitudes to ageing “left no room for the average” in its stark contrasts. St Augustine, Bryhtferth, Macrobius and Isidore of Seville all wrote of the shades of age within a gradual process of decline. Equally, the “Homilies of Aelfric” distinguish between maturity, old age and decrepitude.⁵⁴ In the biological sense they recognised that weakening of physical strength was likely to occur from the mid-forties and

⁵² The mural at Longthorpe Tower, Northamptonshire, is an English example of this type of illustration. See Sears, *The Ages of Man*, plate 78 and plate 14 - Montecassino Monastery Library, *The Six Ages of Man*, Hrabanus Maurus.

⁵³ Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 160.

⁵⁴ Aelfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 2, p. 77.

that old age itself had early (*senectus*) and late (*decrepitas* or *senium*) stages. Similarly, in the thirteenth century, Roger Bacon, wrote in *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* that ageing was a leisurely winding down of the body and mind.⁵⁵ An appreciation of this gentle glide into old age can still be found later in the Middle Ages and beyond. Writing even in 1534, Sir Thomas Elyot said: “Senectute at forty, when the bodye beginneth to decrease”.⁵⁶ In the same way, William of Malmesbury (c.1090-1143) recognised the grey area between mature adulthood and old age when he wrote of the “Witch of Berkeley”: “... she had not yet reached old age, although her foot was now set on its threshold”.⁵⁷

The *aetates hominis* are academic speculations on the seasons of human life. They are useful in highlighting the medieval understanding of the complex nature of biological ageing but the wide variation of chronological age makes them unreliable as sources for determining the threshold of old age. It is true that most identify the start of significant decline at between sixty and seventy years but this is hardly specific. Recognising the limitations of the *aetates hominis*, Shulamith Shahar has identified a class of documents on ageing which have some relevance to social reality. She has examined legislative texts from the countries of Western Europe and the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, which granted certain age-linked concessions.⁵⁸

In the Crusader Kingdom in the thirteenth century, knights were exempt by law from personal military service at the age of sixty years. “According to all the legislative texts from Scotland, Sicily (under the Hohenstaufen), northern and southern France and northern Spain”, men of more than sixty years were not required to fight in person in trial by battle. In mid

⁵⁵ Bacon, *De retardatione*, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁶ Thomas Elyot, *The Castle of Health*, England, 1534, cited in Creighton, “When Did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old”, p. 13.

⁵⁷ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 2 vols., ed. and tr. Mynors, R. A. B., Thomson, R. M. and Winterbottom, M., Oxford: Clarendon, 1998-9, vol. 1, p. 377.

fourteenth-century Florence, men could bear arms until the age of seventy and also in twelfth-century Modena until the age of seventy years. The Statute of Winchester of 1285 relieved those men of more than sixty years from military service. Similarly a statute of Henry VII stated that all those over sixty years were exempt from the king's wars. It might be added to Shahar's list of documents that Orderic Vitalis says: "It is the custom to allow persons of sixty years of age to repose after their warfare".⁵⁹

The age of exemption from administrative and public duties was generally seventy years. The city of Florence did not require service from those over that age. The Statutes of Lucca exempted those of fifty-five years and over but this low age appears to be an exception since it is not repeated in any other document.⁶⁰

The most important English legislative document which refers to age is the "Statute of Labourers" of 1349.⁶¹ This document promulgated after the Black Death stipulated that all persons under sixty years who were not already engaged in agriculture, trade or craft were required to accept work from whoever offered it on pain of imprisonment. Later, a statute of Henry VII (1503) recommended lessening the punishment for vagabondage on those over sixty years of age.⁶²

Shahar goes on to try to identify the actual ages at retirement of particular individuals. This is an awkward task as medieval documents concerned with

⁵⁸ Discussion of legislative texts associated with old age, Shahar (1993), "Who Were Old in the Middle Ages", pp. 327-41.

⁵⁹ Ordericus Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy*, ed. Forester, T., 4 vols., London: Bohn, 1853-1856, vol. 1, p. 26.

⁶⁰ Shahar, (1993), "Who Were Old in the Middle Ages", pp. 329, 330, 328, 331.

⁶¹ *Statutes of the Realm*, ed. Luders, A., Tomlins, T. E., and Raithby, J., 2 vols., London, 1810-28, repr. 1963, vol. I, p. 307, also Shahar (1993), "Who Were Old in the Middle Ages", pp. 331-332.

⁶² *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. II, c. 12, p. 657, and Shahar, (1993), "Who Were Old in the Middle Ages", p. 332.

various offices and salaried positions rarely mention age.⁶³ In the “Babees Book”, a manual of etiquette written by the marshal to Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, the author writes that he only left his post when he was “crooked with age”. There is no mention of his age in years.⁶⁴ It is unsafe to assume however that “crooked with age” implies advanced in years. In the same work it is noted that the Book’s patron, Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, is being treated by a physician. The Duke is in his forty-fifth year. Gloucester, the marshal writes, requires remedies for old age in the treatment of rheumatism, chest infection and a daily cough.⁶⁵

However set against this early view of the onset of old age-related disability, it is known that Gilbert of Sempringham did not retire until he was at least eighty-nine years of age and Gerald of Wales did not contemplate withdrawal from active life until he was approaching sixty.⁶⁶ One record of the retirement of an English clergyman does refer to age specifically and supports Shahar’s argument that functional old age began around seventy in the Middle Ages rather than in the forties. In order to avoid the charge of simony, medieval clergy who wished to retire and relinquish their living to another man, required a license from their bishop. William Basset, rector of Bennington in Lincoln diocese (1475) was in his eighties when he received such permission to retire.⁶⁷ English statute law also referred to age in allowing a man to reach the age of seventy before he became ineligible for service on juries or petty assizes.⁶⁸ However in

⁶³ In the records of the London church, “St. Mary-at-Hill”, 1420-1559 there is only one record of the age of a parishioner at death and that refers to a child; in *Medieval Records of a London City Church*, ed. Littlehales, H., 2 Parts, EETS, nos. 125, 128, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1905, Part 128, p. 241.

⁶⁴ *Babees Book: Manners and Meals in Olden Times*, ed. Furnivall, F. J., EETS, 32, London: Trubner, 1868, p. cvi.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. cxvii.

⁶⁶ Shahar (1993), “Who Were Old in the Middle Ages”, p. 337.

⁶⁷ Heath, P., *The English Parish Clergy on the Eve of the Reformation*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969, p. 185.

⁶⁸ “Statute of Westminster II”, 1285, in *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. I, c.38 p. 89. See Shahar, (1997), *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 26.

England no one was excused from participating in the hue and cry even on grounds of old age.⁶⁹

Although legislative documents concerning retirement do not offer much proof of when old age began, there is some support from alternative sources for Shulamith Shahar's argument that real old age began at around sixty or seventy and not earlier. The minimum age required for office in the medieval church was not particularly high. A sub-deacon had to be at least eighteen years of age, a deacon twenty-five years (after the Council of Vienne a man could become a deacon at twenty years), a priest twenty-five years old and a bishop thirty years of age.⁷⁰ If the opportunity for simony is discounted, this relatively early start could suggest that incumbents were not expected to live into old age and reach retirement at seventy years or more.⁷¹ However it is certain that a significant number of churchmen did actually live long lives. Enquiries into cases for canonisation are a convenient source to illustrate the longevity of the clergy. At the proceedings for St Yves in the twelfth century there appear clerics of ninety, seventy and eighty years of age.⁷²

It is also true that many abbots governed their houses for significant numbers of years. Richard Crossley at Coventry for almost forty years, from 1399 to 1436 and John Litlington at Croyland from 1429 to 1467 are examples.⁷³ Similarly, medieval popes were mature men when they were appointed to office and long-lived afterward; most survived into their sixties and some much longer.⁷⁴ It is unlikely that in the ranks of the clergy at least,

⁶⁹ The borough records of Leicester reveal that local men were relieved of their frank pledge duties on grounds of age – *ultra etatem* Borough Hall, Box 7, no. 248, cited in Russell, *British Medieval Population*, p. 193, n.13.

⁷⁰ Shahar (1993), "Who Were Old in the Middle Ages", p. 99.

⁷¹ The low minimum ages for important offices in the church are probably not indicative of medieval society as a whole. In medicine for example the career of the English physician John of Gaddesden is typical: born c. 1280 he did not complete his education and obtain a license to practise until 1309 when he was twenty-nine years of age. See Cholmeley, *John of Gaddesden and the Rosa Medicinæ*, p. 23.

⁷² Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 183.

⁷³ Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, p. 122.

⁷⁴ Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 152, Table 6.2.

retirement on grounds of age alone would have been considered much before the ages which Shulamith Shahar has proposed.

However there are two points which the author uses to support her case which invite challenge. She states that in the Middle Ages the minimum age for a doctorate in theology was thirty-five years of age.⁷⁵ She employs this fact to support her view that the threshold of old age must therefore have been many years after this age rather than in the forties or fifties. Yet if it is recalled that in the Middle Ages theology was considered of particular importance and the foremost of the sciences, a license to teach this subject which a doctorate conferred, may not have been conceded until relatively late. The candidate would be required to realise the full potential of his abilities at the “perfect age” of thirty-five before he would have been considered competent to teach theology. He could therefore have been at the height of or even nearing the end of a scholarly career rather than at the beginning of it as Shulamith Shahar assumes. The case of John Dalderby, Bishop of Lincoln (cons. 1300, d. 1320) illustrates this point. He received his M.A. from Oxford University around 1269 but did not receive a doctorate in theology until twenty-one years later in 1290.⁷⁶ The minimum age of thirty-five years for a doctorate in theology in no way proves that it was assumed by the people of the Middle Ages that the recipient was likely to have many years of life ahead of him.

The second point of issue is one of interpretation of the word *juvenes*.

Commenting on a thirteenth-century chronicle Shahar says:

...the monk Jocelin of Brakelond wished to imply that the three candidates put forward by the Abbot of Bury St Edmunds for the post of prior (a position he apparently coveted for himself), were unsuitable, he described them as young men (*juvenes*) of 40 lacking

⁷⁵ Shahar (1993), “Who Were Old in the Middle Ages”, p. 327.

⁷⁶ *Handbook of British Chronology*, ed. Powicke, M. F. and Fryde, E. B., 2nd edn., London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1961, p. 236. See also *The History of the University of Oxford*, 6. Vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984 -, vol. 2, *Late Medieval Oxford*, ed. Catto, J. I., and Evans, R., 1992, p. 380.

education and experience in cure of souls, who themselves still required instruction. “These”, he writes “the abbot named, putting them above the sub-prior and many others who were older, superior and more mature men too, who were literate and had of old been masters of the schools”⁷⁷.

She writes that since Jocelin could cite the age of the candidates as an argument for their disqualification it follows that the age of forty could not have been considered old in the thirteenth century. However the author has admitted that Jocelin is writing about this incident with an ulterior motive. He may well have been chronologically older than the preferred candidates or at least entered the monastic life prior to them. The Rule of St. Benedict requires respect for elder brothers but this respect can be interpreted in terms of spiritual maturity in addition to age in years. In chapter sixty-three of the Rule there are two comments on age which illustrate this:

Absolutely nowhere shall age automatically determine rank. Remember that Samuel and Daniel were still boys when they judged their elders. (1 Sam 3; Dan 13: 44-62)

And

For example, someone who came to the monastery at the second hour of the day must recognise that he is junior to someone who came at the first hour, regardless of age or distinction.⁷⁸

The term *juvenes* can mean literally young men as Shahar has assumed but in feudal society another interpretation is possible, particularly since Jocelin points out his rivals’ lack of experience and education. In feudal terms a knight in the household of his overlord remained a *juvenis* until he had accrued land and a wife and fathered a child.⁷⁹ Only fatherhood and a patrimony to bestow brought the title *vir*. Theoretically a man could remain a *juvenis* into old age. William the Marshsall (c.1147-1219), Earl of Pembroke did not marry and produce an heir until 1189 when he was about

⁷⁷ *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*, ed. Butler, Nelson Medieval Texts; London, 1942, p. 127, cited in Shahar, (1993), “Who Were Old in the Middle Ages”, p. 325.

⁷⁸ *The Rule of St. Benedict*, tr. Fry, p. 85.

⁷⁹ “Youth in aristocratic society” in Duby, G., *The Chivalrous Society* London: Edward Arnold, Nov. 1977, pp. 112-122.

forty-two years of age.⁸⁰ At the age of eleven or twelve, he had joined the household of his uncle as a *puer* and after becoming a knight was known as a *juvenis* until the year of his marriage. It is not therefore impossible that when Jocelin calls the candidates for prior *juvenes* he is referring to their educational and spiritual shortcomings rather than their literal age. From this point of view the reverse of what Shahar is saying may be equally true. It could be argued that Jocelin is implying that even at such an “advanced” age of forty the candidates had not distinguished themselves and were therefore unworthy of the position for which they were contending.

The complexity of the estimation of when old age begins has been rehearsed above. St. Augustine and Simone de Beauvoir writing many centuries apart have described the subjective nature of ageing. The slow transformation from youth to old age is hard, sometimes impossible to recognise by the self and only admitted reluctantly by most people when external factors force them to do so. It is true that some individuals of any period in history yield to the belief that they are old in their forties due to the various circumstances which have been discussed in this chapter. However the evidence is insufficient to support the view that medieval society in general considered people old at forty.

There is nevertheless pressure to use chronological age as the most convenient means of assessing attitudes to ageing. For the medieval historian the first line of research in this area is recourse to the *aetates hominis*. The shortcomings of this class of documents lie in their reliance on numerology rather than observation of human ageing which results in the great span of ages, thirty-five to seventy years or more, at which old age is said to begin. However on taking an overview of this material the bulk of estimations place the start of functional old age at around sixty years of age

⁸⁰ Crouch, D., *William the Marshall: Court, Career and Chivalry in the Angevin Empire 1147-1219*, London; New York: Longman, 1990. Dates of birth and marriage of the Marshall, pp. 9, 62.

although some weakening of the body has been recognised from the forties onwards. Despite their shortcomings as indicators of old age as a social reality the *aetates hominis* and manuals which comment on them such as those written by Macrobius and Bryhtferth of Ramsey do reveal a more mature attitude to the process of ageing than some historians will allow.

The people of the Middle Ages were aware of the subtlety of ageing. Perhaps the most interesting point arising from medieval society's appreciation of the many shades of ageing is the difference in meaning of the term "middle age" in that society and our own: the former positive and vigorous, the latter full of the negativity of decline.

Shulamith Shahar has argued convincingly that the only sound method of concluding when a man in the Middle Ages was old is to identify a class of documents which give some indication of the impact of age on the functional life of the medieval individual. The legislative documents, which she has cited, clearly show that functional old age began at sometime between sixty and seventy years of age and not earlier. She draws her examples mainly from continental Europe but although similar English documents are fewer, those which do exist, particularly the Statute of Labourers of 1349, support the case for a later (sixty years) rather than an earlier threshold of old age. It will therefore be assumed in the remainder of this thesis that people of either gender who are referred to as elderly are at least sixty years of age.

CHAPTER 2

Ageing and the Body**(i) How Men Aged: Attitudes to the Causes of Physical Ageing**

A note on modern attitudes to the nature and cause of ageing is necessary before medieval beliefs on the subject are discussed. Contemporary opinion on the nature of ageing agrees on four points. In the first place ageing in the human population is universal. Secondly it proceeds at a constant rate in the sense that by the age of sixty years every individual will have exhibited some of the signs of ageing. It is not an acute condition. It is progressive. Thirdly ageing is both innate and environmentally influenced. It arises from a source within the organism but external factors may hasten or slow its progress. Finally the biological changes which occur are harmful and not benign.

The use of terms such as “natural” or “pathological” in connection with ageing is controversial. If it is accepted that ageing is natural it might be said to have the following characteristics in accordance with the criteria described in the last paragraph. Natural ageing is not due to some specific malfunction in the organism. It proceeds at a constant rate, it is innate and may be hastened or slowed by external factors but it cannot be halted or reversed. Pathological ageing is also innate and can be environmentally influenced like natural ageing but it proceeds at either a constant or inconstant rate. An example of pathological ageing is the condition known as childhood pro-geria, (Hutchinson Gilford Syndrome), in which the signs and symptoms of ageing are pronounced and greatly accelerated.¹ The condition arises from a malfunction or malfunctions in the organism and is therefore potentially capable of correction.

¹ See, *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*, 25th edn., Baltimore; Hong Kong; London; Sydney: Williams and Wilkins, c. 1990, p. 1265, and Medina, *Clock of Ages*, p. 274.

The aetiology of natural ageing is uncertain. Time is the only universally acknowledged agent of the biological changes associated with natural ageing. It can be relied upon that, as age increases, the chances of survival decrease. The simplest historical explanations for the ageing of bodies involve wear and tear and loss of energy. In time the human body erodes and weakens through use. Equally, the body can be regarded as an organism whose vitality is derived from an internal source of energy or heat which gutters and fails in a manner similar to a battery losing energy over time. The progressive loss of energy disables the tissue and makes it less able to withstand assaults from the environment. Thus wear and tear and loss of energy are linked in a vicious circle of decline. It is logical that these two factors do play some part in ageing but it is unlikely that they are the sole agents of deterioration. Predictably more complex theories on ageing have emerged in this century.² A simplified description of four of the most firmly established of these theories follows.

The “cross-linking” theory relies on the formation of biochemical linkages between formerly separate molecules, which results in the loss of tissue quality observed in ageing. The connective tissue of the body, collagen, which forms twenty-five to thirty per cent of total body mass, becomes less elastic. A demonstration of this can be carried out by pinching the skin on the back of the hand of an old person and of a young person simultaneously. The young tissue will snap back into place immediately while older tissue will remain puckered and re-settle gradually.

Alternatively, “programmed” ageing postulates that body cells have a genetically pre-determined lifespan. As age increases cells cease to divide and reproduce

² There are currently eighteen theories on the cause of ageing. 1. Clinker/Age Pigment Theory, 2. DNA Damage Theory, 3. DNA Damage/Repair Theory, 4. Disposable Soma, 5. Free Radical, 6. Glycosylation, 7. Genetic, 8. Gene/Biological Clock, 9. Hormone/Stress, 10. Immunological, 11. Metabolic Waste, 12. Mitochondrial, 13. Mutation, 14. Nutrition, 15. Protein Damage, 16. Radiation Damage, 17. Somatic Mutation, 18. Telomere/ Cellular Senescence Theory. Source: Medline, electronic database, http://www.mrc-lmb.cam.ac.uk/genomes/jong/aging_theory.html

accurately. Mutations occur and accumulate resulting in the decline or destruction of the proper functioning of the various organs.

The accumulation of cell mutations is also thought to be responsible for the third theory of ageing, which involves “immune deficiency”. Mutated cells provoke an autoimmune reaction. The body recognises its own altered cells as antigens and thereby attacks its own tissue bringing about the physiological decline which is associated with ageing.

The fourth theory concerns a class of host molecules called “free radicals” which become detached from their sites of origin and migrate through the bloodstream to relocate elsewhere causing damage to the recipient organs.

The six lines of thought on ageing involving wear and tear, energy-loss, cross-linking molecules, genetics, immune deficiency and free radicals and those listed above (p. 44, n.2), indicate that contemporary opinion is divided on the cause of human ageing although the genetic model is becoming predominant.³ It is apparent to gerontologists that the cause of ageing is likely to be multifactorial, and depends on aspects of all or at least many of the current theories.

In contrast to the modern diversity of opinion, medieval physiologists were in no doubt that loss of body heat accompanied by dehydration were the sole cause of biological ageing.

The use of analogy is common in historical medical writing. Two analogies are used in connection with the physiology of ageing. The first is the universal physiological analogy, probably first described by the Greek philosopher Alcmaeon, at the beginning of the fifth century, B.C.. Alcmaeon likened the

³ The genetic influence on ageing is discussed in *Cellular Aging and Cell Death*, ed. Holbrook, N. J., Martin, G. R. and Locksmith, R. A., New York; Chichester: Wiley-Liss, c. 1996. See also *Nature: Genetics*, May 1996, vol. 13, no. 1., pp. 25-34. Also Medina, *The Clock of Ages*, “Programmed Death”, pp. 270-292, ch. 14.

human being (microcosm) to the universe (macrocosm). Thus, the four elements of which the universe was believed to be composed, earth, air, fire, and water, also constituted the “body of man” as part of the natural world. Each of the four elements had specific properties. Earth was cold and dry, air was hot and moist, fire hot and dry and water cold and moist. The manner in which these elements interacted in the natural world was also believed to be true for physiological reactions. In certain quantities, water would cool and extinguish fire, while air enhanced flame or extinguished it depending on the relative quantities of both. In the case of human physiology, an acute fever, that is a superfluity of the fire element, could be cured by the application of the correct measure of elements which counterbalanced heat and cooled the body.⁴

The developing idea of a balance between the four elements, human health, and the inclusion of a system of four bodily humours which were fluid in nature, and corresponded to the four elements and their properties can be found in the Hippocratic corpus (c.460-400 B.C.). Thus, the humour called black bile was associated with the element earth and a cold and dry state. Yellow bile corresponded to fire, which was hot and dry. Phlegm and water were associated with cold and moist and blood and air were paired to warm and moist.

In the Hippocratic treatise, “On the Nature of Man” it says:

The body of a man has in itself blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile; these make up the nature of his body and through these he feels pain or enjoys health. Now he enjoys the most perfect health when these elements are duly proportioned to one another in respect of compounding, power and bulk, and when they are perfectly mingled. Pain is felt when one of these elements is in defect or excess, or is isolated in the body without being compounded with all the others.⁵

⁴ Galen described the cooling remedies for this type of fever in *On Marasmus*, see Theoharides, “Galen on Marasmus”, pp. 389-390. For the Arabic physician Avicenna’s advice on cooling of epidemic fevers see, Chathard, J. A., “Avicenna and Arabian Medicine”, *Bull. Johns Hopkins Hospital*, vol. XIX, No. 207, June, 1908, pp. 157-60, (p. 160).

⁵ *The Works of Hippocrates*, Jones, W. H. S. et al., 8 vols., Loeb C. L., London: Heinemann, 1923-1988, vol. iv, p. 11.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) agreed with the model of disease and ill health described in the “Nature of Man”, adding that old age stemmed from a similar cause. In “The Parts of Animals”, he writes:

It is surely sufficiently established that these four principles [elements].... are practically the causes controlling life and death, not to mention sleep and waking, prime and age, disease and health.⁶

Since it could be readily observed that the vital animal body was warm when alive and cold when dead, heat was considered the prime mover in all the physiological functions of the body including ageing. The natural heat of the body was known as the “innate heat”, “the intrinsic heat” or the “vital spirit”. Each individual was born with a fixed amount of innate heat which resided in the heart and was carried around the body via the blood. Classical writing is vague on the initial source of the innate heat. In Chapter XVII of *De respiratione*, Aristotle says that:

Birth is the first sharing in the warmth of the nutritive soul, and life is merely the perpetuation of this.⁷

It appears that in this piece at least, Aristotle is saying that the innate heat arose from the soul which nourishes. It is unclear whether he is speaking of a divine source or simply some physiological seat of innate heat such as the heart. In support of a supernatural origin, Peter H. Neibyl, commenting on Aristotle’s “On the Generation of Animals”, has remarked that Aristotle made a distinction between elemental fire and the innate heat, writing that the latter was divine in origin. Neibyl also noted that the Stoics believed in a “universal craftsmanlike fire that performed the work of vital generation and other creative acts of nature with foresight”. Similarly he writes that Plotinus was in favour of one external

⁶ Aristotle, *The Parts of Animals*, tr. Peck, A. L., Loeb C. L., no. 323, London: Heinemann; Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 1937, p. 123. For a review of Aristotle’s thoughts on ageing see Griffin, J. J., “Aristotle’s Observations on Gerontology”, in *Geriatrics*, 1950, 5, pp. 222-226.

⁷ Aristotle, “On Respiration” in *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, tr. Hett, W. S., Loeb C. L., no. 288, 1935, p. 473.

source of vital heat.⁸ It is notable that Galen, whose opinion was so influential during the Middle Ages, believed that the innate heat was not of divine origin but was derived from the moisture associated with menstrual blood and sperm.⁹

The Hippocratic corpus provides a model of how the innate heat and ageing of the body are linked. It is principally a dietary model. It is proposed that in childhood and adolescence the innate heat was at its height and required most fuel or food. As time passed the heat declined until so little food was required that any excess would cause death.

This is analogous to a fire which can either be extinguished by depriving it of fuel such as coal or wood or by violent extinction when too much fuel can dampen and smother a weak flame by depriving it of air. Inevitably, despite how well the innate heat is tended through careful attention to diet, it will eventually expire as its progressive weakening makes it unable to draw to itself sufficient ventilation via the lungs. Thus, in the Hippocratic Aphorisms numbers XIII, XIV:

Old men endure fasting most easily, then men of middle age, youths very badly, and worst of all children, especially those of liveliness greater than the ordinary. Growing creatures have most innate heat, and it is for this reason that they need most food, deprived of which their body pines away. Old men have little innate heat, and for this reason they need but little fuel; much fuel puts it out. For this reason too the fevers of old men are less acute than others, [those of younger men] for the body is cold [and therefore less able to generate the heat of fever].¹⁰

In *De senectute*, Cicero (106-43 B. C.) expresses the same idea:

Itaque adulescentes mihi mori sic videntur, ut cum aquae multitudine flammae vis opprimitur, senes autem sic, ut cum sua sponte, nulla adhibita vi, consumptus ignis exstinguitur; ...

When the young die I am reminded of a strong flame extinguished by a torrent; but when old men die it is as if a fire had gone out without the use of force and of its own accord, after the fuel had been consumed.¹¹

⁸ Neibyl, P. H., "Old Age, Fever, and the Lamp Metaphor" in *Jnl. Hist. Med. and Allied Sciences*, vol. 26, 1971, pp. 351-368, (pp. 355, 358).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

¹⁰ Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, Jones et al., Loeb C. L., vol. iv, p. 105.

The second of the two analogies which were introduced above, that of “the lamp metaphor”, was used in the classical and medieval period and beyond in medical literature and in philosophical writing to describe this concept of ageing. The metaphor likens the innate heat to the flame of a lamp. The oil reservoir which feeds the flame is the natural moisture of the body which became known as “the radical moisture”. The flame gradually uses up its fuel reserve and ageing and death result from dehydration just as a lamp will flicker and die if its fuel is not replenished.

Medical treatment for the elderly based on the attitudes towards the causes of ageing illustrated by the lamp metaphor remained constant from the classical period until early modern times. The object of treatment was to conserve the innate heat and its fuel the radical moisture for as long as possible by warming and moistening regimens. These will be considered in part two of this chapter.

The Hippocratic corpus and the medical writings of Aristotle and Galen were transmitted to the medieval west by the translation of Arabic texts into Latin in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by Constantine the African and Gerard of Cremona.¹² During the thirteenth century the Flemish Dominican, William of Moerbeke (c.1215-1286), and others translated the medical writing of the ancient authors directly from the original Greek.¹³

Galen’s synthesis of the work of the ancient Greek physiologists was the primary channel through which the innate heat and radical moisture model of biological ageing was transmitted to medieval physicians. The most frequent medieval edition of the “Aphorisms” of Hippocrates (with its references to ageing) was that arranged into seven sections by Galen accompanied by his own commentary.

¹¹ Cicero, *De senectute*, p. 152.

¹² A Latin version of Galen’s, *De medendi methodo ad Glauconem* had been available since the ninth century. Translations of Gerard of Cremona are listed in *A Source Book of Medieval Science*, ed. Grant, E., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, pp. 35-38. For a review of the influence of the Hippocratic corpus in the Middle Ages, see, Kibre, P., “Hippocratic Writings in the Middle Ages” in *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 18, 1945, pp. 371-412.

Similarly Galen's commentary was appended to the *Liber Prognosticorum* of Hippocrates translated by Constantine the African. Galen was the cornerstone of the medical faculties of all medieval universities. In England a student wishing to incept in medicine at the University of Oxford was required to be familiar with Galen and the medical writing of Hippocrates.¹⁴ The study of Galen was not confined to theoreticians. English physicians cite his opinions in manuals for use in clinical practice.¹⁵ The libraries of medieval England held Galen's work. The numbers of extant manuscripts recorded by N. R. Ker and M. R. James attests to his availability and popularity in England.¹⁶

Since Galen's system of physiology was so influential it is essential to consider how far his opinions on ageing correspond with the earlier Greek sources and whether medieval physiologists developed the theory of ageing which had been transmitted to them from antiquity.

In keeping with his predecessors, Galen's physiology of ageing remained dependent on the idea of a balance between the innate heat and the body's moisture. But whereas the Hippocratic system assigns the foremost importance to intrinsic heat, Galen departs from the earlier theory in the emphasis which he places on the importance of the moisture in sickness and health and in its decrease during ageing. Death caused by ageing is due to the final drying out of the heart, which in turn causes the enfeebled innate heat residing there to be extinguished. He departs somewhat from the ancient view regarding the role of the innate heat

¹³ *A Source Book of Medieval Science*, pp. 39-41.

¹⁴ *History of the University of Oxford*, 6 vols., Oxford: Clarendon, 1984 -, vol. 2, *Late Medieval Oxford*, ed. Catto, J. I. and Evans, R., 1992, p. 303.

¹⁵ John of Gaddesden quotes Galen 417 times in the *Rosa medicinae*, Appendix E. Gilbertus Anglicus also cited Galen, Hippocrates and Aristotle; for a biography and list of his authorities, see, Handerson H. E., *Gilbertus Anglicus, Medicine of the Thirteenth Century*, Cleveland: Cleveland Medical Library Association, 1918, pp 18ff.

¹⁶ "Catalogue of the Library of Christ Church, Canterbury", in James, M. R., *The Ancient Libraries of Canterbury and Dover*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1903, pp. 56-61: items 446-449, 453-465, 467-469, 479, 489, 493, 496, 498, and 503. *The Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, ed. Ker, N. R., 2nd edn., London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, no 3, 1964, (Supplement 1987, ed. Watson, A.G.), records manuscripts of Galen's writings from the medieval

in the sense that he does not believe that the innate heat is the same heat, which causes death. He says that it is extrinsic heat drawn into the body from the environment which overpowers the weakening innate heat leading to its extinction and the final dehydration of the heart.¹⁷ The process, he says, is “incurable”. (It is notable here that in speaking of ageing as incurable, Galen is using terminology associated with pathology and not natural processes). According to this view the primary influence is given to profound dehydration, that is the loss of the radical moisture, which is a departure from the older system which concentrated on the extinction of the innate heat or vital energy of the body as the cause of death in old age.

Galen’s influence can be seen in the writing of Avicenna, and Roger Bacon, on the role of dehydration in ageing. Both emphasize its importance in the ageing body.¹⁸ An indication of the extent of interest in biological moisture may be inferred from the fact that Avicenna, writing in “The Canon of Medicine”, was the first to use a technical term for the substantive moisture with which the individual was born; he called it the *humidum radicale*.¹⁹ Commenting on dehydration Galen wrote:

It is claimed by some people... [that] in old age, the heart starts fading [the seat of the innate heat] because of lack of fuel, and it finally goes out completely in death. This explanation is accepted by almost all the newer philosophers and physicians although it is not true...²⁰

Galen discusses the effect of dehydration on ageing in detail in a treatise on atrophy entitled, “On Marasmus”. Marasmus is the corruption of the human body due to dryness. This work cannot be dated precisely but it was probably written

libraries of Eton College, p. 80, no. 132, and the Benedictine Cathedral Priory of Holy Trinity at Norwich (U. L. Camb., Conv. And Caus Coll. p. 137, no. 161).

¹⁷ Neibyl, “Old Age Fever and the Lamp Metaphor”, pp. 354, 356.

¹⁸ Gruner, *Avicenna*, pp. 71-72, chs. 58, 59, 60. Bacon, R., *De retardatione accidentium senectutis*, pp. 8-11, ch. 1.

¹⁹ Avicenna and the radical moisture see, McVaugh, M., “The Humidum Radicale in Thirteenth-Century Medicine”, in *Traditio*, vol. 30, 1974, pp. 259-283, (p. 265). For development of interest in the radical moisture see Hall, T. S., “Life, Death and the Radical Moisture: A Study of Thematic Pattern in Medieval Medical Theory”, in *Clio Medica*, vol. 6., 1971, pp. 3-23.

between the years 169 and 180 when Galen was physician to the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius.²¹

Galen divides the corruption of the human body due to marasmus into two categories: simple marasmus and its complicated form. The marasmus of old age is of the latter complicated type. Simple marasmus results when the temperature of the body is elevated due to a failure of the physiological cooling mechanisms (lungs, skin and according to Aristotle the brain.) The innate heat increases and rages out of control. The patient is observed to be fevered and may also exhibit signs which are symptomatic of ageing effects: loss of weight, sunken eyes, and dry skin. But this is not the ageing due to the passage of time. Galen thus distinguishes between natural and pathological symptoms of ageing.

Comparisons between the medieval understanding of ageing and modern theories are unhelpful since the ancient system of physiology discussed here, although tenacious, was mostly invalid. Yet in making the distinction between the presence of the same ageing effects observed in acute disease such as hectic fever and those which develop over time, Galen indicates that he was aware that the signs of ageing could be both natural and pathological. He is aware that ageing need not be dependent on the passing of the years but could be brought about by a malfunction which is not related to time such as is now known to be the case in childhood progeria.²²

Ancient authors are vague when considering the natural or pathological character of ageing. In "On Youth and Old Age" Aristotle says only that ageing is decay of the body from a source "rising from itself".²³ In his study of old age in Roman society, T. G. Parkin admits the uncertainty surrounding the nature of ageing at

²⁰ Theoharides, "Galen on Marasmus", pp. 375-6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

²² See above, p. 43, n. 1.

²³ Aristotle, "On Youth and Old Age" in *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia*, p. 419. The title "On Youth and Old Age" is misleading. The piece is on life and death only. The original work on age may have been lost.

that time but states that many ancient authors did think of old age as a disease. However in opposition to this he quotes Galen, writing in *De sanitate tuenda* that old age was not in itself a disease because it was not contrary to nature.²⁴ Galen's opinion on the naturalness of ageing in "On Marasmus" chimes with his views in *De sanitate tuenda*. He says that since no animal has ever been shown to avoid old age and it inevitably happens to all living beings, it is thus natural in character.²⁵

Yet a note of tension is sounded by an adjective which Galen applies to ageing. According to the English translation of Galen's "On Marasmus" by Theoharides, Galen describes old age as "incurable", which is an adjective usually associated with pathology.²⁶ The use of terms such as curable or incurable, natural or unnatural, admits that there is a malfunction in the organism which under the right treatment is subject to correction. Galen says that he uses the expression natural in two ways. It seems natural to Galen that all animals feed and therefore grow. But this is not the definition of natural which he applies to old age. Old age is only natural in the sense that it can be observed to happen to all animals. The use of the word incurable leaves room to question whether Galen would have agreed that under the right conditions, that is the knowledge of a formula which would conserve the heat and moisture indefinitely, that ageing need not have happened to all animals. It is likely that in using the word incurable, Galen is simply saying inevitable in another way. This reference to pathological old age is not technical but simply a matter of language.

In his article "The Care and Extension of old Age in Medieval Medicine", Luke Demaitre refers to a similar problem of interpretation in citing a case concerning Richard Browne's seventeenth-century translation of Roger Bacon's *De*

²⁴ Parkin, *Age and the Aged in Roman Society*, p. 184 and n. 22.

²⁵ Theoharides, "Galen on Marasmus", p. 373.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 382-383. See the definition of pathological ageing above p. 43. "Incurable" applied to ageing appears to contradict what Galen has said earlier in *On Marasmus*, ("Galen on Marasmus", p. 373), and in *De sanitate tuenda* that is, that ageing is natural.

retardatione accidentium senectutis.²⁷ Demaitre criticises the historian Sona R. Burstein for accepting Browne's translation of Bacon's *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* as "The Cure of Old Age". In doing so she interprets the use of the word "cure" to mean that Bacon, writing in the thirteenth century regarded old age as a disease which could be cured. It does seem unlikely that "The Cure of Old Age" is an accurate rendering of Bacon's title. Browne disregards the use of the genitive of *accidens* in the title, which gives some clue to Bacon's intention in the work. He is not proposing a cure for old age but a delay of the by-products of ageing, that is of the accidents or signs and symptoms (*accidentium senectutis*) of old age and not old age itself.

Internal evidence from *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* suggests too that Bacon's attitude to ageing was not as naive as Burstein believes. Bacon was aware of both the pathological and the natural agents of ageing. He called the signs and symptoms of ageing unnatural only when they were observed in adolescence. He says for example that grey hair can be observed in young men. The accidents of ageing which occur after what he calls "the time of manhood" or "the flower of age" at about forty to fifty years were described as natural in that they were to be expected and could not be avoided.

In defence of Sona Burstein, it is probably true that Richard Browne did believe that Bacon's work could be used to cure old age. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a period of optimism in which it was believed that ageing could be controlled and even eliminated.²⁸ Richard Browne calls old age a disease which could be cured if the correct regime could be devised by following the advice of Galen and Aristotle, since both, he argues, lived to be over one hundred years old. Browne shared St. Augustine's optimism in believing that the human lifespan had

²⁷ Demaitre, L., "The Care and Extension of Medieval Medicine" in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, pp. 1-22. The work which is referred to is Bacon, R., *The Cure of Old Age, and Preservation of Youth*, tr. Browne, R., London, 1683.

²⁸ Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 249ff. Bacon's attitude to "the cure" of old age will be examined in part two of this chapter.

been steadily increasing since the Biblical Flood.²⁹ Medieval physiologists agreed with Galen in viewing the underlying biological process of ageing as natural while treating its accidents or symptoms as pathological.³⁰ Vincent of Beauvais (c.1190-1264) marries the two strands of opinion admirably in the *Doctrinale* when he calls old age, “a healthful sickness”.³¹ A passage in “Piers Plowman” is also revealing on this matter. The poet, William Langland (c.1330-c.1400), personifies old age as a combatant in Death’s army. Hoary Old Age was in the vanguard, bearing before Death the banner that was his by right. Langland writes:

Nature followed with a host of cruel diseases, slaughtering thousands with foul contagions, and sweeping all before him with his plagues and poxes. Then Death came dashing after, crushing to powder both kings and knights, emperors and pontiffs.³²

In this view, Age does not ride in the main company. He acts independently of the main host of diseases. Old Age, in foremost position, wielding Death’s banner, advances on Mankind, in the vanguard. He assaults mankind first and singly whereas the diseases and Death follow in his wake and attack where he has weakened.

To return to the medical view from Langland’s literary allusion, Arnold of Villanova (d.1311) also expressed an opinion on natural ageing. Michael McVaugh interprets Villanova’s opinion thus:

Why then cannot life continue forever? Simply because there is a natural end or limit to the restoration of the *humidum radicale/nutrimientale*.....what remains for the physician to do is to minimize any outward consumption of existing *humidum radicale*.³³

²⁹ See Browne’s introduction in Bacon, *The Cure of Old Age and the Preservation of Youth*. St. Augustine’s opinion on ageing influenced the attitudes of medieval Christians. Augustine’s view and the spiritual aspects of the causes of ageing will be discussed below in ch. 3, part two.

³⁰ Alice Tobriner was therefore not wholly correct in saying, “Not only does old age bring disease; it is itself a disease, an opinion of medical men from the time of Galen but accepted by commoners as true” in “Old Age in Tudor-Stuart Broadside Ballads”, *Folklore*, vol. 102: ii, 1991, pp. 149-174, p. 152.

³¹ *Doctrinale*, cited in Coffman, G. R., “Old Age from Horace to Chaucer: Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea”, *Speculum*, 9, 1934, p. 261.

³² Langland, W., *Piers the Ploughman*, ed. Radice, B., tr., Goodridge, J. F., London: Penguin, 1966, p. 248.

The natural ageing of which Galen speaks in his treatise on marasmus is quite distinct from simple marasmus, which can be suffered at any age and is amenable to treatment by cooling if attended timeously. On the contrary, the ageing produced by the progression of life produces a profound dryness accompanied by a gradual and sustained lowering of the body temperature as the innate heat uses up the available body moisture and decreases with age. Since it can be observed that many old people suffer from rheumy conditions such as over-salivation and exudates from nose, eyes and chest, Galen's opinion that old men are profoundly dry and cold in nature may be questioned. The solution may be that although the underlying condition is cold and dry, there is nevertheless a superfluity of the phlegmatic humour in old age accounting for these conditions. Galen concedes that some physicians do believe that phlegm is the dominant humour in old age but he will not allow it. He is adamant that the body progresses from hot and wet in youth, to warm and moist in the prime years and finally, to cold and dry as old age engages.

It has already been noted in Chapter One above that Galen does not believe that a physician can specify when a man becomes old according to the years he has lived.³⁴ Similarly he cannot be precise about how cold and dry the old man is relative to one whom is still warm and moist. He says that there are fluctuations in ageing bodies as to the relative degrees of coldness and dryness.³⁵

Since Galen's "On Marasmus" emphasizes the marasmus due to ageing rather than that due to fevers it has been suggested that the treatise's popularity among medieval physiologists indicates a growing interest in the nature of ageing.³⁶ If

³³ McVaugh, "Humidum Radicale in Thirteenth-Century Medicine", p. 281.

³⁴ Above, p. 24.

³⁵ Theoharides, "Galen on Marasmus", pp. 378-9.

³⁶ McVaugh, "Humidum Radicale in Thirteenth-Century Medicine," p. 272. The author argues that *On Marasmus* had enough impact to inspire commentators. Bernard of Gordon's, "*Tractatus de marasmo secundum intentionem Galieni*", *MS Vat., Pal. lat., 1234*, fols. 135-139 and Arnold of Villanova's *Libellus de humido radicali*. Similarly Cardinalis of Montpellier showed an interest in ageing when he referred to Galen's system in his introduction to the *Isagogue*.

this is so it would be reasonable to expect debate on the cause of ageing and perhaps some modification of the theory or the treatments associated with it. It does not appear however that any of the medieval commentators on ageing departed from Galen's opinion on the cause of ageing.

Although the Englishman, Roger Bacon, expressed his opinions on the treatment of ageing in an unconventional way; in theory, he followed the traditional line drawn from mainly Arabic authorities. The principal contribution of the medieval period in the physiology of ageing appears to have been the clarification of the constituent parts of the biological moisture as described by Avicenna in "The Canon of Medicine". The distinction of the two moistures, intrinsic or extrinsic, the drying of which caused physiological ageing and death and the relative abundance of the two was of particular import to medieval physicians.

The attitude of medieval physicians towards treatment of ageing therefore centred on protecting the ongoing consumption of the radical moisture as long as possible from external risks such as heat and foods which were thought to chill or dessicate. Their treatment regimes for the elderly will be considered next.

(ii) The Treatment of Ageing: Temporal Physicians

The sources of medieval attitudes towards the physiology of ageing have been discussed in the first part of this chapter. In this part attitudes to the treatment of the signs and symptoms of old age will be discussed. Attention will be given to the identification and management of the various pathologies which were recognised in the medieval period to be associated with ageing. In particular Roger Bacon's opinions on ageing will be discussed to show how these chimed with or departed from the prevailing attitudes to senescence.

Since it has just been shown that classical and medieval knowledge of medicine depended heavily on the Hippocratic corpus, it is necessary to revert to the description of old age related pathologies in the “Aphorisms” of Hippocrates in which it states:

Old men suffer from difficulty of breathing, catarrh accompanied by coughing, difficult micturition, pains at the joints, kidney disease, dizziness, apoplexy, cachexia, pruritis of the whole body, sleeplessness, watery discharges from bowels, eyes and nostrils, dullness of sight, cataract, hardness of hearing.³⁷

Two other ancient sources are also prominent in describing the pathologies associated with old age. These are the Roman, Aurelius Cornelius Celsus (first century) and Aretaeus the Cappadocian, (second century).³⁸ Neither of these two sources was well known to medieval physicians. (The work of Celsus on medicine, although lost for centuries, was rediscovered in 1426.)³⁹ They are useful for confirming that the descriptions of age-related pathologies described in the Hippocratic corpus are supported by the opinions of practising physicians. Celsus gives a similar list of ailments to those described in the “Aphorisms”:

Choked nostrils, runnings from the nose, urinary difficulties, joint and renal pains, paralysis, cachexia, insomnias, chronic maladies of the ears and eyes, looseness of the bowels, loss of memory.⁴⁰

Aretaeus describes:

Difficulty in breathing, loss of appetite, difficulty in healing of wounds, ulcers, senility of mind [which he distinguishes from the mania of younger persons], apoplexy, difficulty of micturition; retention and haematuria, kidney failure, renal calculi and arthritis.⁴¹

³⁷ Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, Loeb C. L., vol. iv, pp. 133-5, part III, no. XXXI.

³⁸ See, Howell, T. H., “Celsus on Geriatrics”, in *Jnl. Am. Ger. Soc.*, vol. 18:2, No. 9, 1970, pp. 687-691. For Aretaeus, see Cordell, E. F., “Aretaeus the Cappadocian” in *Johns Hop. Hosp. Bull.* vol. XX, No. 225, Dec. 1909, pp. 371-377 and Howell, T. H., “Aretaeus on Disease in Old Age” in *Jnl. Am. Ger. Soc.* vol. 19:2, No. 11, 1971, pp. 909-912.

³⁹ Howell, “Celsus on Geriatrics”, p. 687.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 688.

⁴¹ Howell, “Aretaeus on Disease in Old Age”, pp. 910-912.

In “On Marasmus”, Glaudius Galen also gives an indication of the signs of ageing:

sharp nose, hollow eyes, collapsed temples; the ears cold, contracted, and their lobes turned out; the skin about the forehead being rough, distended and parched.⁴²

The encyclopaedia by Bartholomew de Glanville (English version, 1397) says this of the perils of old age:

...Alle men dispisen the olde man and ben hevvy and wery of him. The olde man is itraueiled and greued with coughynge and spettyng and with othir greues, [f]orto asschen tofalle and turne into asschen, and poudre into poudre.⁴³

On taking an overview of these lists of symptoms it is evident that the respiratory tract, urinogenital, sensory, dermatological, and musculo-skeletal defects associated with ageing were recognised. The ancient physicians appear to have been content with identifying and describing the pathologies rather than suggesting treatments for specific age-related diseases. Regimen I of the Hippocratic corpus does advise broadly on diet and exercise in stating that the constitution and age of the patient must be taken into consideration before any treatment is decided upon but neither this nor the two regimens for health which follow it are helpful in more than a general way to the gerontologist. Similarly the Hippocratic treatise “On Joints” concerns reduction of dislocations rather than inflammatory conditions which would be relevant to the elderly.⁴⁴

In “On Marasmus”, Galen concentrates on the theory of ageing, that is on the cooling and drying effects and suggests methods of countering these broad underlying physiological traits in the elderly but not the remedy of particular maladies. “The Canon of Medicine” of Avicenna goes further in providing a

⁴² Theoharides, “Galen on Marasmus”, p. 374.

⁴³ *On the Properties of Things* John Trevisa’s translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ *De proprietatibus rerum*, ed. Seymour, M. C., 3 vols., Oxford: Clarendon, 1975, vol.1, pp. 291-3.

⁴⁴ Hippocrates, *Regimen I*, vol. iv, pp. 223-229; idem, *On Joints*, vol. iii, pp. 201ff.

regime aimed at specific ailments of the elderly.⁴⁵ It remains true however that whatever the nature of the disability or the function of the body affected, the aim of treatment Avicenna describes does not depart from Galen's plan for alleviating the universal cooling and drying of old age. In Thesis III of Book I of the "Canon" Avicenna says:

The regimen appropriate for old people consists in giving those forms of food, drink and baths, which render the body warm and moist.⁴⁶

Avicenna's advice for care of the aged will be rehearsed and compared with surviving records of treatment plans for the elderly of English origin, particularly those of Roger Bacon and John of Gaddesden .

Delicacy characterises Avicenna's line of treatment for the elderly. Foodstuffs were to be served in small amounts throughout the day. "Some laudable nutrient was allowed at bedtime"⁴⁷ All spicy, sharp and dessicating foods such as pickles and other vinegar-based dishes, smoked fish, and savouries, were to be avoided, presumably because of their supposed drying effect. Game birds nicely flavoured with condiments and served in an oil dressing were acceptable. Old red wines were better than sweet new ones since the former were warming and diuretic especially if they were laced with pepper to relieve constipation. White wine was prone to cause gastro-intestinal or urinary obstruction. Constipation was similarly relieved by liberal doses of olive oil taken before food, also laxative fruits such as prunes and figs. Celery was recommended for the treatment of gout or calculus (kidney stone).

Gentle massage was recommended but not on tender parts, which presumably ruled this treatment out in cases of arthritis. For exercise a little walking or horse-riding was prescribed. Avicenna advised caution concerning bleeding of the very

⁴⁵ Howell, T. H., "Avicenna and the Care of the Aged", in *The Gerontologist*, Winter 1972, 12, pp. 424-426.

⁴⁶ Gruner, *Avicenna*, "Thesis III: Regimen for Old Age", pp. 432-436, (p. 432, ch. 854).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

young and the elderly. Cupping, (drawing blood to the surface of the skin by applying a heated metal cup to produce a partial vacuum) he believed, should not be considered in a child of less than three years. It was “altogether contra-indicated” in a person of more than sixty years.⁴⁸

In the medieval period, the treatment regime for any condition requiring treatment involved three categories: diet, medication, and surgery. The practitioner was expected to treat his patient’s malady according to these categories and in that order. Diet followed by medication, being the least invasive and therefore the least hazardous to the patient were the first lines of treatment.⁴⁹

The regime described by Avicenna is consistent with this ethic. Red wine, olive oil, and easily digestible foods characterise the diet, followed by warm baths and gentle massage as the recommended medications. However some of the pathologies associated with the elderly were amenable to correction by the surgical operations which were practised in the medieval period. Surgical treatises exist which describe treatment for ulcers, anal fistulae, cataract, excision of skin blemishes, urinary obstruction and removal of calculi.⁵⁰ Difficulty in

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 511. Roger Bacon was also cautious about over-zealous bloodletting in the elderly since he believed that it dissolved the radical moisture and promoted grey hair; see Browne, *Cure of Old Age*, p. 78. Although surgical operations such as venesection are contraindicated in the elderly by Avicenna; Gilbertus Anglicus, the English physician, used venesection as a first line of treatment in *Arthretica* or gout, a painful condition of the joints. It is consistent with Avicenna’s caution regarding venesection in the elderly that Gilbertus considered this to be a treatment original to himself since he cites no authorities for it. In the Middle Ages joint pain was believed to arise from a gathering of a bloody or bilious humour on the joint. In a case, which the author treated by radical venesection, Gilbertus is careful to note that the female patient was robust. He does not mention her age. Alternative treatments involving purgation, cooling and astringent ointments and the application of the severed foot of a green frog to the affected part were available for the frail; see Handerson, *Gilbertus Anglicus, Medicine of the Thirteenth Century*, pp. 43-49.

⁴⁹ Siraisi, N. G., *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An introduction to Knowledge and Practice*, Chicago; London: Univ of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 137.

⁵⁰ In the medieval period and beyond medical practitioners regarded surgery as a separate discipline. For Avicenna and Galen on surgery, see Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine*, pp. 162, 174; for the separation of the faculties of medicine and surgery in northern Europe, idem., 178-179. The English physician John of Arderne (1307-after 1377) published a treatise on anal fistulae and haemorrhoids, *Treatises of Fistula in Ano, Haemorrhoids and Clysters by John Arderne from an Early Fifteenth-Century Manuscript*, tr. Power, D., EETS, no. 139, London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1910, repr. 1968.

micturition is identified by all of the medical sources associated with conditions affecting the aged; similarly impactions of the bowel appear to have been common. Avicenna advises therapeutic measures for dissolving or preventing the stone: pennyroyal, capsicum, onions and garlic followed by a bath and a drink of hot broth or frumenty (wheat boiled in milk, sweetened and spiced) and barley as the preferred lines of treatment.⁵¹ As already noted above, Avicenna says that cupping is contraindicated in those of sixty years or over. Attention is drawn to this prohibition of cupping for the following reason. If such a minor and widely practised surgical procedure such as cupping or phlebotomy was thought to be too severe for those advanced in years, it is unlikely that lithotomy, (surgical removal of calculus) was much practised although calculus was a common complaint in this age group. In patients of any age the rate of success of lithotomy was suspect. A thirteenth-century manual for confessors reveals that a conscientious surgeon confessed to his priest that he performed such operations regularly and that many of his patients died but he did not know whether his attentions were the cause of their deaths or not.⁵²

Similarly the sources cited above list constipation as a common malady among the elderly. This condition is a cause of anal fistula and other bowel lesions which could be treated by surgical intervention in the Middle Ages. Yet it is doubtful whether a reputable practitioner who wished to retain his practice would have attempted the procedures recommended by John of Arderne to resolve this complaint in persons of sixty years or more, even if they were otherwise in robust health.⁵³

Avicenna was physician to the caliphs of Baghdad. His lines of treatment, in part, reflect the climate of the Middle East and the wealth of his clients. His

⁵¹ Gruner, *Avicenna*, p. 435.

⁵² Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine*, pp. 157-8.

⁵³ Arderne, *Treatises of Fistula in Ano, Haemorrhoids and Clysters*. Shock induced by pain could be controlled to some extent by the application of sponges soaked in soporifics held in the mouth or placed in the nostrils; but hardly enough to produce adequate anaesthesia for a procedure involving cutting or ligature in a frail individual.

prescription of warm baths and expensive foodstuffs such as oiled game and old red wines laced with pepper makes it likely that some adaptation of his advice was necessary to suit the climate and purses of patients in northern Europe.

The English physician, John of Gaddesden appears to follow the broad lines of treatment for the elderly which were advised by Avicenna with some modification. His handbook for practitioners of medicine, the *Rosa medicinae* of 1314, provides numerous prescriptions. Gaddesden adheres to the formula of diet and medication as first lines of treatment followed by surgery as the last resort. His treatments, which would have been applicable to the list of pathologies associated with the elderly defined above, include a number of diuretics for the relief of various types of dropsy arising from either a cold or hot humour. Old age, according to Galen's physiology, would naturally be concerned with the former.

It is notable that Gaddesden does recommend surgery for drawing off dropsical fluid under two conditions: if the patient is wealthy and if he is fit. For the poor man suffering from dropsy he advises drinking his own urine.⁵⁴ The medication recommended included peppery plants and herbs which were thought to warm the blood: anise, fennel, wild carrot (radish) and cumin. Gaddesden's treatment for the rheum, another affliction identified with old age by the classical authors, is exhaustive. He indicates thirteen lines of treatment for the condition including hygienic routines, drinks and ointments. Galen had advised that the aged patient should consume the milk of a lactating woman to refresh the waning innate heat. Gaddesden also advises this treatment for the rheumy patient but he is more precise about the details of treatment. He recommends "the milk of a young

⁵⁴ Cholmeley, *John of Gaddesden and the Rosa medicinae*, pp. 35, 37. By the early twentieth century urea was being used as a diuretic so the poor man probably had the best and certainly safer treatment. Gaddesden did not produce a book of treatments aimed specifically at the elderly, therefore it is unlikely that rich old men and women were lucrative sources of income for medical practitioners.

brunette with her first child, which should be a boy”.⁵⁵ For failing eyesight the remedy was an eye-bath of tutty (zinc oxide scraped from the flues of furnaces) quenched fifteen times in the urine of a virgin youth, rosewater balsam and white wine.⁵⁶

The less serious signs and symptoms of old age, those which were mainly cosmetic in nature such as grey hair,⁵⁷ balding and wrinkling, were given some attention in medical treatises of the Middle Ages in sections entitled *De decoratione*. There is however a facetious tone in the writing of the medical authors on this subject. It may be that serious medical men did not care to place much emphasis on the cosmetic sections of their work since this area of knowledge was considered to be the province of disreputable old women. In the “Roman de la Rose”, Jean de Meun describes a terrible hag who gives advice to a girl on how to use cosmetics and ointments to enable the young woman to ensnare and “pluck her lover down to the last feather.”⁵⁸ This particular exchange between the old woman and the maiden is perhaps more indicative of the dangerous sub-culture among women which was believed to exist in the Middle Ages rather than the calibre of attitudes exchanged between youth and age.

It is true nevertheless that folk traditions held that most old women were evil. In some parts of Europe effigies of old women were burned to ward off old age.⁵⁹ In her study of European fairytales, Marina Warner describes the type of woman

⁵⁵ Cholmeley, *John of Gaddesden and the Rosa medicinae*, p. 44. Using the precepts of Galen’s physiology to interpret the details supplied here it would seem that the source should be brunette because a dark-headed woman would be considered to be warmer in temperament than a blonde. She should be young and with her first child because she would naturally be at the height of vigour at this stage in her life, and therefore warmer than an older woman who had been enfeebled by previous pregnancies. Her child should be a boy because the birth of a male indicates strength in the mother. Similarly the milk produced by the mother for a male baby would have been believed to be of better quality than for a female child.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵⁷ According to Galen, grey hair was the result of an excess of black bile (also associated with melancholy). White hair arose from a deficiency of the innate heat and the operation of putrid phlegm and was therefore “chiefly found in the elderly”, see Grant, *A Source book of Medieval Science*, p. 707.

⁵⁸ Cited in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Blamires, A, with Pratt, K. and Marx, C. W., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 162.

who was vulnerable to becoming a symbol of evil in the tales, “She could be a spinster, an unmarried mother, an old nurse or servant in a household – any woman who was unattached and ageing...”⁶⁰ Old women were particularly associated with poison, either literally or as in the passage just quoted from the “Roman de la Rose” with poisonous knowledge. Two examples will suffice to illustrate a wide seam of writing. In giving advice to husbands, St. Jerome (c.331-420) writes that if a woman cannot have her own way she is likely to have the poison ready. If a husband indulges his wife by admitting to his house “old women and soothsayers and prophets and vendors of jewels and silk clothing, you imperil her chastity”.⁶¹ Walter Map (1140-c.1209) reminds his readers that the Roman Empress Livia, in her old age, poisoned her husband Augustus.⁶²

Arnold of Villanova (d.1311) and Albertus Magnus (c.1190-1280) indicate similar vitriol among scientific commentators. In Arnold’s introduction to Book III of *Brevarium Practicae* after considering women’s ailments and cosmetic remedies for blemishes of the skin. He adds:

...women are in general venomous animals I shall follow it up [the section on cosmetics] with a treatise on the bite of venomous animals.⁶³

The association of old women with poison is taken up by Albertus Magnus:

If old women who still have their periods, and certain others who do not have them regularly, look at children lying in the cradle, they transmit to them venom through their glance...One may wonder why old women who no longer have periods, infect children in this way. It is because the retention of the menses engenders many evil humours, and these women, being old, have almost no natural heat left to consume and control this matter, especially poor

⁵⁹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 174.

⁶⁰ Warner, M., *From the Beast to the Blonde*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1994, p. 229. In a caption to a plate (facing title page) depicting an illustration from Charles Perrault’s ‘collection of fairytales – *Histoires ou contes du temps passe* of 1697, Warner notes that the tellers of the tales were themselves often aged servants.

⁶¹ *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, p. 71.

⁶² “The Letter of Valerius to Ruffinus, Against Marriage”, *ibid.* no. 30, p. 111.

⁶³ Cited in Cholmeley, *John of Gaddesden and the Rosa medicinae*, p. 61.

women, who live off nothing but coarse meat, which greatly contributes to this phenomenon. These women are more venomous than the others.⁶⁴

In contrast to Albertus Magnus, the Englishman Gilbertus Anglicus, writes kindly of old women. In advising them how to renew ageing complexions, soften the skin and open the pores, he recommends among other treatments, steam baths and careful washing in warm water followed by drying with the finest cloths.⁶⁵ It is notable too that the same author pays tribute to the skills of certain old women in therapeutics. He says that, “some old women know how to produce and remove goitrous swellings by means of suitable herbs known to them.”⁶⁶ Both Gilbertus and Gaddesden acknowledge the efficacy of old women’s treatment of the skin lesions associated with smallpox. The women advised wrapping the patient suffering from smallpox in red cloth. (The wavelength of light produced by red objects is now known to promote healing of skin to some degree.) Gilbertus writes: “*Vetulae provinciales dant purpuram combustam in potu, habet enim occultam naturam curandi variolas.*”⁶⁷

Roger Bacon, treats greying, balding and wrinkling as serious afflictions. He considered that “to be long in growing grey” despite the passage of years was a sign of vigour. Bacon goes so far as to call grey hair an obvious deformity, “*Nam predictum accidens reddit hominem magis deformem et magis in manifesto corporis apparet.*”⁶⁸ This attitude to greying is unusual. In literary sources grey or white hair is the only universally positive sign of ageing since it is associated with wisdom. It is revealing of Bacon’s attitude that he uses a strong word: “deformity”, to describe grey hair. Deformity denotes an ugly and marked

⁶⁴ “Les Admirables Secrets de Magie du Grand Albert et du Petit Albert”, in *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jacquart, D. and Thomasset, C., Cambridge: Polity Press; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 75. In the transmission of venom, Albertus is referring to “The Evil Eye” in which injury was brought about by “darting noxious rays” on the victim. See *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Classic edn., Leicester: Galley Press, (n. d.) p. 431.

⁶⁵ Handerson, *Gilbertus Anglicus, Medicine of the Thirteenth Century*, p. 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 43.

⁶⁷ Cited in Cholmeley, *John of Gaddesden and the Rosa medicinae*, p. 41.

⁶⁸ Bacon, *Cure of Old Age*, tr. Browne, pp. 23, 25, 29, 30, 30-4, and Bacon, *De retardatione accidentium senectutis*. ed. Little & Withington, p. 23. Literary references to greying will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this paper.

deviation from the norm usually due to faulty development or disease. In contrast to the opinions of Albertus Magnus, Villanova and Gaddesden which have been cited above, he does not believe that concern about greying and wrinkling is no more than the vanity of women. The use of “deformity” to describe these symptoms of ageing confirms his argument in *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* that he does not see their progress as inevitable but avoidable if the timeous precautions he recommends are carried out.

This evidence of Bacon’s optimistic attitude to ageing raises the question, which has already been referred to above in connection with the work of Sona Burstein:⁶⁹ was Roger Bacon ahead of his time in believing, as Paracelsus did, that ageing could be halted by the practice of alchemy? A dark reference in Chapter Two of *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* could be interpreted as the author’s admission that he had knowledge of secret processes and potions, which were only known to the initiated. In describing two ways in which old age can be managed he says: “One is the ordering of a man’s way of living: the other is the knowledge of those properties that are in certain things, which the ancients have kept secret”.⁷⁰

It was commonplace for medieval medical practitioners and those of a later period in history to keep some of their remedies secret from competitors or from those whom they felt were not sufficiently adept to use revealed knowledge wisely. Bacon’s attitude to his work probably arises from the latter cause.

Writing on the need for secrecy Bacon says:

I have resolved to mention these things obscurely, imitating the Precept of the Prince of Philosophers to Alexander, who said that He is a Transgressor of the Divine Law, who discovers the hidden Secrets, Nature and the Properties of things: Because some men desire as much as in them lies to overthrow the Divine Law by those Properties that God has placed in Animals Plants and Stones.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Above, pp. 54-5.

⁷⁰ Bacon, *Cure of Old Age*, tr. Browne, p. 11.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Georges Minois believes that his reticence in this passage stems from concern that only Christians and not Muslims should be privy to his work.⁷² It is questionable, if this view is accepted, given the complexity of the language which Bacon uses whether educated Christians would have been any the wiser than their Muslim counterparts. Nevertheless it is clear that Bacon believed that his treatise on ageing was a powerful work which would be dangerous in the wrong hands.

A sense of occult knowledge pervades *De retardatione accidentium senectutis*. It is perhaps because of this that the work lacks the spontaneity and practicality of Gaddesden and Gilbertus. The physician and translator, Richard Browne, writing in the seventeenth century, was still highly protective of Bacon's work maintaining in his introduction to "The Cure of Old Age" that the knowledge therein must be protected, not from heretics or Muslims but from: "cheating cut-throats and block-headed quacks".⁷³ Neither Gaddesden nor Gilbertus nor any of the ancient physicians have merited such tenacious caution. Although Bacon writes rather darkly that the ancients are his authorities there is nothing esoteric about the authors which he quotes. He relies heavily on Avicenna and Haly Abbas⁷⁴ and refers to Aristotle and Hippocrates.

There is nothing in his theory of ageing which jars with the prevailing Galenic physiology but the occult tone of the alchemist in his work cannot be overlooked. Whereas Galen, Avicenna and the English physicians who have been referred to above speak openly about the medications which they propose, Bacon writes thus on the substances which will be beneficial to the elderly⁷⁵: (An interpretation of the animal, plant or mineral to which he is referring has been added in brackets).

⁷² Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 176.

⁷³ Bacon, *Cure of Old Age*, tr. Browne, pp. 21-2.

⁷⁴ Haly Abbas (al-Majusi) d. late tenth-century. Author of a medical compendium: *The Complete Medical Art*, which surveys the development of medicine up to his own times. See Porter, R. *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present*, London: Fontana Press, 1997, p. 98.

⁷⁵ Bacon, *Cure of Old Age*, tr. Browne, p. 15.

One of which things lies hid in the bowels of the earth. [Gold]⁷⁶
 Another in the sea. [Coral]
 The third creeps on the earth. [Viper]
 The fourth lives in the air. [Rosemary]
 The fifth is likened to the medicine, which comes out of the noble animal. [Bone from the heart of a mature stag.]⁷⁷
 The sixth comes out of the long-lived animal. [Elephant]⁷⁸
 The seventh is that whose mine is the plant of India. [Aloes]

The means by which the various substances mentioned in the above extract operated to alleviate the accidents of old age is not entirely clear but it is likely that each item was thought to have a preservative quality in itself. Gold, it is presumed, fed the innate heat, the stag and the elephant being long-lived and vigorous themselves imparted this to the aged recipients. Rosemary is antiseptic, aloes heal the skin, and viper venom is a cardiac stimulant in the correct dosage. Notably, the English fifteenth-century political allegory “Mum and the Sothsegger” links two of Bacon’s constituents; the use of viper venom to re-invigorate the body, and deer, in this case a hart. The author writes:

When harts come to be a century old, and grow feeble, they instinctively strive to catch adders. When the hart finds the adder, he feeds on his venom, renews his skin and prolongs his life.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Bacon’s suggestion of gold as a remedy for the accidents of old age is notable. A gold salt has been used in twentieth-century medicine for severe arthritis. The author goes to some length to advise on how the active substance is to be taken. He says that thick substances such as gold (as opposed to more friable ones such as plants) must be burnt and very finely powdered and taken in a cordial. It is noted as good for anything from baldness to leprosy but is not associated with gout or any other painful condition of the joints. Gilbertus Anglicus’s cure for gout was venesection; he does not mention gold. *The Book of Quinte Essence*, does recommend soaking gold in the Essence but presumably only as a means of fortifying the drink. It is unlikely that Bacon had any knowledge of the beneficial effect of gold salts on inflamed joints. Even if his instructions for administration were followed it is doubtful whether gold administered in this way would have been therapeutically active. The alchemical association of gold with the sun and therefore heat and strength is probably the source of the supposed efficacy of this substance rather than any observed effects.

⁷⁷ A fibrous tendon in the heart of a young stag ossifies into a small bone over time. This piece of the animal’s anatomy was thought to hold and retain its strength. It may have been believed that after death some of the stag’s vigour lingered in the bone and could be transferred to the person who ingested it.

⁷⁸ The long-lived animal to which Bacon refers is probably an elephant. In a bestiary of the twelfth century it is noted that elephants “have memory and live for three hundred years”. See *The Book of Beasts*, ed. White, T. H., Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1992, pp. 24-25.

⁷⁹ *Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. Day, M. and Steele, R., London, EETS o.s. no. 199, 1936, p. 13.

The use of coral or viper flesh is questionable. However the overall method of operation adheres to medieval confidence in like curing like. Bacon says plainly:

For that preserves another thing which is long-preserved itself and that corrupts another thing which is quickly corrupted itself, and it acts that thing according to whose similitude it is denominated, or like as it is formed: and this is a secret..... and to these our very times still remains secret.⁸⁰

The opening paragraph of “De retardatione accidentium senectutis” also deserves comment:

As the world waxeth old men grow old with it: not by reason of the Age of the World but because of the great increase of creatures which infect the very air that every way encompasses us (sed propter multiplicationem viventium inficientium ipsum aerem, qui nos circumdat) and through our negligence in ordering our lives.⁸¹

The use of the phrase, “because of the great increase of creatures which infect the very air” in Bacon’s description of how ageing progresses has attracted attention. Minois has said that this comment means that Bacon was aware of the “strong demographic growth in Europe at the period when he was writing”. This knowledge lead to Bacon’s remarkable foreboding that as population grows, it creates more pollution and so endangers the environment and public health.⁸² Shulamith Shahar repeats Minois on Bacon’s prescience about pollution.⁸³

“The multiplication of living creatures which infect the very air” does probably refer to the simple observation that over-crowding leads to disease. If Bacon was indeed ahead of his time in making the connection between over-crowding and air pollution as Minois says, it follows that he may also have turned his mind to how the infected air of which he speaks caused disease. He would have had to accept that something invisible in the air polluted by humans caused ill health. It may be stretching belief that Bacon or his contemporaries had any idea of the

⁸⁰ Bacon, *Cure of Old Age*, tr. Browne, p. 17.

⁸¹ Bacon, *De retardatione accidentium senectutis*, ed. Little and Withington, p. 8.

⁸² Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 177-178.

⁸³ Shahar (1997), *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 61.

bacteriological interpretation of living creatures infecting the very air and spreading disease. Set against this, a comment in Avicenna's "Canon of Medicine", which Bacon lists as one of his authorities gives pause and invites speculation on whether at an intellectual level, some physicians had indeed recognised the possibility of the existence of invisible "living" particles as vectors of disease.

Physicians had observed that contact with the body fluids or inhalation of the breath of plague victims spread infection but Avicenna has shown a level of awareness which goes beyond this simple explanation. He could not have observed microscopic organisms but he described a process, which J. A. Chatard has called "remarkable" and likened to a description of the "modern microbic theory of disease". Avicenna says this on an infection of bone: "Spina Ventosa is due to the acrid humour of the bones but the bone may be eaten away by some small animiculus, which enters through a wound and destroys the bone", though he says this observation is not confirmed.⁸⁴ Similarly it may be the case that Bacon had sensed that it was not simply the quality of the air, which a man breathed in terms of hot or cold, stagnant or fresh which affected his state of health but something unseen and living carried within it.

It may be true that as Minois says, Bacon's understanding of the links between over-population, pollution, and ill-health were remarkable for his time but the effect of environment or climate on ageing had already been described by Galen in "On Airs Waters Places".⁸⁵ He writes in particular that living in a city facing west and turned away from the east winds with hot winds and cold winds from the sea of the Farquadin blowing towards it was hazardous for the elderly. Men in this type of environment were prone to diseases and aged quickly.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Chatard, "Avicenna and Arabian Medicine", p. 159.

⁸⁵ The Hippocratic corpus also recognises the influence of climate and environment on health. See *On Airs Waters Places*, Jones et al, vol. i, pp. 65-137.

⁸⁶ *Galen's Commentary on the Hippocratic Treatise Airs, Waters, Places*, tr. Wasserstein, A., Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982, *Proceedings of the Israeli Academy of Science and Humanities*: v. 6, no. 3, pp. 41, 49-50.

Bacon's attitude in *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* in hinting that this is a secret work, capable in the wrong hands of overthrowing nature, is reminiscent of another work of alchemy, which refers to ageing: the "Book of Quinte Essence". The author states that he has developed an elixir, which can prevent the "decay of flesh", preserve the body and renew youth".⁸⁷ Minois has noted that the Swiss alchemist, Paracelsus (1493-1541) wrote of his knowledge of an "elixir of life" of this type in *Liber de Longa Vita*.⁸⁸ Like Bacon, Paracelsus introduced a note of caution regarding the possible overthrow of Divine Will by indicating that because life had a natural and predetermined end he refused to divulge it or use it himself.⁸⁹ In keeping with Bacon's claims of secret sources, the author of the "Book of Quinte Essence" says that the formula for the essence was given to Hermes by an angel of God immediately after the Flood with the recommendation that it was "God's greatest secret for man's need is how to restore old feeble men to the strength of their youth".⁹⁰

In contrast to Bacon, there is a sense of quackery about the "Book", as it goes on to claim that the pain of gout will cease within a few days of taking a half walnut shell-full of the essence morning and evening. After a brief treatment with the elixir, an old man will feel only forty years of age again and the old man's complaint of melancholy will be dispelled.⁹¹ Although the author says that the elixir is potent and can restore a man on the point of death to health, he is careful to say that this occurs only if it is the will of God.⁹² The "Book of Quinte Essence" is actually a recipe for fortifying wine through a process of five distillations. The resulting essence is a crude brandy, described by the author as:

⁸⁷ *Book of Quinte Essence*, pp. 2, 3, 10. The object of serious medical treatises was not rejuvenation by a magical force but the retardation of the physical afflictions of old age and the extension of life to fulfill the natural lifespan of at least one hundred years, see Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 240-241.

⁸⁸ Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 271.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

⁹⁰ *Book of Quinte Essence*, p. 1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 10, 15, 17, 19.

Burning water, the soul in the spirit of wine; water of life; and if you wish to conceal it, Quinte Essence.... It gives incorruptibility for it prevents dead flesh from rotting.⁹³

The author may be right in his claims for the preservative powers of the essence since alcohol is a pickling agent and has been used, in the form of wine, since antiquity to cleanse wounds and prevent suppuration. Although alcohol is a depressant it may indeed have the power to lift an elderly melancholic's mood or make the pain of gout seem less troublesome if only temporarily. The "Book of Quinte Essence" is an inferior work in comparison to Bacon's. There is an apparent similarity in their common avowals regarding secret knowledge and old age but the former offers magical cures whereas *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* is an earnest treatise on preventative medicine.

Although *De retardatione* is not offering immortality, neither is it entirely in keeping with the palliative approach of the ancients. Bacon himself makes the distinction:

But our regiment lays open by what Way Old Men and the well-stricken in years may easily be freed and defended from the Accidents of Old Age which are wont to happen not only to Old Men but even to those that are young.⁹⁴

Bacon is not straying into heresy. In keeping with the Divine Law the natural human lifespan is unaltered despite his regimen. He is simply promising a healthier old age than anyone including the ancients had envisaged before.

Bacon's treatise is an optimistic work; its aim was to keep the ageing Christian as healthy as possible for as long as possible in order that he could carry out, to the fullest degree, God's purpose for him. Bacon was not hinting at an indefinite lifespan. The secret of a healthy old age did not lie in magic elixirs. Health

⁹² Ibid. p. 15.

⁹³ Ibid. p. 2.

followed obedience to the Divine Will by living a good life, observing the particular rules for diet and medication recommended in his treatise and most importantly, by realising timeously that preparation and effort were required to safeguard health before the onset of old age.⁹⁵

This chapter concerned how men aged. It has explored the difficulty of identifying the cause or causes of ageing, medieval beliefs on how the body aged and attitudes to the treatment of physical decay. In a theocentric culture, such as the Middle Ages, it is necessary to consider attitudes to “why” men aged as a separate question. Chapter Three will explore the spiritual value which medieval men placed on ageing and their attitude to sin and the elderly.

⁹⁴ Bacon, *Cure of Old Age*, tr. Browne, p. 136. In keeping with the preventative theme in *De retardatione*, Bacon has said earlier in the work that his advice should begin to be put into practice not later than “the flower of manhood”, that is between forty and fifty years of age.

⁹⁵ This contrasts with an ancient author, (probably Philippus the Egyptian) who was criticised by Galen in *On Marasmus* over the content of the former’s treatise entitled, *On the Art of Staying Young*, see Theoharides, “Galen on Marasmus”, pp. 373-374 and n. 22. Bacon’s opinions reflect those of Philippus in that the greatest importance was placed on following their respective regimens against old age as early as possible, even from as early as childhood in the latter case. However unlike Bacon, Philippus believed that death could be prevented.

CHAPTER 3

Ageing and the Church**(i) Why Men Aged: The Theological View**

Georges Minois has written that the negative attitudes of Roman society towards the elderly persisted into the early Middle Ages. Furthermore, the status of the elderly declined in the wake of the barbarian invasions when the Roman social and legal institutions, which had hitherto provided a measure of protection for them, collapsed. In barbarian society, only the physically useful were of value. The elderly disappear into the large sub-class described bleakly in the sources as “the weak”. They are bound up anonymously with the poor, widows, orphans and the disabled.

The emergence of Christianity did not alleviate the situation of the elderly. If anything their position was worse than that of their younger companions in misfortune, because, according to Minois, the early medieval Church was not interested in actual old age, only in its spiritual significance as the consequence of original sin.¹ In part one of this chapter the idea of original sin as the root of old age will be explored followed by a discussion on how far Minois is correct in thinking that the Church had little interest in age beyond its symbolic significance. Part two will continue the theme of sin and old age by considering the attitude of the medieval Church to aged penitents.

The Roman Catholic Church’s definition of original sin is summarised as follows:

¹ For this view of early medieval attitudes to the aged see, Minois, *History of old Age*, pp. 113-114. On Roman attitudes to the elderly, cf. Parkin, *Age and the Aged in Roman Society*, pp. 59-62. The dominant attitude, according to Parkin (p. 62), is that expressed by Pliny the Elder, “A short life is nature’s greatest gift.”

Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called ‘original sin’.

As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin.²

St. Augustine of Hippo was influential in establishing the Church’s teaching on original sin. Two passages in the “City of God” describe Augustine’s views on why humans age and die:

...if he [mankind] submitted to his Creator, ...he should pass over into the fellowship of the angels, attaining an immortality of endless felicity, without an intervening death; but if he used his free will in arrogance and disobedience, and thus offended God, his Lord, he should live like the beasts under the sentence of death.³

For though they would not have been destined to die, if they had not sinned, still, as human beings, they took nourishment, since the bodies they bore were not yet spiritual but animal, still bodies of the earth. Those bodies were not indeed growing old and senile, so as to be brought in the end to an inevitable death. This condition was granted to them by the wonderful grace of God, and was derived from the tree of life which was in the middle of paradise, together with the forbidden tree... Thus the purpose of the other food was to prevent their animal bodies from experiencing any distress through hunger or thirst, whereas the reason for their tasting of the tree of life was to prevent death that might come on them unawares from any source, or the death that might come in extreme old age after their lives had run full course.⁴

These extracts highlight a line of tension between the classical biological attitudes to the nature of ageing which persisted into the medieval period and beyond and the theological attitudes to ageing described by St. Augustine. It has been established above that Galen and the physicians who followed him considered ageing to be a natural process but from a theological point of view Augustine is describing an unnatural process. The “City of God” mentions three types of body. The first is the body of Adam and Eve before the Fall of Man, which was mortal but protected from ageing by God’s will via sustenance from the Tree of Life. This body would have eventually become self-sustaining through the grace of

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, p. 93, nos. 417, 418.

³ Augustine, *The City of God*, tr. Bettenson, H., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p. 502.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 533-4.

God if Adam and Eve had chosen obedience to the divine. The second human body is the post-Fall body, which is subject to ageing, senility and death. The third type is the post-Resurrection body, that is the body which God had intended for humans. It needs no sustenance of any sort because those who attain salvation will be suffused with the Tree of Life through dying in Christ. Augustine emphasizes that the pre-Fall bodies were conventional biological bodies but ones in which ageing is held in check by God's grace. Thus the fruit of the Tree of Life, according to Augustine, to use a crude analogy, is an anti-ageing supplement. The withdrawal of the fruit of the Tree of Life results in the erstwhile suspended biological process being allowed to run its course "naturally".

Augustine writes that mankind was:

...handed over to time and old age, for them to make an end of him, in respect of that life, at least, which he might have enjoyed perpetually in paradise...⁵

Augustine may have agreed therefore that ageing was natural in purely biological terms but from the theological viewpoint it was unnatural since Adam and Eve had become vulnerable to ageing by opposing God's will. According to Augustine's reading of scripture, ageing had no part in God's original plan for mankind, as he makes plain in the following extract:

Hence all Christians who truly hold the Catholic faith are agreed that even the death of the body was not inflicted on us by the law of our nature,.. but it was imposed as a just punishment for sin.⁶

Augustine acknowledged that old age as a just punishment for sin was feared. He offers a gloomy definition of physical life:

In fact, from the moment a man begins to exist in this body which is destined to die, he is involved all the time in a process whose end is death.

We bring with us, at our birth, the beginning of our death...⁷

⁵ Ibid., p. 537.

⁶ Ibid., p. 524.

The harsh severing of flesh from soul was bound to be unpleasant. Augustine notes that the unpleasantness is cut short if death comes by one sudden blow in which the stroke outruns sensation and does not allow death to be felt. But if the dying is long, as it must be in prolonged old age, suffering is considerable. Although Minois has said that there was no interest in great age beyond the symbolic, there is evidence of considerable fearful interest in the reality of *senium*, the last stage of old age. The attitude of Christians towards the decrepit is severe. St. Augustine quoted Seneca to illustrate how the aged could expect to be abandoned:

A leading pantomime actor of great experience, grown old and decrepit, used to put on his act every day on the Capitol, as if the gods still took pleasure in his performance now that human beings had abandoned him.⁸

Evidently experience and eminence in the professions counted for nothing once the practitioner passed into the final stage of life. Even Sabinus, Bishop of Canossa who was known for his saintliness was not safe from abuse in his last years as this piece from the “Dialogues” of St. Gregory shows. Sabinus has become blind in his old age:

But as he lived on to an advanced age, his archdeacon, an ambitious man, impatient to take over the episcopal see, planned to poison him.⁹

The old man survives the attempted murder but the auditor of Gregory’s story, a young monk, expresses no surprise that the archdeacon would consider murdering his decrepit senior. Minois remarks on the “savage pleasure” taken by some Christian authors in describing the effects of decrepitude as St. John Chrysostom says:

⁷ Ibid., pp. 518, 523.

⁸ Ibid., p. 250.

⁹ Gregory I, Pope, *Dialogues by Saint Gregory the Great*, tr. Zimmerman, O. J., New York: Fathers of the Church, vol. 39, 1959, pp. 118-19.

His eyes grow dim, his ears dull, his hair thins, his complexion turns pale, his teeth rot and disappear, his skin withers, his breath stinks, his chest is sunken, he breaks out in coughing fits, his knees shake and his feet swell up; the inner man, who ages not at all, is himself affected by these signs of decrepitude which show that his bodily dwelling is about to fall to ruin. What is there left for every old man to do, given that the end of his life is nigh, other than think on one thing only, how to reach the shores of the life to come in all happiness.¹⁰

The afflictions mentioned in this paragraph reflect the list of symptoms (above, pp. 58-9) given by various physicians, but the relish with which John Chrysostom describes the afflictions of age discharges a frisson which is absent in the medical writing. Similarly, Salvian of Marseilles (fifth century) is quoted by Minois to support his view that the aged Christian was despised, “It is depressing to tell what I have seen: honoured old men and decrepit Christians enslaved to greed and debauchery...”.¹¹ Salvian’s opinion of old men is certainly severe and thus suits Minois’s case but it must be read in the light of Salvian’s extremely sour opinion of Roman society in general.¹²

While it is conceded that there is a great weight of writing which suggests that Christians did take a poor view of the decrepit and regarded their ills as a punishment for sin, it is not impossible to find some evidence which suggests kindlier attitudes. It is important to recall that decrepit old age is only the last phase of ageing. According to the medieval sources discussed in Chapter One above, a person would definitely be considered old at sixty years of age and in some cases from around fifty years. This means that a person would have been considered old long before he became decrepit. St. Augustine does not even begin to speak of himself as old until he is sixty-nine years of age and admits that it was

¹⁰ Cited in Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹² Salvianus, a Latin writer of fifth-century Gaul is mentioned by Gennadius (priest and theological writer, d. 492-505) as a priest of the Church of Marseilles. Nine of Salvian’s letters and two treatises: *Ad ecclesiam adversum avaritiam* and *De gubernatione Dei* are extant. A major theme of Salvian’s writing was the unfavourable comparison of the society of Christian Rome, which he considered to be depraved, with the pagan or Arian German barbarians whom he believed to be more virtuous. Paul Lejay has questioned the reliability of Salvian’s view of the society in which he lived. Lejay says of Salvian, “To judge the society of his time by his pictures is to risk making mistakes” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Online edn., 1999, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13411a.htm>.

possible in some cases to experience a comfortable old age.¹³ A letter from St. Jerome (331-341-420) to the centenarian Paul of Concordia supports Augustine's optimism that advanced old age could be tolerable:

Here we have your years circling their orbits for the hundredth time, and you, ever observing the precepts of the Lord, bear in mind the blessings of the future life as you enjoy a foretaste of them in this life. Your eyes are clear and full of life, your steps steady, your hearing unimpaired, your teeth white, your voice is resonant, your body robust and full of energy. Your ruddy cheeks give the lie to your white hairs, your physique protests your age. Extreme old age has not (as we commonly see) impaired the tenacity of your memory, nor has cooling blood blunted the sharp edge of your warm spirit....The Lord shows us in you the flowering of the resurrection to come: He wants us to know that while it is by reason of sin that the rest of us though still alive, die prematurely in the flesh, it is evidence of virtue practiced that you counterfeit youth at an age alien to it. And though we see such a healthy body given to many – even sinners – yet in their case the devil supplies it to them that they may sin, while in your case the Lord bestows it that you may rejoice.¹⁴

Although Jerome says nothing to contradict Augustine's views on original sin and ageing in this letter, he associates a good or bad old age with a person's burden of actual sin rather than with original sin. Augustine's teaching on original sin was not universally accepted by Christians of this period. The Pelagians did not agree with Augustine's position, believing instead that men could obtain salvation by his own efforts. Thus no supernatural intervention in the form of grace was required. Augustine argued on the contrary that the gift of grace was essential to enable the human being to choose to follow Christ rather than his own sinful inclinations.¹⁵

In the light of this attitude to grace, Paul of Concordia, as presented by Jerome, is a living testament to the action of grace. Paul has lived a saintly life and therefore has a negligible burden of personal sin to aggravate the symptoms of ageing. Jerome admits that the devil may supply such robust health in a wicked person to enable him to continue sinning but the root of Paul's good health is God's grace

¹³ See below, p. 81.

¹⁴ *The Letters of St. Jerome*, tr. Mierow, C., 1 vol., nos. 1-22, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 33, Westminster, Md.: Newman Press; London: Longmans, Green, 1963, 10, pp. 50-51.

¹⁵ For Augustine's position on original sin and grace see Evans, G. R., *Augustine on Evil*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994, pp. 126-127.

in assisting him to live a blameless life. He notes too that Paul is not unique when he states that such a healthy body in old age is “given to many”. Jerome therefore uses Paul as an example to the community that extreme old age was not necessarily to be feared even by sinners, whom the devil looks after. The possibility of a fulfilled pleasant old age such as this was within the reach of Christians.

In keeping with this, St. Augustine can also be found writing to soothe the fear of advanced old age:

I myself have known and heard of some who up to the decrepitude of old age never experienced as much as the mildest of fevers, whose whole life has been undisturbed; and yet the whole of man’s life is pain, because the whole of it is temptation, as the holy Scriptures proclaim.¹⁶

This piece recalls the remarks of Simone de Beauvoir, quoted above in Chapter One (p.16) in which she says that young and middle-aged people see the elderly as an alien species, a group of people engaged in the painful process of dying who are set apart from the rest of society. Augustine does not agree with this attitude. He assimilates the elderly with the rest of the community in writing that the whole of man’s life is pain: “..from the moment a man begins to exist in this body which is destined to die, he is involved all the time in a process whose end is death.”¹⁷ Death is therefore the goal of life. Old age and death are the fulfilment of life’s pilgrimage. Augustine argued that from the moment of birth the human being is actually “in death”. The signs of growth in a child are therefore actually signs of decay. Growth is as much a sign of the disintegration hurrying every man to the end as white hair and arthritic joints. Augustine’s teaching on decay in the midst of life is repeated in Aelfric’s sermons:

..there is no stability of our body: childhood passes to boyhood, and boyhood to full growth; full growth bows to age, and age is ended by death. Verily our age stands on no stability, but so much as the body grows so greatly are its days diminished. Everywhere in our life are

¹⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, p. 991.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

faintness and weariness, and decay of the body, and yet everyone desires that he may live long.¹⁸

Although Augustine's design is to comfort this may seem a gloomy view of ageing but it is not fatalism. It presents a useful historical contrast with modern attitudes. Medieval society was disposed to admit the perpetual presence of decay in all stages of life and was thus more open to the elderly as part of the community as a whole. In Augustine's plan the elderly are simply one element in the cyclic pilgrimage of life. They are the image of the seeds from which the *novus homo*, the resurrected spiritual man will arise.

Chaucer expresses the same idea in the prologue to the Reeve's Tale, "Till we be rotten can we not be ripe".¹⁹ Similarly, The "Homilies of Aelfric" speak of the birth of the new man from the old: "...we have cast off pernicious age, and are accounted among the children of God".²⁰

In medieval illustrations of the pilgrimage of life, rebirth is suggested by juxtaposing the drawing of the infant with that of the old man. The helpless baby is represented lying naked or in swaddling upon the earth. The old man is similarly wrapped up against his cooling blood and is shown bent down or inclined towards the infant on the earth, indicating his hope of new life.²¹ For some the journey to rebirth is short while for others it is longer but the route and goal are the same:

The whole of our lifetime is nothing but a race towards death, in which no one is allowed the slightest pause or any slackening of the pace. All are driven at the same speed, and hurried along the same road to the same goal. The man whose life was short passed his days as swiftly as the longer-lived; moments of equal length rushed by for both of them at equal speed, though one was further than the other from the goal to which both were hastening at the same rate. There is a difference between a longer journey and a slower pace of walking. If a man passes

¹⁸ Aelfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 1, p. 491.

¹⁹ *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Robinson, F. N., 2nd edn., London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957, p. 55.

²⁰ Aelfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 1, p. 195.

²¹ Sears, *Ages of Man*, plates 14, 92, 98.

through a more extended period of time on this road to death, his progress is no slower; he merely has a longer journey.²²

According to this way of thinking the elderly are not an aberration but a single brushstroke in the Divine Plan. Augustine does not attempt to explain why one person's life should be longer than that of his neighbour or what effect this could have on the individual's opportunities for salvation. A short life has the advantage of less time to accumulate a fatal burden of personal sin but the disadvantage of less time to repent of the sin which one has accumulated. A long life gives more time to yield to temptation but the opportunity to repent at the last moment. It is the case that both Augustine and Jerome regarded a long life, free through God's grace, of the most painful symptoms of decrepitude, as a blessing.²³ Their attitude thus opposes Minois's view that old age was universally feared in this period.

It is true nevertheless, that in Augustine's writing the significance of old age as a spiritual symbol outweighs his interest in actual ageing. He does not refer to the physiological "lamp metaphor" which is so common in the medical literature which was discussed above. The actual mechanics of ageing were of little interest to Augustine. In the "City of God" he expresses this attitude to human anatomy and physiology directly:

As for the parts which are hidden from view, like the complex system of veins, sinews and internal organs, the secrets of the vital parts, the proportions of these are beyond discovery. Even though some surgeons, anatomists they are called, have ruthlessly applied themselves to the carving up of dead bodies, even though they have cut into the bodies of dying men to make their examinations and have probed into all the secrets of the body, with little regard for humanity, in order to assist their diagnosis, to locate the trouble and find a method of cure – even after all that, no man could ever find, no man has ever dared to try to find, those proportions of which I am speaking, by which the whole body within and without, is arranged in a system of mutual adaptation. The Greeks call this adaptation "harmony"... Hence it can, I think readily be inferred that in the design of the human body dignity was a more important consideration than utility. For practical needs are of course transitory.²⁴

²² *City of God*, pp. 518-19.

²³ Long life as a blessing, *Letters of St. Augustine*, ed. Dods, M., tr. Cunningham, J. G., 2 vols., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1882, vol. 2, p. 394 and Jerome's letter to Paul of Concordia, above, p. 80.

²⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, p. 1074.

Although Augustine dismisses the transitory needs of the body in favour of the dignity, wholeness and function of humanity in general, he does show some interest in assessing the true lifespan of human beings. In “Eighty-Three Different Questions”, Augustine sets the post-diluvian human lifespan accurately at one hundred and twenty years.²⁵ For the antediluvian period he is at pains to support the greatly extended spans claimed in the Book of Genesis which he describes and defends in the, “City of God”:

..some unbeliever or other will start a dispute with us about the immense number of years, which in the record of our authorities, the men of that period [antediluvian] lived; he may assert that this tradition is incredible. Similarly, as we know, some people do not believe that human bodies were then of much greater size than they are now.²⁶

He seeks to convince the reader that the claims of the Book of Genesis are biological fact by recalling his own eye-witness evidence of what he and his friends saw on the sea-shore at Utica, “.a human molar so immense that if it had been cut up into pieces the size of our teeth it would, as it seemed to us, have made a hundred”.²⁷

Despite these worthy attempts to provide material evidence, in the end he depends on simple faith in the Scriptures regarding the possibility of an extended lifespan:

..the longevity of individuals in that period cannot be put to the proof of such material evidence. Nevertheless we should not for that reason call in question the reliability of the sacred narrative.²⁸

²⁵ Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 115.

²⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, p. 609.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 610.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 610.

The letter of St. Jerome to Paul of Concordia revealed the author's respect for the aged recipient as a symbol of God's grace. An exchange of letters between St. Augustine and St. Jerome between 404 and 415 also gives some insight into the status of the elderly in early medieval society. If J. N. D. Kelly and Pierre Hamblene are correct in determining 331 as the date of Jerome's birth; Jerome was Augustine's chronological senior by twenty-three years.²⁹ The former makes colourful use of age in his correspondence. In one letter, dated 376, Jerome refers to himself at the age of forty-five as an adolescent, "*Dum essem adulescens immo*

²⁹ Kelly, J. N. D., *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, London: Duckworth, 1975. See Appendix, "The Date of Jerome's Birth", pp. 337-339. Hamblene, P., "La Longévité de Jerome: Prosper avait-il raison?" in *Latomus*, 28, 1969, pp. 1081-1119. The date of Jerome's birth is controversial. Ferdinand Cavallera, gives 347 as the birth date, in "Saint Jerome sa Vie et Son Oeuvre", Université Catholique Collèges Théologiques O. P. et S. J. de Louvain Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense Etudes et Documents, Tome II Première Partie, 1922, pp. 3-12. This date is endorsed by the current *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. An earlier date, 341, is cited in *The Middle Ages: A Concise Encyclopaedia*, ed. Loyn, H. R., London: Thames and Hudson, 1991, p. 190 despite citing Kelly in the entry. Similarly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 3rd edn, ed. Farmer, D. H., Oxford, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992, p. 252, gives c. 341 despite citing Cavallera (347) and Kelly (331) as authorities. Primary sources such as Prosper state 331 and some sources give earlier dates, giving Jerome, who died in 420, a lifespan of ninety, ninety-nine and one hundred years. Cavallera based his evidence on two lines of argument; the record of Jerome's education and data relating to dates associated with Jerome's siblings. The author states that Jerome began the study of grammar in Rome in the year 359 when according to the practice of the time, he must have been about twelve years of age. Kelly challenges this by drawing attention to the entire lack of evidence regarding Jerome's life between 350 and 367-8. Cavallera's remarks concerning the relative birth dates of Jerome and his siblings, a sister born in 361 and a brother in 364, are more convincing. (It is assumed that they were full siblings since there is no evidence to contradict it and some to support the case, in that a letter of Jerome's records that he sent his brother back to Stridon to see to the ashes of "the parents we shared"; see Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 6, n. 18). If Jerome was born in 347, as Cavallera says there would be a gap of fourteen and seventeen years between children born to the same parents. If Jerome was born in 341, the age-gap between himself and his brother is twenty-three years. If Kelly and Hamblene are accepted at 331 there is a gap of thirty-three years between the siblings which seems improbable especially in the light of the later age of menarche in this period; see Amundsen D. W. and Diers C. J., "The Age of Menarche in Classical Greece and Rome" in *Human Biology*, 41, 1969, pp. 125-32, also Amundsen and Dyers, "The Age of Menarche in Medieval Europe", *idem*, 45, no. 3, 1973, pp. 363-369, and Bullough, V. and Campbell, C., "Female Longevity and Diet in the Middle Ages" in "Notes and Documents", *Speculum*, 55, 2, 1980, pp. 317- 325. Neither Kelly nor Hamblene challenge Cavallera on this point. In support of Kelly's opinion that Jerome was born in 331, the author notes that Jerome refers to events which were known to have occurred in the 330/40s as "happening in his infancy". It is also true that Jerome only uses strong language about his advanced age after 400 which chimes with a man in his sixties or seventies. The tone of the letters between Augustine of Hippo and Jerome, which will be discussed below, also suggest a gap in age between the men of much more than seven years, which would be the case if a birth date of 347 is accepted. In 415, Augustine wrote to Jerome, "...in addressing you I consult one much older than myself, nevertheless I also am becoming old;" in *Letters of St. Augustine*, vol. 2, p. 296, no. 166. This thesis will therefore adhere to the most recent research on this subject by Kelly and Hamblene and accept 331 A.D. as the date of Jerome's birth.

paene puer".³⁰ But in the same year in which he describes himself as an "adolescent; just a boy really", Jerome also complains about ageing, "*hic enim aut barbarus seni sermo discendus est aut tacendum est*".³¹ Jerome can thus be inconsistent when referring to age but in an exchange of letters with Saint Augustine his attitude to age is fixed. Jerome had already started to highlight his age by 386, writing to friends in that year that his head was flecked with white, "*Iam canis spargebatur caput*",³² In the letters to Augustine beginning in 405, when Jerome was seventy-four years of age and Augustine was fifty-one years old, the former is at pains to emphasize his weight of years. In the first of the letters Jerome is angry with Augustine because he believes that the latter has criticised him in a previous letter which he has allowed by design, Jerome believes, to have become public although it was private correspondence. He complains that every Christian in Rome has seen it except the intended recipient. The relevant part of the letter reads:

...desist from annoying an old man, who seeks retirement in his monastic cell. If you wish to exercise or display your learning, choose as your antagonists, young, eloquent, and illustrious men,....As for me. A soldier once, but a retired veteran now, it becomes me rather to applaud the victories won by you and others, than with my own worn-out body to take part in the conflict; beware lest, if you persist in demanding a reply, I call to mind the history of the way in which *Quintus Maximus* by his patience defeated Hannibal, who was in the pride of youth, confident of success.

*Omnia fert aetas, animum quoque. Saepe ego longos
Cantando puerum memini me condere soles:
Nunc oblita mihi tot carmina: vox quoque Moerin
Iam fugit ipsa*³³

.....I tell you again, without reserve, what I feel: you are challenging an old man....It is not for one of my years to give the impression of enviously disparaging one whom I ought rather to

³⁰ Jerome, *Letters*, p. 205.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41, no. 7. "Here in your ageing days you must either learn to talk a barbarous language or else remain silent".

³² Now my head was flecked with white.

³³

Time carries away everything
even our memory. How often as
a boy I sang through the long
summer day and put the sun to bed.
So many songs forgotten and now my
Very voice is failing me.

encourage by approbation.... Farewell, my very dear friend my son in years, my father in ecclesiastical dignity.³⁴

Jerome highlights his age again in another letter to Augustine in the same year:

In closing this letter, I beseech you to have some consideration for a soldier who is now old and has long retired from active service, and not to force him to take the field and again expose his life to the chances of war. Do you, who are young, and who have been appointed to the conspicuous seat of pontifical dignity, give yourself to teaching the people.....I am contented to make but little noise in an obscure corner of a monastery, with one to hear me or read to me.³⁵

In these letters Jerome uses his age in an attempt to humiliate Augustine. In the first place, he purports to cringe at Augustine's lack of sympathy for an old man; and secondly he delivers an implied rebuke for contradicting his senior in years.

It is possible that the theme of seniority which Jerome belabours in the letters may go beyond the chronological sense. Jerome employs the theme of age to emphasize his seniority in two other areas, that is, as a Christian, and as a scholar. At the time of writing of the letters, Jerome's major work was completed. The Vulgate version of the Bible was commissioned by Pope Damasus in 383 and finished later the same decade. Augustine's star as a scholar was still rising at this time. Secondly, Jerome had been a Christian considerably longer than Augustine. When Augustine became a bishop in 396, Jerome had been a Christian for almost thirty years. He had been baptised at the age of twenty years. Augustine was not received into the Christian Church until 386 when he was thirty-two, becoming sole bishop of Hippo only ten years later. Jerome had therefore twenty more years of communion with the Christian Church than Augustine and although he did not seek ecclesiastical office himself he is perhaps referring sarcastically to Augustine's meteoric rise in worldly terms when he ended letter seventy-five with the remark quoted above, "...farewell my son in years my father in ecclesiastical dignity".

³⁴ Augustine, *Letters*, vol 1, pp. 264-267. no. 72, pp. 265-7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 277-300, no. 75, p. 300.

At this period in history age was an important qualification for ecclesiastical preferment. The primates of North Africa were elected not strictly by merit, but according to seniority in age and were addressed by the title “Aged”.³⁶ It appears at least from Jerome’s point of view in these letters that the elderly were entitled to respect.

In contrast to Jerome, Augustine’s letters to Jerome are relatively neutral in tone regarding age. Augustine, like Jerome could be bitingly critical to those who offended him; his letters to Donatist bishops are sour but his responses to the aged Jerome are measured. He presents a composed defence of his position and a sorrowful exposition of the former’s impetuosity and readiness to quarrel with friends. He reminds Jerome of his well-known dispute with Rufinus³⁷ and laments the fact that their own bickering is made worse because they should know better as men of mature age, thus turning Jerome’s use of age around on him. But Augustine’s reply to Jerome is respectful. He acknowledges Jerome’s age, his continuing vitality and the honour, which is his due. He writes:

Since therefore, you are, to quote your own comparison, an ox worn out, perhaps as to your bodily strength by reason of years, but unimpaired in mental vigour, and toiling still assiduously and with profit in the Lord’s threshing floor; here am I, and in whatever I have spoken amiss, tread firmly on me: the weight of your venerable age should not be grievous to me, if the chaff of my fault be so bruised under foot as to be separated from me.³⁸

Augustine’s references to his own ageing are also untroubled. He first speaks of advancing age in the year 391, when he is thirty-seven; even then he says mildly that he is no longer in the earlier years of manhood.³⁹ Augustine makes much the same remark in the “Confessions” as he approaches thirty. It may thus be deduced that he believed that youth had passed by the beginning of the third decade of life, although old age had not begun. It is notable in this context that his mother, St.

³⁶ Augustine, *Letters*, vol.1, p. 250, n. 1.

³⁷ See Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 195ff.

³⁸ Augustine, *Letters*, vol. 1, no. 73, pp. 268-276, p. 271.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 21, pp. 46-50, p. 47.

Monica (332-387) died at the age of fifty-five years. Although her death is intimately and emotionally described in the “Confessions” there is no indication that her death was considered untimely at this age.⁴⁰

From the year 423, when Augustine is sixty-nine, he begins to write more often concerning age. There is a cluster of references in his letters to the physical debility of ageing. Chronologically these are: in 426 Augustine designates his successor and delegates some of his duties, specifically on account of old age. In 427 he complains of weakness and again in 429, the year before his death, he is unable to visit a friend on account of his “bodily weakness and chill of age”.⁴¹

The letters of Jerome and Augustine suggest that there was interest in the attitude due to the elderly and the physical perils of advanced age beyond the symbolic. Age is a recurrent theme in the letters reviewed above in which Jerome uses his advantage in years against Augustine.

The works of Pope Gregory the Great also confirm that a practical interest in age existed. St. Gregory had a good opinion of elderly people and showed particular care for them.⁴² In a letter to the Abbot of Mount Sinai he reports that, having learned that there was a want of beds and bedding in the *Gerontocium* there, he was sending fifteen cloaks, thirty *rachinae* [blankets or woollen shifts] and fifteen beds in addition to money.⁴³

⁴⁰ *Confessions of St. Augustine*, tr. Pine-Coffin, R. S., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, reprint 1975, Bk.9, pp. 192-205.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 436, no. 229.

⁴² Gregory’s affection for elderly people was not sentimental. Although he was patient with old men, he recognised and disapproved of bad conduct. He writes sourly in the *Dialogues* about the aged patrician bishop Valerian of Brescia who had accepted bribes and died unrepentant. Gregory says with relish that the martyr Faustinus appeared and ordered that the late bishop’s stinking flesh should be thrown out of the church; *Dialogues*, p. 264.

⁴³ Gregory I, *Selected Epistles of Gregory the Great*, tr. Barnby, 2 Parts, Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church, Oxford: James Parker, 1898, vol. 13, Pt. II, p. 296.

Gregory's interest in old people was not confined to charity; he said specifically that he liked conversing with old men.⁴⁴ There are respectful and positive references to the aged in both his private correspondence and his published works, while his almsgiving was the practical expression of a keen interest in and affection for the elderly beyond their symbolic significance. In the "Dialogues" he identifies the aged with children as deserving tender treatment. There is no disdain intended in this attitude. He recalls affectionately the testimony of a soldier who had a supernatural vision of old men and children building a house of golden bricks in heaven. The house was the celestial reward for the almsgiver who had taken pity on them in life.⁴⁵ Gregory thus believed that the elderly were valuable and deserved respect.

It could be argued however that Gregory's sympathetic attitude was unique. Minois writes that aged monks were treated with derision by their community. He quotes the "Rule of St. Benedict" to support the view that senior monks were passed over in preference for younger men when important posts became vacant. He notes that the "Rule" instructs that deans of the monastery were not to be chosen according to seniority but for their merits and wisdom in teaching".⁴⁶ Minois states that the elderly were relegated to the ranks of infants by the Church, forced to endure a second childhood.

Yet there is evidence to contradict this point of view, if the "Rule of Benedict" is given a more sympathetic reading. Slighting of elderly brethren was not universal. The treatment of the aged in the cases cited by Minois to support his point of view, is a matter of perspective rather than fact. What one reader may see as relegation another could construe as compassion. In the following extracts from the "Rule" Minois's view is considered first followed by an alternative reading:

⁴⁴ Gregory, *Dialogues*, p. 45-6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁴⁶ Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 131.

Although human nature itself is drawn to feel sympathy to those in these stages of life, namely the old and children, yet it is right that the authority of the Rule also should have regard to them. Their weakness should at all times be taken into consideration, and the letter of the Rule should by no means be applied to them in matters of food. Indeed they should always be thought of compassionately, and they should have their meals before the prescribed times”.⁴⁷

Minois interprets this passage as demeaning to the old. He employs it as proof that they were demoted in status. He uses the verb “to relegate” again when analysing the following piece from the “Rule of the Master”. He says that it was “quite out of the question to confer the slightest privilege on old age”. Old monks were relegated to menial employment such as gatekeeper:

For two brothers made decrepit through age a lodging shall be constructed within the monastery gates and close to them. They are to be entrusted with small manual jobs... These old men will eat with the abbot, on account of their age, according to the example of perfect humility provided by St. Eugenia, when she said that she did not want to show herself superior even to them”.⁴⁸

A remark made by St. Augustine to his fellow priest, Memor, appears to support Minois in believing that the elderly were treated as children. Augustine sent Memor an edited copy of one of his books, suggesting that the shortened work may be more easily digested by one of Memor’s venerable age.⁴⁹

The following points concerning these extracts support the opposite case, that the Benedictine attitude to the elderly was not one of derision but of compassion. The first concerns the arrangements which were made by the monks for the care of the old. The first extract quoted above from the “Rule” does bracket the elderly with children but this need not be taken as a slight. The negative association with “to be treated like a child” is a modern attitude. The medieval reader would not necessarily have made the same association. The child is a tender and sometimes

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 131. The extract which is quoted by Minois is from *The Rule of St. Benedict*, tr. Parry, D., London, 1984, ch. 37.4, p. 63.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 131. The extract which is quoted by Minois is from *La Règle du maître*, Le Cerf, coll. “Sources chrétiennes”, 1964, ch. 94.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 31.

powerful image in medieval iconography. Images of children were used as symbols of the soul and the resurrected body. The *puer senex*, that is the child with the learning and wisdom of an old man, was well-received in medieval culture. By parity of reasoning, it may be that an old man with the simplicity of a child was equally honoured.⁵⁰ In this passage, the “Rule of Benedict” is emphasizing the Christian requirement to treat all tender human beings for whatever reason, youth or age, with compassion. Evidence that the Benedictine monks went to some trouble to provide special diets and convenient mealtimes for the aged members of their community suggests charity rather than contempt.

Similarly, in “The Rule of the Master” the monks are required to go to some trouble to construct special lodgings for the decrepit brethren. The elderly were to be kept occupied with small manual jobs commensurate with their strength, a practice which Minois describes as demeaning, but it is one recommended by modern occupational therapists, designed to stimulate and protect the mind and body for as long as possible. The Rule does not isolate the elderly. They were to take their meals with the Abbot, which may or may not have been irksome to the superior; it ensured that the older monks were at least as well-fed as any of their brothers.

There is some evidence too that in this early period, special arrangements were made for the care of the decrepit outside monastic communities. Pope Gregory’s reference to the *Gerontocium* at Mt. Sinai has already been mentioned. It is possible that the institution admitted lay people. A letter written by St. Jerome speaks of aid to a laywoman specifically, “..an aged woman, supported by alms given by the church,...”⁵¹

It may also be not entirely true, as Minois argues, that the elderly were regularly passed over in career matters. The letters of St. Augustine are peppered with

⁵⁰ For positive and negative images of children in medieval literature, see, Shahar, S., *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, tr. Galai, C., London; New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 14-20.

⁵¹ Jerome, *Letters*, vol.1, p. 26.

references to individuals who were given the title, “Aged” as a term of respect.⁵² It has already been noted in this chapter that the primates of North Africa were elected according to seniority in age; similarly the letters of Pope Leo the Great (d. 461) warn that aged men must not be passed over for office by their juniors. The Pope writes that:

...it is extremely unfair and preposterous that the inexpert should be preferred to the expert, the young to the old, the raw recruits to those who have seen much service.⁵³

In another letter Leo maintains his attitude regarding the elderly by rebuking Dorus, Bishop of Benevento, for allowing a junior presbyter to be promoted over the heads of seniors.⁵⁴ If these demands by Leo confirm that the rights of the elderly were overlooked, they also indicate that the abuses were recognised and subject to correction.

Gregory I also protected elderly office-holders from predatory juniors. He intervened in the cases of two bishops who were afflicted with dementia. Writing to Anatolius, Deacon at Constantinople he says:

Thy Love has written to me that our most pious lord orders a successor to be appointed to my most reverend brother John, bishop of Prima Justiniana, on account of the ailment of the head from which he suffers... And yet the canons nowhere enjoin that a bishop should be superceded on account of sickness.⁵⁵

In another letter Gregory gives humane advice to the Bishop of Lyons on the treatment of an unnamed bishop who is also suffering from mental infirmity:

⁵² Augustine, *Letters*, vol. 2, nos. 21, 22, 38, 64.

⁵³ *Letters of Leo the Great*, tr. Feltoe, C. L., Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd series, Oxford: James Parker, 1895, vol. 12, no. XII, pp. 12-16, (p. 14).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, XIX, p. 31.

⁵⁵ Gregory, *Epistles*, p. 312, XLVII.

And so, since during the life of a bishop, whom unavoidable infirmity and not crime withdraws from his office, no reason allows another to be ordained in his place except on his resignation, let him, if he is accustomed to have intervals of sanity, himself make petition... that another be ordained in his place... Yet so that, as long as life shall retain the said bishop in this world, his due expenses to be supplied to him by the same Church. If, however, he at no time recovers the faculties of a sound mind, a trustworthy person of approved life must be chosen... take thought for the benefit of souls, restrain the unquiet under the bond of discipline, take care of ecclesiastical property, and exhibit himself in all respects ripe and efficient.⁵⁶

Gregory was also lenient with aged bishops whose behaviour might have invited censure in younger men:

Thus, writing to Januarius, (the aged bishop of Cagliari)

...so great wickedness has been reported to us of thy old age that, unless we are humanely disposed, we should smite thee with a definitive curse. For it has been told me that on the Lord's day, before celebrating the solemnities of the mass, thou wentest forth to plough up the crop of the bearer of these presents, and after ploughing it up didst celebrate the solemnities of the mass. Also, after the solemnities of the mass thou did not fear to root up the landmarks of that possession... And, seeing that we will spare thy grey hairs, bethink thee at length, old man, and restrain thyself from such levity of behaviour, ... The nearer thou art approaching death the more careful and fearful oughtest thou to become.⁵⁷

Januarius was confident enough to defy Gregory and later he is in trouble again:

The most distinguished lady Nereida has complained to us that your Fraternity does not blush to exact from her a hundred *solidi* for the burial of her daughter, and would bring upon her the additional vexation of expense over and above her groans of sorrow.⁵⁸

Januarius is the recipient of several more letters from the exasperated Gregory.⁵⁹ In this case advanced age was an advantage which protected the bishop from the Pope's wrath.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 337, no. V.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 245, no. I.

⁵⁸ Ibid., no. III.

⁵⁹ Ibid., nos. IV, VI, VII, pp. 246-8.

Part one of this chapter has examined the roots of medieval opinion on why mankind aged from a theological point of view. This was followed by an exploration of the opinion of George Minois that the lives of the aged were universally harsh in this early period and that the Church had no practical interest in ageing beyond the symbolic. Part two will build on the theological attitude to sin as the root of old age by examining the management of aged penitents in medieval England.

(ii) The Treatment of Ageing: The Spiritual Physicians.

The principal sources for this discussion will be the *libri poenitentiales* medieval manuals of penance dating from the eighth to the thirteenth century. English books will be referred to, notably those by Theodore of Canterbury (668-69), Egbert of York (c.750) and Bartholomew of Exeter (1161-84). Books of Irish and continental provenance, are included.

The manuals do not have a first class reputation as an historical source. There are two reasons. In the first case the documents present technical difficulties. The date and authorship of much of the early material is hard to establish. Although it is known that the penitentials were in use from the sixth century, there are no extant manuscripts earlier than the eighth century. The first, which can be accurately identified in terms of date and authority is that of Regino of Prum (c.900). Since most examples are therefore medieval copies of earlier documents there is considerable corruption in transcription.⁶⁰ In addition to these difficulties, the Latin in which most of the penitentials are written is crude. The abused Latin grammar is accompanied by a wild vocabulary bristling with legal, canonical and colloquial terms.

⁶⁰ For an analysis of the technical difficulties associated with this class of documents and a comparison of the merits of the collections available, see *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A translation of the Principal libri poenitentiales*, tr. McNeill, J. T. and Gamer, H. M., New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990, pp. 51-71.

The second difficulty which arises when using the penitentials as an historical source is the uneasiness of authors who have translated or commented on the material regarding its subject matter. They see the penitentials as dry lists of penalties for sin, which appear to expose the medieval mind at its most inflexible. The ideas expressed in the penitentials such as the expiation of sin through financial commutation do not find favour with modern thinking nor did the detailed and often extended attention given to unnatural sexual practices sit well with nineteenth-century sensibilities when most of the critical editions of these works were produced. Allen J. Frantzen has described the reticence of McNeill and Gamer to translate frankly some of the descriptions of sexual sin, which must detract from the overall value of their English versions of the major penitentials.⁶¹ In their Introduction, McNeill and Gamer acknowledge their reserve, excusing it on the grounds of the possibly corrupting taint of the handbooks and they reproduce, although not uncritically, the opinion of C. Plummer regarding their content. Dr. Plummer expresses relief that he is not compelled to believe that the Venerable Bede ever produced penitential literature because:

The penitential literature is in truth a deplorable feature of the medieval Church. Evil deeds, the imagination of which may have dimly floated through our minds in our darkest moments, are here tabulated and reduced to a system. It is hard to see how anyone could busy himself with such literature and not be worse for it.⁶²

To busy oneself with the penitentials is necessary in the cause of medieval gerontology for the following reasons: their use is novel in this area and their content regarding the elderly is a means of testing whether negative literary images associated with the elderly had any practical effect.⁶³

Although early medieval society from the fifth to the tenth century was not the worst which the elderly have had to endure it must be conceded that these were

⁶¹ Frantzen, A. J., *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England*, New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers, Univ Press, c. 1983.

⁶² *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 47.

hard times for the weaker members of society.⁶⁴ Minois has written that this early period:

constituted (despite the Carolingian renaissance) an age of brutality in its pure state, when justice was reduced to its simplest expression, as represented by such travesties as the Wergeld, [or Wergild] the Ordeal and the Judgement of God.⁶⁵

The period which is described by Minois in this piece coincides with the first use of penitential handbooks on the continent and in England by Irish missionaries. The following discussion will evaluate whether the penitentials benefited the elderly and other disadvantaged persons by exerting a civilising influence on barbarian society through clearly identifying conduct incompatible with Christianity and imposing penalties on it. It could be argued that the secular practice of payment of Wergild achieved the same end, since even an old man could not be abused without some consequences. But consequences were slight compared to those which followed a hostile act against a man or woman in the prime of life.⁶⁶ The penitentials may have contributed to crude levelling of such attitudes to age. In contrast to the geld, penitentials make few distinctions in matters of homicide regarding the age of the victim. The primary factors (but not the only ones) in calculating the penance due for murder were the circumstances of the offence and the condition of the perpetrator. The status of the victim was not of first importance, which is a reversal of the barbarian system of taxation.

In order to bring the approach to the elderly in the penitentials into focus it is convenient to begin by describing the attitude to women in the same material. This line of research has been chosen with a specific purpose. Women are in a

⁶³ For a discussion of literary attitudes to the elderly see: Nitecki, A. K., "Figures of Old Age in Fourteenth-Century English Literature" in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, pp. 107-116; also Parkin, *Age and the Aged in Roman Society*, pp. 39-56; and below, ch. 4.

⁶⁴ The attitudes of the Thonga of South Africa, the Chukchee people of Siberia and the Eskimo of Greenland towards the elderly were particularly harsh; see de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, pp. 49-51.

⁶⁵ Minois, *History of Old Age*, p.113.

⁶⁶ According to the Visigoths old men over sixty-five were worth one hundred gold solidi, the same as children under ten. A man between thirty and fifty years was valued at three hundred solidi. Women were worth two hundred and fifty *solidi* in the prime reproductive years, two hundred *solidi* after the age of forty and almost nothing after sixty years. Cited in Minois, *History of old Age*, p. 114.

sense the partner-stereotype of the elderly of this period. Like the elderly, women belonged to a sub-stratum of society which was considered in literary sources at least, to be physically and spiritually vulnerable with a heavily drawn outline in relation to sin. The elderly mirror them in these respects. Women are however more easily identified in historical sources whereas the elderly, although present, disappear into the ranks of the poor and the infirm. Thus, beginning with women, it is intended to show that it is possible to isolate various groups of society which were singled out in the penitential manuals for particular consideration in the administration of penance. Significantly the elderly were not among them but the way in which women were managed when confessing to guilt of particular sins may have implications for how the elderly were treated by their priests. This aspect will be explored.

Women were chiefly associated with two sins, witchcraft and sexual wrongdoing. The connection of women with sorcery and the occult is naturally more prominent in the earlier penitentials (eighth and ninth century) when the Church was still Christianising Europe. The later handbooks were written when the Christian faith was established and shows less interest in the sin of witchcraft which did not become prominent again until the religious upheavals of the Early Modern period.

In the early Middle Ages entries on witchcraft appear relatively frequently. In “An Eighth-Century List of Superstitions” it is recorded that women commanded the moon and had the power to take away the hearts of men.⁶⁷ On the same theme the early ninth-century “Penitential of Silos” records that if, “..for the health of the living a woman burns grains were a man has died she will do penance for one year”,⁶⁸ and the “Penitential of Egbert records that,

⁶⁷ “Indiculus superstitionem et paganiarum” in *Codex Vat. Pal. Lat. 577*; cited in *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, pp. 419-421, (p. 421, 30).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

If a woman places her child upon a roof or in an oven in order to cure a fever, she shall do penance for five years.⁶⁹

Although the books reveal that both sexes practised magic in this period, women bear the burden of accusation and guilt. Many more references of a similar order can be found which associate women with superstitions of various sorts, particularly keening for the dead. It is probably not case that the entries are the result of ecclesiastical misogyny. It is more likely to be a reflection of the practicalities of the female role in this period. Women have traditionally been involved in the preparation of simples, nursing the sick and laying out the dead which left them more vulnerable than men to lingering suspicion about pre-Christian rites.

Naturally, considering the nature of the sin, women were also vulnerable to accusations of abortion. The attitude shown to women by the Church in this case may have implications for the treatment of the elderly as penitents. Abortion could be considered among the progeny of the sin of witchcraft since magic (or what was assumed to be magic) was one of the methods of securing an unnatural birth. It is interesting that the handbooks reveal a considerable degree of latitude in prescribing the penance for this sin. The penance was mitigated if the abortion was procured at less than forty days, the point at which the soul was believed to enter the flesh of the child.⁷⁰ The following extract from “The Old Irish Penitential” is instructive:

A woman who causes miscarriage of that which she has conceived after it has become established in the womb, three years and a half of penance, if the flesh has formed, it is seven years. If the soul has entered it, fourteen years penance.⁷¹

⁶⁹ *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. after Spelman and Wilkins by Haddan, A. H. & Stubbs, W., 3 vols. in 4, Oxford: Clarendon, 1869-1878, vol. III, p. 424, VIII:2.

⁷⁰ “Augustine followed Aristotelian biology in holding that no soul can reside in an unformed body (‘In Exodum’, 21, 80), so there could be no talk of murder in either case [male or female]. Jerome, too, wrote to Aglasia (one of his spiritual pupils): ‘The seed takes gradual shape in the uterus, and it does not count as killing until the various elements have acquired their outward appearance and their members’. (Ep. 121, 4).” Cited in Ranke-Heinemann, U., *Eunuchs For Heaven: The Catholic Church & Sexuality*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1990. p. 61.

⁷¹ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 166, ch. 6.

This last penance, for the murder of an unborn child with a soul, is greater than the penalties for homicide for the murder of father, mother, or sibling; set down at four years in the same penitential.⁷² There are parallels with the system of Wergild here as a new life is clearly valued more than that of father or mother, but the most interesting feature of this extract from the “Old Irish Penitential” is the element of discrimination in degrees of sin. In the same manner the “Penitential of Theodore” (England, 668-690 and later) distinguishes between penitents in the case of abortion, prescribing leniency (in relative terms) for a financially-distressed woman guilty of abortion.

The So-Called Roman Penitential of Halitgar” (c.830) advises that the rank of a woman should also be taken into account when administering penance. These instances of mitigation show the application in a particular sin of the general advice given to priests in the prologues to the penitentials, which required them to use discretion regarding the condition of the penitent and the severity of the sin. This advice is likely to have had consequences for the elderly in the sense that it reveals scope for compassion and flexibility in the administration of penance to the weak, which contradicts the view that penitentials expose an arid and relentless aspect of medieval thought. It is worth noting too that although the penitentials sometimes give examples of the rank and condition of the penitent they at no time describe old women in particular as perpetrators of abortion or as practitioners of witchcraft, a function with which they were not uncommonly associated in literature.⁷³

Although the association of women in general with witchcraft is a definite component in their sin-profile in the early penitentials, their perceived sinfulness in this area does not mature, according to the penitentials, as the Middle Ages

⁷² Ibid., ch. 3.

⁷³ See *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, p. 193 and Scarre, G., *Witchcraft and Magic in the Sixteenth- and Seventeenth- Century Europe*, Studies in European History, Hampshire, London: Macmillan Educ., ch. 2, [iv], *Women as Witches*, pp. 51-3.

progressed. This is not true for sexual misconduct, the second of the two sins with which women were associated in the Middle Ages. Women progress from a low sin-profile regarding sex in the early Irish Penitentials, that is as objects of sin rather than sinning, to sexual sinners in their own right, particularly after marriage in both the early and late English examples.⁷⁴

It is only occasionally that the woman is described as independently sinful, as in this extract:

If there is anyone whose wife commits fornication with another man, he ought not to hold intercourse with her until she does penance... So also a woman is not to hold intercourse with her husband, if he has committed fornication with another woman, until he performs a corresponding penance.⁷⁵

The English penitentials, early and late, have a sharper edge regarding women and sexual sin but they do not extend the list of sins specifically attributed to women, which are unchanged as sins involving magic and sexuality. One point touching on the language used in the “Penitential of Egbert” does suggest that in this case the negative image of women in scripture and literary sources⁷⁶ as a temptress to sin may have found practical expression in the manual:

De Machina Mulierum

4. *Qui in quadregesima ante Pascha cognoscet mulierem suam noluit abstiniere, ante peniteat vel suum pretium reddat ad ecclesiam, vel pauperibus dividat aut xx et sex solidos reddat.*⁷⁷

The entry deals mainly with the penalty for the male who indulges in intercourse with his wife outside the period approved by the Church but the chapter is titled, “Concerning the Artifices of women”. If only passively, the woman appears as

⁷⁴ For examples of women as passive objects of sin in early Irish penitentials, see *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 89, no. 12, p. 94, nos. 36 and 37, and p. 95, no. 39.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97, no. 51.

⁷⁶ For background on negative images of women see “The Roots of Antifeminist Tradition” in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, pp. 17-30.

⁷⁷ *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. III, p. 423, VII:4.

the temptress who has been the conduit for her husband's sin. She is doubly sinful in that she has sinned and incited to sin.

The fact that women penitents have such a clear outline in the penitentials confirms that ecclesiastical authorities had an interest in identifying groups within medieval society who might be more than ordinarily vulnerable to sin. Women were thought to be prone to sins associated with the occult and sexuality which confirms that negative images of them in literary sources had practical consequences. The penitential manuals gave advice on the severity of penance and on particular questions which women should be asked in the confessional.⁷⁸

Although the prologues to the penitentials state that penitents were only to be questioned on sins which they were likely to have committed, priests did not have the benefit of similar guidelines for elderly penitents. General comments about considering the age of penitents appears in the prologues to the handbooks and specific advice on chronological age is given occasionally but with only one exception this is confined to the distinction between childhood and adulthood not between adulthood and old age as these extracts confirm:

If it be boys of ten years old, they get seven days: if over twenty years, twenty days' penance.
[In connection with the theft of food]

He who after his twentieth year defiles himself with a male shall do penance for fifteen years.

Small boys who strike one another shall do penance for seven days; but if [they are] older, for twenty days; if [they are] adolescents, they shall do penance for forty days.⁷⁹

Exceptionally the "So-Called Roman Penitential" does draw a distinction between adulthood and mature adulthood for a specific sin:

⁷⁸ See, Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Peacock, E., 1 vol., London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, EETS, 31A, 1902, p. 40.

⁷⁹ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, pp. 158: 9, 185: 4, 114: 21.

If anyone sins with animals after he is thirty years of age, he shall undergo [a penance] fifteen years and shall deserve the communion. But let the nature of his life be enquired into, whether it deserves somewhat more lenient treatment. If he continually persists in sinning, he shall have longer penance. But if those who are of the above-mentioned age and have wives commit this offence, they shall undergo [a penance of] twenty-five years in such a way that after five years they shall deserve the communion with the oblation. But if some who have wives and are more than fifty years commit this sin, they shall deserve the viaticum [only] at the end of life.⁸⁰

This is a unique passage since it is specific about chronological age at the mature end of the lifespan. A harsher penance is reserved for the more advanced in age. There are two further points of interest. First, the author takes it for granted that the penitent will know his chronological age precisely. Secondly the content of the entry touches on medieval attitudes to the sexuality of the aged. The thirty to fifty year old man with a wife may receive Communion again after five years (although continuing his penance) while those of fifty or over will be denied the Eucharist until they are in danger of death.

Attitudes to the sexual behaviour of the elderly during the Middle Ages are better defined than in other areas.⁸¹ It was considered appropriate that sexual drive should disappear in old age. Elderly people who continued to be sexually active were mocked. Aristotle said that sexual activity for women should end at menopause, age forty-four. Men should cease to be sexually active between forty-five and fifty-five.⁸²

St. Augustine and St. Jerome were influential in establishing the belief that, even in youth, the celibate state was preferable to the married one and that sex should only be used for procreation. The *aetates hominis* and the medical treatises described in Chapter One above portray old age as a period of physical decline, of cooling and drying, unsuitable for the expenditure of heat involved in passion and procreation. Although the increased penance in this extract for perverted sex

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 307-308, ch. 54.

⁸¹ Covey, H. C., "Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Sexuality of the Elderly During the Middle Ages" in *Gerontologist*, 1989, vol. 29, Feb. (1) pp. 93-100.

⁸² Ibid., p. 95.

(indeed any sex at the age of fifty according to Aristotle and St. Augustine was perverted) may reflect these sexual attitudes but it may also be a comment on perceived life expectancy. The necessary penance for this sin was twenty-five years. It might have been assumed that few perpetrators of fifty years would have lived beyond the age of seventy-five which would have been required for satisfaction of penance, and thus the ban from Communion was sustained until the end of their natural lives.

With this single exception from the “So-Called Roman Penitential”, the penance prescribed in the manuals increases with age but only until the age of adult responsibility (in terms of culpability for sin) which from the evidence of the penitentials was twenty years of age. There is no demarcation in terms of age for female sinners in any of the penitentials which were considered. Although penances for boys were well defined there is no set chronological age for the guidance of confessors at which penances were to be reduced for the aged. There is therefore no way to identify the elderly as a group in the penitentials by means of chronological limits in the way that it is possible to discriminate between boy and adult male.

Thus women and male children emerge from the evidence of the penitentials as members of society who require special spiritual attention. One handbook, “The Law of Adamnan” (Abbot of Iona, c.697) refers to the needs of these two groups specifically. The book is an outstanding document since it asserts the rights of the weak. It prescribes condign punishments for sins against women and children.⁸³ One other group, those in Holy Orders, also stands out for special attention. Indeed the evidence from the penitentials suggests that the division between lay

⁸³ The *Law of Adamnan* does not mention the elderly but there is some evidence in medieval sources that they were singled out for protection. The *Chronicle of Richard of Hexham* reports that Alberic, the papal legate to England in 1138, made the parties to an armed conflict swear that they would spare non-combatants, namely, women, children, and those debilitated by age or infirmity; cited in Strickland, M. J., *War and Chivalry: The Conduct And Perception Of War In England and Normandy, 1066-1217*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996, p. 305. An account of the life of St. Alban states with disapproval that a slaughter occurred in Wales in which neither the age

person and cleric was the primary distinction made by the authors of the manuals. The following are examples selected from many typical ones throughout the penitentials: Irish and English, early and late.

From “The Irish Penitential” concerning quarrelling:

If he is a layman, he shall do penance for a week, since he is a man of the world and his guilt is lighter in this world and his reward less in the world to come... But if he is a cleric and strikes his brother or his neighbour... the penance is not the same... He shall do penance with bread and water and be deprived of his clerical office for an entire year.

From “The Penitential of Theodore”:

If a monk vomits on account of drunkenness, he shall do penance for thirty days.
If a presbyter or a deacon [does this] on account of drunkenness he shall do penance for forty days.
If a lay Christian vomits because of drunkenness, he shall do penance for fifteen days.⁸⁴

It is not intended to labour the point further that the elderly were not among those vulnerable sections of society who were singled out for special treatment in the manuals of penance. The purpose of considering this aspect is to underline that despite the fact that priests had clear instructions that the spiritually infirm were not to be given doses of penance indiscriminately, the elderly were not considered to require special attention.⁸⁵ The lack of mention in the “Penitential of Adamnan” referred to above is particularly notable. The absence of the elderly in Adamnan’s book may indicate that they were not important enough in medieval society to command attention. Alternatively, despite the grim picture which Georges Minois paints of the status of the aged in this period, they may have been held in such esteem in the Iona community that they did not need ecclesiastical protection.

nor the sex of the victims were taken into account, see *Lives of the British Saints*, ed. Baring-Gould, S. and Fisher, J., 4 vols., London: Soc. Of Cymmrodorion, ¹⁹⁰⁷vol. 1, p. 144.

⁸⁴ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 184.

⁸⁵ In the *Summa predicantium*, a manual for the instruction of priests, John Bromyard writes, “the preacher follows the procedure of the faithful physician, who does not heal all with one common

Since it is not possible to identify the elderly as one of the groups singled out for special care by any of the authors of the penitentials, it is necessary to shift the analysis along different lines. An exploration of three classes of evidence found in the manuals is proposed. (i) The general advice given in the prologues regarding discrimination between penitents, (ii) the system of mitigation in the text of the manuals from which the elderly were likely to benefit and (iii) consideration of the specific sins with which the elderly were associated in contemporary literature.

The prologues to most of the *libri poenitentiales* emphasize the need to discriminate between penitents. The priest was enjoined to take the age and health of the penitent into consideration when administering penance. In “The Penitential Ascribed to Bede” there is the following advice:

...he [the priest] shall carefully distinguish the sex, the age, the condition, the status, even the very heart of the penitent and shall judge accordingly each [offence] one by one as seems best for him. For [proper penance consists], for some people, in abstaining from foods; for others in giving alms; for some in frequent bending of the knees in prayer or in standing in cross-vigil.⁸⁶

This text ascribed to Bede makes specific reference to the age of the penitent. It has already been proposed in this paper that the principal interest in age in the books is that between man and boy but this particular penitential goes on to be specific about what the author means by age:

...first of all examine the distinction of all cases, without which just judgement cannot stand; for it is written: “In nothing shalt thou appear inconsiderate; but distinguish what thou oughtest to do and where, for how long, when, and how to do it”. For not all are to be weighed in one and the same balance, although they be associated in one fault but there shall be discrimination for each of these, that is between rich and poor; freemen, slave, little child, boy, youth, young man, old man; stupid intelligent; layman cleric monk; bishop, Presbyter, deacon, subdeacon, reader ordained or unordained; married or unmarried; pilgrim, virgin canoness or nuns: the weak, the sick, the well. He shall make a distinction for the character of the sins or of the men.⁸⁷

medicine but applies its own medicine to any disease”; unpublished MA thesis, Univ. of Birmingham, Sr. Winefride, (n. d.) p. 51.

⁸⁶ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 221.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

This extract reveals concern that the condition of the penitent is correctly diagnosed in order that a suitable level of penance can be prescribed. There is much evidence to support the view that this attitude was common throughout the handbooks.

The “So-Called Confessional of Egbert” (c. 950-1000) says:

It is proper for any priest, when he imposes fasting on men, that he knows [in each case] what kind of man he is, strong or weak, rich or poor; how young he is, or how old; ordained or layman; what kind of repentance he has; and whether he is a bachelor or a married man. Discrimination among all men is needful, even though they commit similar offences. Great men are to be more severely judged than lowly according to the decisions of the canons.⁸⁸

The “Penitential of Theodore” is unusual in that the prologue does not give much advice on discriminating between penitents but the other major English penitential, that of Bartholomew of Exeter, follows the trend of all the other manuals, continental and insular, early and late in distinguishing whether the penitent was a freeman, lay or clerical, boy, youth, man or old man:

Thus from “Bartholomew of Exeter”:

Ad attendendam delinquentium differentiam

*Attendendum de penitente utrum liber sit an servus, si clericus si laicus, si monachus; ... Item si penitens dives est vel pauper, si puer vel adolescens, si vir vel etate senex si hebes vel gnarus, si sanus vel infirmus, si vir mulier, ...*⁸⁹

Continental texts also emphasize the importance of knowing the age of the penitent. These quotations, the first from the “Corrector of Burchard of Worms” and the second from the “Milan Penitential” echo the English material:

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁸⁹ Morey, A., *Bartholomew of Exeter, Bishop and Canonist: A Study in the Twelfth Century: with the Text of Bartholomew's Penitential from Cotton MS. Vitellius A. XII*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1937, p. 194, ch. XXV.

This book...teaches every priest, even the uneducated, how he shall be able to bring help to each person, ordained or unordained; poor or rich; boy, youth or mature man; decrepit, healthy or infirm; of every age; and of both sexes.

...that they [priests] severally accurately investigate both the things that pertain to the greatness of the sin and those that pertain to the status, condition and age of the penitent.⁹⁰

The conscientious administration of the Sacrament of Penance to engage with the condition of the penitent was thus a delicate operation. The aged had rights in this area. They could expect particular consideration when they confessed, not only on the grounds of advanced age but also on a multiplicity of related factors such as gender, marital and financial status.

It is possible to use these factors to construct in theory, the profile of an aged penitent. While it is lamentable that there is no standard chronological indicator regarding old age in the handbooks for the use of priests; it is unlikely that a confessor would have considered anyone to be old before the age of fifty and not a definitely aged person before the mid-sixties. The priest would therefore have been able to question the penitent on his age. Following the advice in the prologues, the priest's second consideration would most likely have been the gender and health of the individual since most of the penances recorded, if not commuted, were physical and sometimes rigorously so. The rank and financial status would also be digested. From these elements it is possible to construct a best and worst case when aged persons presented themselves for absolution.

In the best case, that is in receiving absolution for the lightest penance, the aged person would be decrepit, certainly not in the first phase of old age and male. The guidelines which the priest was required to follow were stricter for the male, less open to interpretation. The penitent would be unmarried, in poor health, of low rank and straightened financially. Conversely the outlook on penance was not good for an aged penitent who was in the first stage of old age, a robust female of rank, married and of sound financial means.

Putting aside these theoretical considerations, the problem of independent evidence of how priests actually applied the advice on discrimination in the prologues is a formidable one. The confessional is by its nature private. Myre's "Instructions for Parish Priests" says that a woman's penance was to be such that it could be performed without even her husband knowing about it.⁹¹ The problem can be managed to some extent by exploring the nature of the penances available to the priest in general terms and thereafter considering the restrictions placed on him by the complex system of relaxation and commutation which the books required him to apply once he had determined the condition of the penitent.

Penances fall into two categories, physical and economic. In the case of aged penitents the former is of most interest since old age in any period of history does not necessarily mean poverty but always involves some degree of pathology. Although personal sin was only one factor involved in the decay of the body, it was accepted that those who sinned through the body must be cured through the body and the undiluted draughts of physical penance in vigils and fasts which the priest was authorised to prescribe for this purpose would have required a robust constitution. Fasts on bread and water for between twenty and forty days three times a year for periods ranging from a few years to life are recorded.

Miscellaneous vigils also appear in the material accompanied by arduous postures and devices to keep the penitent from sleep. The early Irish penitentials advise sleeping (in the sense to simply lie down) in nettles, on crushed nutshells, or with a corpse. Standing in cold water up to the neck was also prescribed. There is no reason to suppose that if the sin was serious enough and the sinner physically fit that the full penances were not applied. The important aspect regarding the aged is whether relaxations of penance were available for the physically frail.

⁹⁰ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, pp. 323, 364.

⁹¹ *Mirk, Instructions for Parish Priests*, p. 47, line 1540.

A clear system designed to safeguard the physically infirm and sometimes the mentally infirm also can be traced throughout the penitentials. Furthermore, the system becomes elaborate and therefore more protective as the Middle Ages progress. Entries in the early books are bald, such as the following one from the “Old Irish Penitential” concerning abstinence as a remedy for gluttony, “Anyone who is sick is allowed to eat meals at any hour of the day or night”. The advice is repeated later in the same book.⁹² The English “Penitential of Theodore” is more elaborate with the same advice:

In the case of one who eats food that has been sacrificed and later confesses, the priest ought to consider the person, of what age he was and in what way he had been brought up or how it came about, So also the sacerdotal authority shall be modified in the case of a sick person. And this matter is to be observed with all diligence in all penance always and rigorously in confession, in so far as God condescends to aid.⁹³

It is probable that the age referred to here is connected with distinguishing between man and boy but the author is not specific. The book does emphasize that the priest is bound to examine the circumstances of the sin. He is at liberty to interpret “age” in a number of ways, perhaps one in which an elderly person in straightened circumstances succumbed to eating forbidden meat. Again as in the extract from the “Irish Penitential” just cited, the author of the “Penitential of Theodore” states that if the sinner was a sick person the penance was to be modified. Identical advice regarding frail persons and fasting appears in the “Penitential of Silos”, the “So-Called Roman Penitential” and the “Corrector of Burchard of Worms”. Thus fasting for the elderly could be waived or in suitable cases commuted for alms or completed vicariously.

Vicarious fasting is a feature of the penitentials, which may have benefited the elderly of means. The following piece is from the “Pseudo-Cummean Penitential” (eighth century):

⁹² *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 158 ch. 6, and p.159, ch. 18,

... whoever is able to fulfill what is written in the penitential – it is good. Yet to those who are too feeble in body or in mind we give the advice that if what we have said above seems grievous to them, [each] when he is due to fast on bread and water shall [rather] sing for every day fifty psalms, kneeling, and seventy psalms without kneeling, and for one week he shall chant three hundred psalms in sequence, kneeling or if he is not able to kneel he shall sing four hundred and twenty psalms and fulfil this within a church or in a secret place.... And he who does not know the psalms and is not able to fast shall choose a righteous man who will fulfill this in his stead, and he shall redeem this with his own payment or labour; this he shall disburse among the poor at the rate of a denarius for every day.⁹⁴

Similarly the English penitential ascribed to Bede says:

And he who cannot perform that which we have indicated above concerning the psalms shall choose a righteous man who shall perform it for him and shall redeem this [vicarious penance] by his own value or labour.⁹⁵

References to vicarious penance also appear in the “Penitential of Egbert”, and the “Icelandic Penitential”. Similarly, the “Spurious Canons of King Edgar” invited powerful men to engage, “seven times cxx men, who shall fast for him iiii days; then will be fasted as many fasts as there are in vii years”.⁹⁶

The “righteous men” who are referred to in the extract as suitable to carry out penance in one’s stead could be feudal servitors, a practice which was supported by secular law.⁹⁷ Vicarious penance was criticised at Church councils. The records of the Council of Cloveshoe (747) comment:

... against the acceptance of psalm singing by substitutes in fulfillment of penitential requirements, when a certain rich man seeking reconciliation claimed that enough penance for three hundred years had been performed for him by others in singing, fasting and alms.⁹⁸

⁹³ Ibid., p. 198, ch. 5.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 268-269.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 236:8

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 410.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 48. See also, Oakley, T. P., “The Cooperation of Medieval Penance and Secular Law” in *Speculum*, 7, 1932, pp. 515-524.

⁹⁸ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 48.

This abuse of the Sacrament of Penance must have been common and tenacious since John of Salisbury was still protesting against vicarious penance in the “Policraticus” written in the twelfth century:

They too readily exonerate the powerful and the more wealthy upon receipt of favours or payment and, placing upon their shoulders the sins of others they order them to go out in tunics and mourning garments as penance for whatever deeds they lamented that they had committed.⁹⁹

The attention which is given to the penitential needs of the infirm climaxes in the twelfth century, changing from the frequent but sparse statements in the earlier material to the detailed treatment in the “Penitential of Bartholomew of Exeter”.¹⁰⁰ Bartholomew adds to the relaxations available to the infirm which have already been described by giving detailed instructions on the management of penitents in acute danger of death. If the priest was delayed the subjects’ friends were authorised to hear his confession. Satisfaction was not required of the ailing penitent if he truly desired reconciliation, his confession had been faithfully made and his contrition sound. If he recovered his health he was required to perform penance in the usual way.

The discussion above suggests that the frail aged person had the right to expect compassion from his priest when he admitted his sins. It remains to deliberate whether the penitential manuals reveal that he would have been under particular suspicion regarding the sins traditionally associated with the elderly in literature, and if he did confess himself to be guilty of these particular sins, what penances would have been incurred.

⁹⁹ *Policraticus of John of Salisbury*, ed. Nederman, C. J., Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990, pp. 170-1, Bk. VII, ch. 21.

¹⁰⁰ A Latin edition of the penitential is included in Morey, *Bartholomew of Exeter*; one section deals with the administration of penance to the infirm, see *De Penitentia infirmorum*, pp. 206-9, ch. XXXIX.

George Coffman has identified the faults associated with the elderly in literature dating from the classical period until the Age of Chaucer.¹⁰¹ The literature reveals that the elderly have been associated with all of the “Seven Deadly Sins”.¹⁰² In the case of the elderly sinner the form of the sin is often modified to suit the advanced age of the guilty person. The pre-eminent sin, pride, according to the classification of the sins by Pope Gregory I, is reduced in the literature of ageing to boasting. In the same way gluttony is reduced to greediness for life. Anger is deflated to mere quarrelsomeness. Full-blown lechery requires physical ability; therefore in the elderly it lingers as lust only. Envy is narrowed to condemnation of younger people. Only avarice and sloth remain with the aged person in their unattenuated virulence.¹⁰³ This is the case in the allegorical poem, “The Mirror of the Periods of Man’s Life”.¹⁰⁴ In this piece the various stages of life are correlated with the machinations of a personification of the sin of sloth in each stage. As a young man, Sloth advises Man to rest. Sloth forbids him to carry out his devotions or to listen to wise counsel. In old age when five of the Deadly Sins (pride, lechery, gluttony, envy and anger) have abandoned Man, only Sloth and Avarice remain to tempt him, the former in the guise of despair. Morton W. Bloomfield has also highlighted the medieval fascination with linking the Deadly Sins with the Ages of Man.¹⁰⁵ He cites the work of Berthold of Regensburg (d.1272) as an example of the general trend which associated old age with avarice. He also states that avarice supplanted pride as the capital sin in the late Middle Ages. This change, he believes, was a consequence of the transition from a feudal economy, where pride was synonymous with an exaggerated individualism, which was the foremost danger to a society based on feudal

¹⁰¹ Coffman, G. R., “Old Age from Horace to Chaucer. Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea” in *Speculum*, 9, 1934, pp. 249-279 and Nitecki, in *Ageing and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, pp. 107-16.

¹⁰² Pride, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, Envy, Anger, Lechery.

¹⁰³ Chaucer writes that there are “four fiery sparks” of sin remaining among the ashes of old age: boasting, lying, anger and covetousness; *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Wenzel, S., *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature*, Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1967, pp. 116, 121.

¹⁰⁵ Bloomfield, M. W., *The Seven Deadly Sins*, East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1952, pp. 76, 92.

lordship, to a money economy dominated by merchants whose wealth caused general unease.

The Middle Ages were familiar with two systems of the Deadly Sins. The earlier and less favoured eight-fold Cassianic scheme placed gluttony at the head of the list with pride coming last. Pope Gregory I, later amalgamated Cassian's *acedia* (sloth) and *tristitia* (melancholy) reducing the sins to seven in number. In Gregory's scheme, pride took first place although some adaptations placed the old age related sin of avarice foremost.¹⁰⁶ It is notable that Roger Bacon, whose particular interest in old age was discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, considered avarice to be the foremost of the Deadly Sins.¹⁰⁷ Only Aegidius Romanus, in *De regimine principum*, demurs with the literary trend concerning avarice and the aged. Aegidius argues that since all the passions have cooled, the aged are incapable of desiring what they do not possess. He does admit, nevertheless, that the aged cling to what they already have, resulting in miserliness.¹⁰⁸

The following discussion on the aged as sinners accepts the attitude current in the late Middle Ages, that five of the Deadly Sins had ceased to attack mankind, at least in their most venomous forms, by the time he reached old age. The examination will be confined to sloth, avarice and the elderly.

The sin of sloth evolved over nine centuries (fourth-thirteenth) from a simple state of mind in the early Middle Ages, to a complex transgression later in the period. Sloth could present in two ways: as a spiritual problem or as physical idleness. In its original state, sloth or *acedia/accidia* was a monastic vice. The Desert Father, Evagrius (b.346) and later Cassian (b. between 355 and 365), who travelled in Egypt c. 386 and became acquainted with the work of Evagrius, are

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁰⁸ Aegidius Romanus, *De regimine principum*; cited in Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 70.

credited with its early definition. The primitive form of the vice was entirely spiritual, characterised by psychic exhaustion and depression. Its causes were recognised as the monotony of life practised by the desert monks of this period; the protracted struggle with temptation and a soul still too attached to the sensual.

Its effects were dejection, restlessness, hatred of habitat and of one's brethren and the desire to leave the cell. It attacked the monks most often at midday, presumably when the heat and boredom of the desert environment were at their worst and for this reason was called, picturesquely, the "Noonday Devil".¹⁰⁹ But this *acedia* or spiritual lukewarmness was not to be confused with "spiritual dryness". *Acedia* is an entirely separate condition as St. John of the Cross explains:

In such a case it is evident that this lack of sweetness and this aridity do not come from weakness and lukewarmness; for it is the nature of lukewarmness not to care greatly or to have any inward solicitude for the things of God. There is thus a great difference between aridity and lukewarmness, for lukewarmness consists in great weakness and remissness in the will and in the spirit, without solicitude as to serving God; whereas purgative aridity is ordinarily accompanied by solicitude, with care and grief, as I say, because the soul is not serving God.¹¹⁰

Sloth in the sense of spiritual lukewarmness or tepidity is a sin of the mind the principal feature of which was despair. Sloth remained a principally monastic vice until the thirteenth century when the "Seven Deadly Sins" began to appear in literature intended for the layman. Yet the sin had already begun a tentative transformation into a universal iniquity by the ninth century. This extract from Hrabanus Maurus is a portrait of lay sloth before the thirteenth century. The author is not describing the sin according to earlier precedents. Sloth, as he defines it has the original mental elements but also strong physical aspects which could be applied to the layman. *Acedia* has been developed to include simple laziness:

¹⁰⁹ For the early definition of sloth see, Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 3 vols., tr. Silverio De Santa Teresa, P. ed. Allison Peers, E., London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1934, vol. 1, p. 374, Bk.1, ch. 9.

The eighth and last poison [*virus*] of the eight principal vices [Hrabanus refers to the scheme of Cassian, supra.] is *acedia*. From it arises languor of the mind and a harmful sluggishness, which renders man useless to any good work and pushes him to his destruction. Wherefore it is written: “Idleness is the enemy of the soul,” which the devil, hostile to all good, engenders in man through the mentioned disease [*morbus*] of *acedia*; so that he injuriously causes man to be listless and exert himself the least in good works. For *acedia* is a plague which proves to be of much harm to those who serve God. The idle man grows dull in carnal desires, is cheerless in spiritual works, has no joy in the salvation of his soul, and does not become cheerful in helping his brother, but only craves and desires and performs everything in an idle fashion. *Acedia* corrupts the miserable mind which it inhabits with many misfortunes, which teach it many evil things. From it are born somnolence, laziness in good deeds, instability, roaming from place to place, lukewarmness in work, boredom, murmuring and vain talks. It is defeated by the soldier of Christ through reading, constancy in good deeds, the desire for the prize of future beatitude, confessing the temptation which is in the mind, stability of place and of one’s resolution, and the practice of some craft and work or prayer, and the perseverance in vigils... Such then is the Christian who, when he arises in the morning from his bed of drunkenness, does not engage in any useful work, does not go to church to pray... does not make an effort to give alms or visit the sick or help those who suffer injustice: but rather goes hunting abroad, or stirs quarrels and fights at home, or devotes to dice or useless stories and jokes while his food is being prepared by hardworking servants.¹¹¹

The question arises: which of these two strains of *acedia*, spiritual or physical, was of greater peril to the elderly? It is probable that medieval society believed that it was the subtler form, the spiritual variant, which was particularly noxious to the aged whether in orders or lay. From the descriptions cited above it is possible to isolate the dominant characteristic of both forms of *acedia*, that is, loss of hope or despair.¹¹² Yet the attempt to link older monks with the *acedia* described by Evagrius and Cassian is tortuous even though it might be assumed that the heart of elderly monks who had spent many years in the cell might falter and find spiritual tepidity hard to resist. Origen surmises on this point “..when it [the heart] grows weary on account of the works of piety and grows old on account of its pains with regard to [the pursuit of] virtue”.¹¹³

¹¹¹ From *De ecclesiastica disciplina*, Bk. III, *De agone christiano*, P. L. 112:1191f; cited in Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, pp. 36-37.

¹¹² Thomas Aquinas identified loss of hope as one of the principal features of the elderly character, see, Lumbreras, P., “De senectute quid Divus Thomas senserit” in *Angelicum*, 46, 1969, pp. 318-329.

¹¹³ *Analecta Sacra Spicilegii Solesmensis*, ed. Pitra, J. B., cited in Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, p. 7.

Relying on what slim evidence there is, it does not seem to be the case that elderly monks were prone to spiritual sloth. The “Rule of Benedict” states specifically that two older monks were to be set over the others to look out for a *frater achediosus*.¹¹⁴ This may not of course refer to the chronological age of the older monks but to spiritual seniors of any age. Yet it is interesting to speculate that if “older” did mean chronologically senior then elderly monks were considered to be wise and useful, since by virtue of their age and experience they could recognise and care for an *acedic* brother.

Two further extracts confirm that the elderly monk could advise his juniors on managing *acedia*. Although writing later than the period of the Desert Fathers, Peter Damian (1007-1072) is recorded praising an old monk in his fervour to recite the office, “. . . because never did the weariness of *acedia* press down his eyes.”¹¹⁵ In the same way, although old men do not appear often in the exempla relating to monastic *acedia*, John Herolt describes the prowess of an old hermit in resisting the affliction. The old man remains immune by meditating on three things: his sins, the passion of Christ, and future bliss.¹¹⁶ The image of the elderly monk in relation to *acedia*, which emerges from these sources is of a seasoned veteran in the war against the “Noonday Devil” to whom younger monks could look for inspiration and protection.

The sin of sloth does not figure largely in the penitential handbooks. The authors of the books expected that the priest would be more concerned with easily identifiable transgressions not states of mind. The three physical aspects of *acedia*, idleness, somnolence and instability do appear in the manuals and the usual remedies of fasting and prayer or manual work are prescribed as penance. The subtler aspects of the condition are passed over. In all of the manuals translated by McNeill and Gamer, there are only three brief references to

¹¹⁴ *Rule of Benedict*, tr. Fry, p. 70, ch. 48: 17-18.

¹¹⁵ *De perfectione monachorum*, 23, cited in Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Herolt, J., *Promptuarium in Sermones Discipuli*, no. 15, cited Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, p. 110.

acedia.¹¹⁷ Thomas of Chobham (vice-dean of Salisbury Cathedral 1214-1230) identified this deficiency regarding the lack of attention to *acedia* in his penitential and exhorted priests to describe the “Seven Deadly Sins” to penitents, including the *spiritualia peccata* and to question their subjects on these sins.¹¹⁸

Images of old age in medieval literature will be considered in Chapter Four below but it is appropriate to mention here the unusual treatment of sloth in de Deguileville’s allegorical poem, “The Pilgrimage of Human Life”. In medieval literature sin is often symbolised by animals. Sloth appears in the guise of a cat. Guillaume de Deguileville’s sloth is in human form, that of an old crone, deformed but physically strong who ensnares the pilgrim on his journey to the Holy City:

An old crone-ugly, hideous, and foul-was holding the cords and nets, gripping them in one hand. I did not see her before because she was following me...she was all mossy, completely covered in moss that was shaggy, filthy, black, vile and dirty.¹¹⁹

In the extract quoted above the pilgrim has chosen the path, which leaves him vulnerable to capture by the sloth crone. The matter of choice in relation to sloth when it takes the form of despair has implications for the elderly. Chapter Two above considered medieval attitudes to the physiology of ageing. It was established there that the aged were considered to be of a melancholic phlegmatic type of humour, that is primarily dry and cold but with an excess of phlegm, which left them, despite their underlying dryness, prone to rheums and congestions of various sorts. The astrological aspect of medical diagnosis in this period concurred with the humoural melancholy due to the additional influence of the planet Saturn, which became the ruling planet in the last stage of life. To a certain extent the aged person was recognised to be at the mercy of these physiological factors; cold, dry, phlegmatic and ruled by the planet of melancholy

¹¹⁷ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, pp. 19, 108, 153.

¹¹⁸ Thomas of Chobham, cited in Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, p. 72.

¹¹⁹ Deguileville, *Pilgrimage of Human Life*, pp. 95-6.

which left them vulnerable through no fault of their own (except the collective fault of original sin) to the sin of despair.

Some medieval writers acknowledge that despair could be attributed to pathology, among them John of Wales, William of Auvergne and Alexander of Hales.¹²⁰

William of Auvergne writes thus on the aetiology of despair:

This vice is sometimes increased and strengthened by the melancholy humour or vapour... In this respect [*acedia*] is not the greatest sin nor incurable, because it occurs in many people who are disposed to it, as the melancholy. Hence, it often arises from the infirmity of *melancholia* or another weakness, and thus is not said to be the greatest sin or incurable.¹²¹

It follows from the realisation about the physiological root of this type of *acedia* that the treatment consisting of the usual penances of fasts, prayer and manual work applied to it in the case of pure sin would require review when the sufferer was an elderly person and physiologically predisposed to melancholy. Roger Bacon suggests an alternative treatment in his *Moralis philosophia*, prescribing rest and recreation rather than hard work for this particular vice.¹²²

In connection with the physiology of the humours, the dryness of old age and sin, it is notable that in religious literature both the sins associated with old age, that is sloth and avarice are pictured as causing a “drying up”. William of Pagula writes in *Oculus sacerdotis*:

Then *Accidia* empties the ditches of the water of grace; for “a sad mind dries up the bones” [Prov. 17:22]. Avarice fills the empty ditches with the lust for earthly goods.¹²³

¹²⁰ From a list of authors who linked *acedia* directly with the humours, see Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, p. 191, (a-e).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²² Cited *ibid.*, p. 60: *Moralis philosophia*, III, vii, 8, p. 181. For the effect of an individual’s state of mind on ageing, cf. Bacon, *Cure of Old Age*, tr. Browne, p. 129: “For a cheerful Mind brings Power and Vigour,.. stirs up Nature and helps her in her Actions”.

¹²³ Cited, Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, p. 148.

Acedia appears to have been regarded as a vice which accompanied old age but was also in itself a factor which may have promoted old age, for “a sad mind dries up the bones”. There are two points to be emphasized which arise from this discussion of old age and sloth. In the first place, the elderly are not associated with the physical form of the vice nor are they criticised for physical weariness. They are condemned when spiritual or mental weariness is their complaint although a few writers take the physiological roots of this into consideration. Secondly, despite the recommendation by Roger Bacon that rest and recreation should be the remedy for despair, any notion of physiologically induced melancholy is absent from the penitential handbooks. It is likely that aged penitents who confessed to despair or were diagnosed as suffering from it by their priest received some form of the standard penance of work and prayer, exactly the opposite of Bacon’s recommendation of rest.

It was the onset of despair in old age, more than the decay of physical powers which appeared to haunt the medieval mind, for despair, when it led to loss of hope in God, would bring about the “second death in Gehenna” of which Christ spoke (Matt. 10:28). The Doctors of the Church underscored Christ’s words on the second death as the greatest evil oppressing mankind. The loss of hope in the second death is the subject of warnings by St. Augustine in the “City of God” and Pedro Lumberras has shown that Thomas Aquinas acknowledged the loss of hope to be a feature of old age.¹²⁴

Similarly the value of hope and the impending loss of it in old age is reflected in popular literature. In de Deguileville’s “Pilgrimage of Human Life”, one of the characters named “Lady Grace” gives the pilgrim the “Scrip of Faith” and the “Staff of Hope” for his journey. The action of the entire piece centres round various sins in personified forms who attempt to deprive the pilgrim of these two

¹²⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, pp. 510-511, 894, 966. Lumberras, “De senectute”, pp. 318-319.

items. At the start of the pilgrimage of life, Youth, with feathered feet flies with the pilgrim above the Sea of the World but in time he is abandoned by fickle Youth who drops him into the Sea. Tribulation carries him safely to the shore but only because he had retained the “Staff of Hope”.

The penitential handbooks also reveal the great danger which despair posed for men of this period with regard to making a satisfactory confession. According to the protracted advice given in the “Penitential of Bartholomew of Exeter” in relation to infirm penitents (above, p.112, n.100), an absolute requirement for a valid deathbed confession was the desire to be reconciled with God which true despair made impossible.

Avarice is the second Deadly Sin, which is associated with old age. Pope Innocent III has left a heavily-drawn pen portrait of an avaricious man in *De miseria condicionis humane*:

The avaricious man is quick to demand, slow to give, bold to refuse. If he spends anything, he loses all. Sad, complaining, and morose, anxious, he sighs; doubting he holds fast; reluctantly he spends. He praises a gift, but depreciates giving; he gives in order to get, but does not get in order to give...He empties his gullet in order to fill his coffer; he reduces his body in order to enlarge his wealth...But “the riches of the unjust shall be dried up like a river,” because he who accumulates wickedly scatters quickly. It is a just judgement that what comes from evil comes to evil, and what does not proceed from good does not move towards good. Therefore the avaricious man has ruination in the life that is now and is to come.¹²⁵

Although Innocent does not associate the old person with avarice in this portrait, there are echoes of features associated with the aged therein and all the while a picture would be forming in the mind of the reader. The avaricious man, he says, is “sad complaining and morose”, which is exactly the temperament associated with age. He is “reduced in body” but his riches will be “dried up”. In the light of Bloomfield’s remark quoted above concerning the malaise engendered by the change from the gift-giving feudal society of the early and high Middle Ages to

¹²⁵ Lotario Dei Conti di Segni (Pope Innocent III, 1160 or 61-1216). *De miseria condicionis humane*, ed. Lewis, R. E., London: Scholar Press, 1980, pp. 162-4, ch. 16.

the money economy of the late Middle Ages, it is interesting that the Pope writes sourly: “He gives in order to get but does not get in order to give”. This perhaps expresses regret about the loss of the open-handed ideals which had gone before, to be superseded by the practice of lending with interest of the market economy.

In his *De contemptu mundi*, Bernard of Cluny draws a particularly acidulous character-portrait of old age (his idea of childhood is no less biting) but he is more direct in his association of old age (or at least senior members of society) with avarice than Innocent III. He writes, “Now everyone wants carnal goods, everyone wants earthly goods, gluttony rules the populace, money rules their elders, errors rule both”.¹²⁶

The picture of avarice in Langland’s “Piers Plowman” is typical of the personification of this vice as an aged person:

Avaricia

And thanne cam Couerytise. Can I hym nouzte descryue
So hungriliche and howle sire Heruy hym loked
He was bitelbrowed and baberlipped also
With two blered eyghen as a blind hagge
And as a leathern purs lolled his cheeks
Wel sydder than his chyn thei chieuled for elde
And as a bindman of his bacoun his berde bidraueled.¹²⁷

Avarice, according to Langland, is thus a chilled old man, stringy and hungry-looking, bushy-browed, wet drooping lips, bleary eyes and cheeks like an empty purse which sag below his chin which bears a bedraggled beard.

¹²⁶ *Scorn for the World: Bernard of Cluny’s De Contemptu Mundi*, ed. Pepin, R. E., East Lansing, Michigan: Colleagues Press, c. 1991, Bk. II, pp. 87-89.

¹²⁷ Langland, W., *Piers The Plowman*, ed. Skeat, W. W., 2 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886, vol. 1.- Text, pp. 146-147.

If a priest was influenced by these popular characterisations of old age, he might have been expected to examine aged penitents with avarice in mind and question them on this sin, but there is no evidence of this in the penitential material. There is no chapter-heading entitled, *De machina senium* to complement *De machina mulierum*. When avarice is mentioned in the penitentials for the special attention of the priest, it is surprising that it is linked with childhood and not with old age, as the following extracts from the “Penitential of Cummean” and the “Old Irish Penitential” illustrate:

[For Avarice] If he is a boy, forty or thirty days, according to his age or state of knowledge”.

If boys do such things, it is forty nights (or twenty nights) of penance, or else their penance is according to their age. If the culprit can pay the erics [compensation] which God has appointed in law and rule, his penance is consequently less.¹²⁸

Most of the handbooks of penance follow the advice of the Church Fathers who defined the Deadly Sins and appropriate spiritual remedies. In the case of avarice, Gregory I advised the cultivation of generosity in one so afflicted. Most of the penances reflect this position in requiring compensation to the victim or some form of almsgiving, none of which has particular relevance for the elderly. But if a man persisted to be avaricious into old age he could expect a severe penance, “Anyone who persists in avarice until the end of his life must go on pilgrimage or must distribute the value of seven cumals to the poor and needy for his soul’s good”¹²⁹.

A discussion of the sins of which the elderly were thought to be guilty would be unbalanced without a parallel disquisition on the sins of which they were prone to be victims. The best (and perhaps the only) window on this problem is to consider the attitude of the penitential authors to infringements of the Fourth Commandment: “Honour thy Father and Mother”. Before looking at minor and major infringements of the Fourth Commandment, it is necessary to clarify what

¹²⁸ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, pp. 105:2, 161: 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162, from the *Old Irish Penitential*.

the authors of the manuals meant by “Father and Mother”. The definition of parent according to the authors is unusual in that it is much broader than the modern definition of this term, which perhaps reflects the prevalence of the extended family in the Middle Ages. In dealing with the sin of parricide, the “Penitential of Bartholomew of Exeter” explains the full meaning of “father” and, as with other vices the circumstances of the sin such as the character of the perpetrator, the place and time of the offence and whether their actions were premeditated or not, are taken into account:

De Parricidio

Parricidium dicitur solummodo patris vel matris interfectio, sed et fratris et sororis et filii et filie, aui, patru et avunculi, matertere et amite, et reliquorum qui valde affines parentes sunt, et secundum hoc dicitur parricidium quia parenticidium. Omnium autem penitentia ex paucis perpendi potest, habita ratione personarum, locorum et temporum, maxime autem causarum et utrum casu vel sponte perpetrata sint.¹³⁰

Parricide could thus involve a parent but also brother or sister, child, uncle, or aunt on either side or any close relations of one’s parents. Although it is acknowledged that parricide, thus described is more a sin against one’s own blood than against a senior and that the manuals contain no direct reference to chronological age in relation to parents, it can be assumed that this is a crime in which a significant number of the victims would be aged.

Minor infringements of the Fourth Commandment will be discussed first, by which is meant venial sins such as reviling an elder. The following extract from the “Old Irish Penitential” reflects the classes of person described above who were regarded as seniors but it is also specific about the chronology of seniority:

Anyone who reviles his mother or father or sister or brother or his prince or prior or an elder who is above him in age or instruction, let him make confession and do penance seven days on bread and water, or the equivalent which cancels it. If he reviles anyone else, three days and a half.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Morey, *Bartholomew of Exeter*, p. 215.

¹³¹ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 164, 4: 3.

Reviling an elder (whether simply a superior or an older person) merited twice the punishment of insulting any other person.

The “Milan Penitential” is severe on sins against parents:

He who reviles his parents shall be a penitent for forty days on bread and water.
 He who does injury to his parents three years.
 He who beats [them] seven years.
 If anyone rises up against his bishop, his pastor and father, he shall do penance in a monastery all the days of his life.¹³²

Again with reference to the penalty for reviling the elderly, the *Regula Coenobialis of Columban* says that, “He who utters a loud speech in condemnation of the work of the doorkeeper, that he does not keep his hours well, a special penalty of silence or fifty strokes.”¹³³ Since it has been explained above in relation to the “Rule of Benedict” that the post of doorkeeper was reserved for elderly men, it is clear that the aged could not be insulted with impunity. Respect for the feudal superior, the system of obedience to seniors, was the mainstay of medieval society. It may have had a happy side effect for the elderly in that it embraced, as the preceding extracts show, respect for seniority in age; at least in theory.

For mortal sins such as murder, the “Penitential Ascribed to Bede” prescribes alms and protracted fasting. It singles out parricides and fratricides for special punishment, “Of parricides and fratricides some say seven years; some say fourteen and seven added to these”.¹³⁴ This distinction between homicide and parricide finds expression again in the “Corrector of Burchard of Worms”:

Hast thou committed parricide, that is, slain a father, mother, brother, sister, father’s brother, mother’s brother, mother’s sister, father’s sister, or done any such thing? If by accident, not

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 366.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 261-262, vi.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227:5

intentionally...thou shouldst do penance as if [ordinary] homicide had been intentionally committed.¹³⁵

The “Old Irish Penitential” is notable in that it reflects the earlier wergild system of compensation, where youth appears to be more valuable than age or at least it takes the attitude that the culpability of a parent in killing a child as greater than if a mother or father is the victim, thus, “ A son or daughter twenty-one years...mother or father fourteen years...brother or sister ten years”,¹³⁶

The English eighth-century “Penitential of Egbert” is even more severe on parricides, prescribing at the worst, exile: “*Quidam VII., quidam XIV., et VII cum eis exul fiat*”,¹³⁷

The twelfth-century English work by Bartholomew of Exeter describes a series of penances, according to numerous authorities, to be completed by parricides. The penitent is excluded from his church for a year during which time he is to stand in the porch bewailing his sin and praying. If satisfaction is given in this phase he may enter the church again but without benefit of Communion. After three years he may return to the Sacrament. He must continue to fast during all the years of the penance (*quatuordecim*, fourteen years) from meat and wine except on certain feast days and the Easter season. He is to keep vigils and travel on foot. He can only bear arms against pagans but he is to be allowed to continue to live with his lawful wife lest he is tempted to fornication:

*... per annum unum ecclesiam non ingrediatur, sed ante fores basilice stans, orans et deprecans... Completo vero anni spacio introeundi in ecclesiam licentiam habeat; tamen inter audientes stet et nondum communicet. Completis autem trium annorum curriculis sacre communionis gracia illi concedatur... carnem non manducet, nec vinum bibere presumat, exceptis festis diebus atque dominicis, et a Pascha usque ad Pentecostem... nullo vehiculo deducatur, sed pedibus profiscatur. Arma non sumat nisi contra paganos. Ieiunet autem tribus diebus per ebdomadam usque ad vesperam. A propria et legitima coniuge non separetur, ne in fornicationis voraginem corruat.*¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 326-7:15

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 165, v:2.

¹³⁷ *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, vol. III, p. 419, Ch. III.

¹³⁸ Morey, *Bartholomew of Exeter*. p. 215.

It is debatable whether the long exile prescribed by Egbert of York is more severe than the restrictions endorsed by Bartholomew of Exeter. The latter certainly deals with parricide in much greater detail but this may simply be a reflection of the more sophisticated society of the twelfth century as opposed to the eighth century and not a hardening of attitudes to sin against seniors.

It remains to explore a small clutch of entries in the penitential manuals, which could be described as “pro-parent” legislation. The “So-Called Roman Penitential” allows no accusation to be made against any man who commits homicide in defence of his parents.¹³⁹ The “Penitential of Silos” places anathema on anyone who deserts his parents in the season of worship.¹⁴⁰ The “Customs of Tallacht” (c. 831-40) say that a son ought to perform penance for the souls of his parents.¹⁴¹

These few extracts together with the relatively more abundant material on offences against the Fourth Commandment show that mistreatment of elders was a serious misdemeanour which resulted in heavy penances ranging from years of fasting to temporary excommunication and exile. Although the elderly are not readily visible in the handbooks, many of the entries refer to them indirectly, although hidden in larger sub-groups such as the weak. They were however, significantly, not singled out by the authors of the manuals for particular attention due to spiritual vulnerability and susceptibility to particular sins which was the case with women and children. Literary sources do associate the aged with sloth and avarice but this is not reflected in the penitential material.

The penitentials do reveal that the elderly had certain rights. The prologues to the books repeat that age, health and circumstances of a penitent had to be taken into

¹³⁹ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 310: 79.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 289, xi: 107.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

account when administering penance. Similarly the medieval respect for lordship and seniority in general which is confirmed in the treatment of parricide in the books must have protected the elderly from abuse to some extent. The shift from the payment of wergild, in which the abuse of an elderly person had negligible consequences, to one in which the crime, its circumstances and the relationship of the victim and perpetrator were considered, must have had the same effect.

Chapters One to Three above have explored the definition of old age in the medieval period and attitudes concerning how and why humans aged. Chapter Four will consider images of old age in medieval literature and in particular the perceived relationship between old age and death.

CHAPTER 4

Old Age in Medieval Literature**(i) An Overview of Old Age in Medieval Literature**

The study of the character of the elderly in medieval literature has produced more agreement among historians of gerontology than any other aspect of the discipline. Coffman, Nitecki, Minois, Blamires and Warner are united in the opinion that the predominant literary image of the elderly in the Middle Ages is negative.¹ It would therefore be appropriate to begin this chapter with an exploration of their collective view by examining the components of these negative images and their literary roots. The second part of the chapter will use a sharper focus to consider the relationship between old age and death in selected sources.

The deficiencies of old age in medieval literature are depicted as either physical or emotional weakness. Chapter Two above detailed the physical deficiencies which were observed by the medical authors (pp. 58-9). Literary sources confirm the pathologies described by the physicians in two ways; either wistfully for the loss of health and strength or with bitterness and ghoulish relish in the rehearsing of the corruption of the body. The first part of this chapter will describe the former wistful type the latter will be reserved for part two.

¹ Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer"; Nitecki, "Figures of Old Age in Fourteenth-Century English Literature" in *Aging and Old Age in Medieval Europe*, pp. 107-116; Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, pp. 170, 180-1, 219, 159-63 and Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, pp. 218-240. The negative image of the last phase of life in medieval literature can be accepted with the caveat that old age was not alone in attracting unfavourable comment. Much of the literature on age was written by moralists whose purpose was to highlight the faults of every stage of life as a warning to their audience. St Augustine identified importunity, jealousy, anger and aggressiveness as sinful drives in the infant; see Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, p. 14, also Sears, *Ages of Man*, p. 131 and "It is all the same sad story from cradle to grave", in Owst, G. R. *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to the Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450*, Cambridge at the University Press, 1926, p. 341.

The following extracts from “An Old Man’s Prayer” (fourteenth century) and “God Send Us Patience in Our Old Age” (fifteenth century) are typical of the laments of the aged in medieval literature. The old man complains at length, of weakness, the diminution of the senses, depression, joint pain and the loss of the physical prowess of his youth:

Nou is marred al my meyn [strength]
away is all my wunne [joy]

A goute me hath ygrethed so
And other eueles monye mo,
Y not whet bote [remedy] is best.

Faste y wes on horse heh
Ant werede worly wede,
Nou is faren al my feh,
With serewe that ich hit euer sch
A staf ys nou my stede.

Euel ant elde ant other wo
foleweth me so faste
Me thunketh myn herte breketh a-tuo !
suetē god, whi shal hit swo?
Hou mai hit lengore laste ?²

The same litany of the failing body is rehearsed in the second lyric, “God Send Us Patience in Our Old Age”:

From the tyme that we were bore
Oure youthe passeth fro day to day,
And age encreseth more and more;
And so doth yt nowe, the soth to say.

Oure body will yche, oure bonys wol ake,
Owre owne flesshe wol be oure foo,
Oure hede, oure handys than wol schake
Owre legges wol trymble whan we goo,
Oure bonys wol drye as doth a stake,
And in oure body we schulle be woo,
Oure nose, oure chekes, wol wex al blake. And oure glad chere wol vade vs fro; And then oure
teeth ben goon also, Oure tongue schalle lese hys fayre language.
Prey we for vs selfe and other moo,
That god send vs pacyence in oure old age.³

² *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Brown, C., Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1924, pp. 3-7, of 107 lines: 11, 12, 24-26, and 47-51 are quoted.

Although “The Old Man’s Prayer” and “God Send Us Patience in Our Old Age” are religious lyrics they lack any sense of the serenity of a life fulfilled or of the ripeness of Christian vocation which the aged Simeon expressed in the *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32).⁴ In contrast, the old men of the medieval lyrics strain painfully against age; all is loss. In “The Old Man’s Prayer” the subject questions the necessity of his suffering: “suetē god whi shal hit so?” He sees no point to it.

The pains of old age in the lyrics cited above seem trivial in comparison to the dissolution which is described in “The Pricke of Conscience”, a Northumbrian poem of c.1350. Although the list of symptoms is much the same as before, the poem’s focus on pain is relentless resulting in a darker, oppressively gruesome picture of the last years of life:

Than waxes his kind wayke and calde
 Than changes his complexcion
 And his manners and his condicion;
 Than waxes his heart hard and hevvy,
 And his heved feeble and dysy;
 Than waxes his gaste seke and sare.
 And his face rouncles, ay mare and mare;
 His mynde is short when he oght thynkes,
 His nese ofte droppes, his hand [breath] stynkes,
 His sight wax dym that he has,
 His back waxes coked,⁵ stoupand he gas,
 Fyngers and taes, fote and hand;
 Alle his touches er tremblande:
 His werkes for-worthes that he bygynnes,
 His haire moutes, his eghen rynnes:
 His eyres waxeth deaf, and hard to here,
 His tung fayles, his speche is nocht clere
 His mouthe slavers his teethe rotes,..⁶

³ *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Brown, C., Oxford, 1938, pp. 233-236, of 96 lines: 1-4 and 25-36 are quoted.

⁴ There is a sympathetic portrait of Simeon the prayerful, faithful and wise in Aelfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 1, p. 137; also Anna, the wise widow of eighty-four years or more, *ibid.*, p. 147.

⁵ The crooked back or hump which is associated with the elderly is a symbol of the burden of sin.

⁶ *Pricke of Conscience: A Northumbrian Poem by Richard Rolle de Hampole*, [authorship is disputed], ed. Morris, R., Berlin: A. Asher & Co, 1863, p. 22, 9624 lines: 767-784 are quoted.

These poetic complaints of physical weakening tinged with the melancholy of accumulated years are not unique to the Middle Ages. They can be found in any age. In a short poem dividing the ages of man from birth to death into nine, Solon (639-559 B.C.), portrayed the elderly as weak and feeble minded.⁷ Equally, Biblical sources are not free of negative attitudes to physical ageing. The Book of Psalms (90:10) refers to old age in the well-known verse, “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet it is their strength labour and sorrow”. (The Psalm refers negatively to the decrepit stage of old age, not old age in general). In the Gospel of John, (21:18) Jesus describes the helplessness of physical old age, “another shall gird thee and carry thee wither thou wouldst not”. Similar laments on the physical inconveniences of age, chosen at random to illustrate the tenacity and appeal of this literary image through the centuries can be found in Juvenal (c.55-130), Horace (65-8 B.C.), Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274), John Donne (1573-1631), and Balzac (1799-1850).⁸

This plaintive theme in the universal literature of old age which portrays the stark facts of physical ageing will not be laboured further except to highlight a recurrent image in this class of writing which links the literary images of age with medieval beliefs on the physiological causes of ageing. The biological notion of ageing as the waning of the innate heat due to lack of fuel and the subsequent drying of the body finds expression in literary sources. In Chaucer’s “Canterbury

⁷ Solon, *Poem on the Nine Ages of Man in the Work and Life of Solon*, ed. Freeman, K., London: Humphrey Milford, 1926, pp. 213-214, cited in Berman, L., *Images and Impressions of Old Age in the Great Works of Western Literature (700 B.C.-1900 A.D.)*, New York; Ontario: St. David’s Univ. Press, 1987, p. 243. The references to physical decay in the final stage of life are discussed in Covey, H. C., “Old Age Portrayed by the Ages-of-Life Models From the Middle Ages to the 16th Century”, in *Gerontologist*, vol. 29, no. 5, 1989, pp. 692-698. Elizabeth Sears also refers to the illustration of physical decay in the *aetates hominis* in Sears, *Ages of Man*, p. 131. Also of interest in reference to the physical appearance of old age in ballads is, Tobriner, A., “Old Age in Tudor-Stuart Broadside Ballads” in *Folklore*, vol. 102: ii, 1991, pp. 151-153.

⁸ Berman, *Images and Impressions of Old Age*, pp. 245, 225, 107, 138-139; Donne, J., “Elegy Nine-The Autumnal”, in *John Donne, The Complete English Poems*, ed. Smith, A. J., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, reprint 1986, pp. 105-6.

Tales”, the Reeve describes the remaining passions of old age as the dying embers of a fire:

..for thogh oure myghte be goon
 oure wyl desireth folie evere in oon.
 For whan we may nat doon, than wol we speke;
 Yet in oure asshen olde is fyr yreke.
 Foure gleedes han we, which I shall devyse, -
 Avauntyng, liying, anger, coveitise;
 These foure sparkes longen unto eelde.⁹

In “The Pilgrimage of Human Life” the old crone named “Sloth” describes herself: “I am called Sloth, the gouty, the cramped, the lame, the crippled the wounded, the sodden the frozen.”¹⁰ In some cases the association of old age with loss of heat is implied rather than spoken of directly. In the romance, “The Dream of Rhonabwy”, a sinister old crone sits on a dais of bare boards feeding her feeble fire with husks:

and when cold came upon her she would throw a lapful of husks on to the fire, so that it was not easy for any man alive to endure that smoke entering his nostrils.¹¹

The husk is a symbol both of the old woman herself and of the last of her biological fuel or radical moisture.¹² She is a drying shell of a woman, using up the last of her body’s resources. The poor-burning fuel may also be symbolic of the poverty of old age, not just in the financial sense, but also in the wider sense of loss of family, friends, status, and in the end life itself.

Francois Villon uses the same symbolism in connection with old age in a poem entitled, “Lament of the Fair Heaulmiere”. After rehearsing the familiar catalogue of physical decay which appears in “The Old Man’s Prayer”, “God Send Us

⁹ *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 55.

¹⁰ de Deguileville, *Pilgrimage of Human Life*, p. 97.

¹¹ *The Mabinogion*, tr. Jones, G. and Jones, T., Everyman, London: J. M. Dent, 1994, p. 115.

¹² “Radical moisture”, see above p. 49.

Patience in Our Old Age” and the “Pricke of Conscience”, Villon goes on to lament:

Tis thus we mourn for good old days,
Perch'd on our buttocks, wretched crones,
Huddled together by the blaze
Of some poor fire of forest cones,
That dies as quickly as our moans
A briefly-lit, brief-living flame.¹³

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) also uses the image of an old hunched crone warming her blood over a fire in this piece from the “Corbaccio”:

If you had seen her, as I saw her most mornings, with her nightcap pulled down over her head, with the little veil around her throat, so swamp-faced, as I have just said, sitting on her haunches in her lined mantle, brooding over the fire, with livid rings under her eyes, coughing and spitting great gobs of phlegm.¹⁴

The elderly woman as crone or witch illustrated in this extract from Villon and “The Dream of Rhonabwy” is a common figure in medieval romances and fabliaux. The image confirms the association of women with occult knowledge, which appears in the contemporary penitential literature. The ugliness of Morgan le Fay, who is described in “Gawain and the Green Knight” as “an aged beldame”, suggests that she is a witch. Her advanced age and disfigurements are constantly set against the beauty of her young alter ego, the host’s wife.

For if the one was winsome, withered was the other.
Hues rich and rubious were arrayed on the one,
Rough wrinkles on the other rutted cheeks.
Kerchiefed with clear pearls clustering was the one,
Her breast and bright throat bare to the sight,
Shining like sheen of snow shed on the hills;
The other was swathed with a wimple wound to the throat
And choking her swarthy chin in chalk-white veils,
On her forehead were folded enveloping silks,
Trellised about with trefoils and tiny rings.
Nothing was bare on the beldame but the black brows,
The two eyes, protruding nose and stark lips,
And those were a sorry sight and exceedingly bleary:

¹³ *The Poems of Francois Villon*, tr. Cameron, N., London: Jonathan Cape, 1952, pp. 58-60.

¹⁴ Cited in *Woman Defamed Woman Defended*, p. 174.

A grand lady, God knows, of greatness in the world
 Well tried !
 Her body was stumpy and squat,
 Her buttocks bulging and wide;
 More pleasure a man could plot
 With the sweet one at her side.¹⁵

The two enchantresses, the “other” and the “sweet one”, are two seasons in the life of the same woman. The loveliness of youth and the ugliness of old age co-exist in the one person, only time separates them.

Another example from “The Mabinogion” is typical of the marriage of elderly woman and supernatural knowledge. A queen seeks out an aged wise-woman for information concerning her prospects in life: “.the good lady went walking abroad, she came to the house of an old crone who was in the town, without a tooth in her head”.¹⁶ The crone obliges the queen by prophesying her future.

Medieval folk tales which have persisted into modern times as fairy tales, abound in wicked old women that prey on the young.¹⁷ In the same way, sin of various complexions is personified as a predatory elderly person. The personification of avarice in *Piers Plowman* has already been described.¹⁸ In “The Pilgrimage of Human Life”, Sloth is not alone in pursuing the pilgrim. Without exception all of the vices or misfortunes which afflict Mankind are characterized as old women.

¹⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, tr. Stone, B., 2nd edn., Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1974, p. 57.

¹⁶ *Mabinogion*, p. 81.

¹⁷ Examples abound: an old beggar-woman offers “Snow White” the poisoned apple, a wicked old fairy curses “Briar Rose” (Sleeping Beauty), “Rapunzel” is imprisoned in her tower by an evil old woman. Further examples include; “Hansel and Gretel”, “The Three Little Men in the Forest”, and “The Devil and his Grandmother”, in *Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm: Selected Tales*, tr. Luke, D., McKay, G., Schofield, P., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, pp. 56-62, 98-103, 334-336. Medieval folklore which features the elderly as principal characters in a sympathetic light is scant in comparison but not impossible to find. Chinen has isolated a number of stories from medieval Europe and elsewhere which he calls, “Elder Tales”. In these, the elderly protagonists who are initially sinners or merely fools, reform themselves and transcend the self. Chinen, A.B., “Fairy Tales and Spiritual Development in Later Life: The Story of the Shining Fish” in *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, ed. Cole, T. R.; Van Tassel, D.; Kastenbaum, R., New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1992, pp. 197-214.

¹⁸ Above, p. 122.

Even Nature becomes a disgruntled old hag. Grace and Penance, on the contrary, are beautiful, temperate young women.¹⁹ It is notable that in this piece Lady Grace expects less of youth than of age. Youth is not obliged to wear the armour of patience, fortitude and prudence. He is too young to make use of these virtues and is excused just as the penitential handbooks which were explored in Chapter Three above excused boys from full penance.²⁰

The source of these negative body images lies most probably in the simple observation and experience of the complaints suffered by elderly persons in the decrepit or last phase of life. It is notable that it is the last phase of old age on which they dwell, that is the stage which is described by Psalm Ninety and most of the schemes of the *aetates hominis* which were explored in Chapter One as seventy years of age or more. The author of “God Send Us Patience in Our Old Age” acknowledges the cumulative effect of ageing: “our age encreaseth more and more”. The ill-health described in the poems only encroaches gradually. The poet John Lydgate (1375-1448-9) shows a fine appreciation of this gradual process of decline in “Death’s Warning”:

By processe at ey[e] men may see
 Beaute declyneth, hys blossom falleth doune
 And lytyll and lytyll, tyll by succession
 Cometh croked elde, vnwarly [in] crepyng,
 With hys patent purely than manysshynge.²¹

An individual may have experienced fifteen to twenty years or so of tolerable old age before entering this category and, as shown by St. Jerome’s letter to Paul of Concordia²² might very well live to be one hundred years old without ill effect. For most people, however, who lived beyond seventy years the picture drawn in the literature may not be far from the truth. At the very least such a

¹⁹ de Deguileville, *Pilgrimage of Human Life*; Nature, p. 22, Penance, p. 29, Grace, p. 24. Cronos: pp. 99-100, 103, 110-111, 118, 123, 127, 133, 138-139, 158, 165, 184.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63

²¹ *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. MacCracken, H. N., 2 Parts, EETS nos. 107 e.s., 192, Oxford Univ. Press, 1911, 1934, Part II, no. 192, “Secular Poems”, p. 656, lines quoted: 17-21.

²² Above, p. 80.

preponderance of sources which describe this frightening picture of extreme old age suggests that the dominant theme of old age was loss; loss of strength, of beauty, of health, of status, of family and friends. Loss in old age accompanied by lack of sympathy from younger people was thus expected and feared.

Medieval descriptions of the psychological characteristics of old age follow a similar repetitive pattern. The melancholic temperament associated with Saturn, the governing planet of the last phase of life, is pictured thus by John Lydgate:

Malencolik of his complexioun,
 Disposed of kynde for to be fraudelent,
 Malicious, froward, and by decepcioun,
 Which thynges peysed by good avisement,
 Forgyng discordes double of his entent;²³

Saturn's people, according to Lydgate, are cheating, vindictive, and quarrelsome. This view of the mental traits of the elderly character was widespread.²⁴ The "Pricke of Conscience" is typical:

He is lyghtly wrath, and waxes froward,
 Bot to turne hym fra wrethe it es hard;

 He es covatous and hard haldand,
 His chere es drery and his sembland;
 He es swyft to speak on his manere
 And latsom and slaw for to here;
 He prayses ald men and haldes tham wyse,
 And yhung men list him oft despise;²⁵

The repetition of these particular mental traits associated with the elderly occurs so frequently in medieval sources that G. R. Coffman has proposed that they were derived from a common literary source; that is a letter written by Horace (20 B.C.). The author states in the letter that since the audience to a dramatic work is

²³ Lydgate, *Minor Poems*, Part II, p. 737, lines 97-101.

²⁴ See Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer", pp. 249-53. Also Sears, *Ages of Man*, p. 135.

²⁵ Rolle, *Pricke of Conscience*, pp. 22-23, lines: 786-787, 790-795.

composed of people of different ages, the dramatist ought to include characters of various ages in his play which conform to certain ideas about the natures of particular age groups. The elderly, Horace suggests, are “miserly, quarrelsome, likely to hark back to the good old days, and condemn the young”. Coffman identifies Maximianus (c. mid sixth century), the author of six elegies on old age, as the “first inheritor” of the ideas described in Horace. It was through the great popularity of the “Elegies of Maximian” throughout the Middle Ages, Coffman believes, that the mental characteristics first described by Horace were transmitted to medieval literature²⁶

In addition to bemoaning the physical ills of old age which were to become so familiar to the medieval reader, Maximian keeps faith with the notion that the old are prone to despair by devoting the first elegy to the old man’s desire for death. The theme of the second elegy is the curse of impotence. In the third and fourth pieces the old man looks back with bitter longing to the sexual adventures of his youth and the fifth describes an unhappy foolish affair with a younger woman and in the final elegy the old man resigns himself to death.

The five themes of the elegies are easily traceable in medieval literature. Christine de Pisan (c.1364-1431) clearly has Maximian’s portrait of a sad old age in mind when in, “The Treasury of the City of Ladies”, she gives advice to old women on how to interact successfully with their juniors. Her description of the passions which are ordinarily ascribed to older people such as being petulant, querulous, quarrelsome, envious, impatient and gluttonous are derived from the elegies. Her advice on these faults is to calm oneself and avoid anger. She also counsels that the natural antipathy which some elderly people feel for the young should be suppressed in the knowledge that they were once young and exuberant themselves.

²⁶ *The Elegies of Maximianus*, ed. Webster, R., The Princeton Press, 1900. An English version of the elegies, *Le Regret de Maximian* appeared in the thirteenth century, see *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Brown, C., Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1932, pp. 92-100. For

Just as Maximian's old man makes himself foolish by dallying with a younger mistress, Christine reminds her elderly women readers of Machaut's warning that "Old women's coy coquetry is a subject for mockery."²⁷ This theme, the subject of the fifth elegy, in which the old person male or female attempts to continue sexual relations with younger partners, thereby making themselves both detestable and farcical, is universally popular and common in the literature of the medieval period. In most situations, it is the elderly male who is the victim of a younger predatory female. The practical author of the "Babees Book" confirms this literary line by advising that a young woman is never content with an old man.²⁸ Minois and Nitecki have rehearsed the predominance of this theme in the works of Chaucer, particularly the "Canterbury Tales". Minois writes:

Geoffrey Chaucer, between 1385 and 1390, introduced many old men into his *Canterbury Tales*. Old Age was clearly the order of the day, and particularly the problem of husbands who were too old. Chaucer provides a whole litany of them, veering from the ridiculous to the odious, against a background of animosity between the generations.²⁹

Coffman does not agree that "old age was the order of the day" in the "Canterbury Tales". He writes: "As a subject to be treated independently or as material for significant incidental treatment Chaucer makes very little use of old age".³⁰

Chaucer employs elderly characters in six of "The Canterbury Tales". These are: the "Pardoner's Tale", the "Miller's Tale", the "Wife of Bath's Tale", the "Merchant's Tale", the "Reeve's Tale" and the "Friar's Tale".³¹ It is possible to

confirmation of the popularity of Maximian during the Middle Ages, see Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer", p. 253.

²⁷ de Pizan, C., *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor: The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, ed. Pelner Cosman, M., tr. Cannon Willard, C., N. York: Bard Hall Press / Persea Books, c.1989, pp. 203-205.

²⁸ See the discussion on "The Fifteen Joys of Marriage" by Gilles Belemere, Bishop of Avignon, 1390-1407 in Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 223 and *The Babees Book*, p. 87.

²⁹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 227-229; cf. Nitecki, in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, pp. 108, 111-113.

³⁰ Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer", p. 269.

³¹ *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, pp. 148-55, 47-55, 76-88, 115-27, 55-60, 89-93.

agree with Minois that Chaucer makes heavy use of elderly characters in the tales in so far as the frequency with which he employs old age is significant relative to the dearth of elderly characters in comparable sources. Medieval versions of the popular *Danse Macabre*³² make scant reference to old age and the penitential documents which were discussed in Chapter Three above do not abound in direct references to old people. It is true that the image of the elderly in the “*Canterbury Tales*” is relentlessly unsympathetic especially in matters of sexuality. In the “*Miller’s Tale*” a girl of eighteen cuckolds an old man. The ageing *Wife of Bath* reminisces on the husbands she has worn out and tells a tale of a young knight who is forced to marry an old woman. In the “*Merchant’s Tale*” an old knight of more than sixty years wants a wife of less than twenty years of age and the *Reeve* laments his impotence. These base attitudes to the elderly and sexuality are reflected in the earthiness of popular songs such as “*Old Hogyn’s Adventure*”. *Hogyn* has been successful in courting a young woman but in the end she treats him with the utmost contempt because:

When thei were to bed browght-
 Whan thei were to bed browght,
 The old chorle he cowld do nowght,
 Hum, ha, trill go bell-
 The old churl he cowld do nowght,
 Hum, ha, trill go bell.³³

If the account of the fourteenth-century “*Chronicon Anglie*” can be trusted, it may be said that in at least one prominent case real life imitated art. In his dotage, the English King Edward III (1312-1377) was recorded as “having no more discernment than a boy of eight”.³⁴ In his decline, the king took a mistress, Alice Perrers, who appears according to the “*Chronicon Anglie*”, to have been the living counterpart of the type of predatory younger woman described in the literary sources. Michael Prestwich writes:

³² Discussed below, pp. 171ff.

³³ *Secular Lyrics of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Robbins, R. H., 2nd edn., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955, reprint 1968, p. 33-34, lines: 13-18.

She was the subject of much malicious gossip. She was said to be in league with a magician, whose potions and herbs placed the king in a state of unseemly sexual excitement;³⁵

As Edward lay dying, the same chronicle records that Alice stripped the old man of his rings and abandoned him.³⁶

It remains to be discovered whether it is possible to detect any positive images of old age in medieval literature. If Horace and Maximian created a negative template for medieval sources, Cicero (106-43 B. C.) provided a positive one in a letter entitled, "On Old Age". In this piece, Cato, an aged Roman soldier and statesman, describes the best of old age to two young friends. Cato writes that every stage of life is burdensome if an individual does not have the capacity to be happy. He recounts many pleasures which may still be enjoyed by the old man even if his body is infirm. He may recall the good deeds which he has performed. He may rejoice in his increased capacity, through experience of life, to reflect and judge. His memory need not fail if he remains enthusiastic about the interests of his youth. The happiness of dining with friends, farming, and the exercise of authority are still open to him. Each age of life, according to Cicero, and as St. Augustine confirmed later, bears new fruit and in the end the old man himself when he is ripe, must fall naturally to the earth.³⁷

The notion of seniority and the exercise of authority of which Cicero speaks is one which is likely to have appealed to the feudal society of the Middle Ages and from time to time the image of the seasoned and authoritative old man does occur in literary sources. In these instances white hair or the "hoary head", the only

³⁴ See, Prestwich, M., *The Three Edwards: War and State in England 1272-1377*, London: Methuen, 1981, p. 293.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

³⁷ The attributes of positive old age are discussed in Carp, L., "Cicero Speaks on Old Age", in *Geriatrics*, January, 1955, 10, pp. 43-45, and Chandler, A. R., "Cicero's Ideal Old Man", in "Browsing Through The Ages", in *Jnl. Of Gerontology*, 1948, 3, pp. 285-289. For Augustine on ageing, see above, p. 17.

positive physical characteristic of ageing in medieval literature, signifies experience, wisdom and dignity.³⁸ The theme of white hair as a symbol of authority is particularly evident in the “Song of Roland”. There are fourteen descriptions in this poem of the white locks and the grizzled appearance of the Emperor Charlemagne and his enemy, the Emir.³⁹ In the “Song of Roland”, old age is a fantastical old age. It is claimed that Charlemagne is two hundred years old.

The King’s age is used in both a positive and negative sense, in the former to commend him to the reader and in the latter as a focus of abuse by his enemies. His body is described as fatigued yet noble. Thus, although the physical decline of old age is mentioned here as it is in the later works cited above, it is not in this case a matter for complaint, but rather it is honourable exhaustion. The King has led a hard life but he is still able to command his host and fight mightily to the death.⁴⁰

The positive descriptions of Charlemagne in the “Song of Roland” describe his hair as snowy white, while his enemies refer to his “grey” hair with contempt. The hirsute symbols of the King’s age are admired by his own host in the following lines:

Of fairest France there sits the King austere.
White are his locks, and silver his beard,
His body noble, his countenance severe:⁴¹

His flowing silver beard, the emblem of his physical and spiritual maturity is revered and becomes the subject of an oath, “By this my beard that’s silver to the

³⁸ With the design of emphasizing St Bartholomew’s status and wisdom, the homilist Aelfric describes him, at only twenty-six years of age, as having, “an ample beard, somewhat hoary”. *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 1, p. 457.

³⁹ *The Song of Roland*, tr. Sayers, D. L., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, pp. 55, 61, 70, 72, 89, 119, 122, 163, 169, 172, 184, 203.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

view”.⁴² A white beard (in this case, the Emir’s), the symbol of old age and winter, is also most unusually, associated with the strength of youth and spring: “White is his beard as any flower of spring”.⁴³ In the same way when Charlemagne suffers emotional injury or the author wishes to emphasize the weariness of command, it is the symbols of his old age, the white hair and beard, which become the focus of the strength of his grief:

I am so wretched, would I had perished too.
He tears his beard that is so white of hue,
Tears with both hands his white hair by the roots;⁴⁴

“God !” says the King, “how weary is my life !”
He weeps, he plucks his flowing beard and white.⁴⁵

Conversely although white hair is the symbol of strength and dignity in these passages, the King’s advanced age also gives his opponents the opportunity to revile him. The pristine whiteness of his hair is dimmed to grey: “Old greybeard Charles shall never live, I think”.⁴⁶ “Carlton the old shall be grieving and groaning”.⁴⁷

There are similarities in the attitude to old age expressed in the “Song of Roland” and those in the eighth-century English poem, “Beowulf”. The poem is set in fifth or sixth-century Scandinavia and again the attitude to the aged is largely sympathetic. In particular, weariness of body in old age, although sad, is a sign of merit, the inevitable result of a life lived well. Both “Beowulf” and the “Song of Roland” demonstrate a fatalistic attitude to the passage of time and the changes that it brings to the body. There is no questioning of why the body decays like

⁴² Ibid., p. 61.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 184.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 163.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 203.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

that of the old man in the fourteenth-century “Old Man’s Prayer”.⁴⁸ In “Beowulf”, Hrothgar had been a ruler for fifty years. The poem records that he was a king:

blameless in all things, until old age at last,
that brings down so many, removed his proud strength.⁴⁹

In addition to the sympathetic approach to fatigue in these poems there is a similar tolerance of the emotionalism of the old man and even appreciation of his fancy for recalling the past which is despised in later medieval work. In contrast the “Beowulf” poet says:

There was music and laughter, lays were sung:
the veteran of the Scyldings, versed in the sagas,
Would himself fetch back far-off times to us;
The daring- in- battle would address the harp,
the joy-wood, delighting; or deliver a reckoning
both true and sad; or he would tell us the story
of some wonderful adventure, valiant-hearted king.
Or the seasoned warrior, wrapped in age,
would again fall to fabling of his youth
and the days of his battle strength; his breast troubled
as his mind filled with the memories of those years.⁵⁰

The use of the term “wrapped in age” in this verse is unusual. It suggests a cloak of old age and hence warmth, exactly the opposite of the images in Villon, Boccaccio, and the “Mabinogion” of a frozen old crone huddled over a wretched fire of cones to warm her cold blood. In “Beowulf” the author suggests that it is old age itself, or at least the accumulation of memories which only the elderly possess, that the old man is hugging to himself to keep him warm. The old man of “Beowulf” is no cold empty husk. Although his “breast is troubled” he is among his own people who understand the grief of years and revere him as a repository and guardian of their past. He is warm and replete with memories.

⁴⁸ Brown (1924), *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century*, p. 5, line 50.

⁴⁹ *Beowulf*, ed. Radice, B., tr. Alexander, M., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, reprint 1988, p. 110.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Yet isolation does afflict the elderly in medieval literature; the old crones which have been described, generally lived alone at the edge of the forest. The ugliness of old age also brings social isolation such as that described by Villon and Boccaccio. In most cases physical decline made the individual useless to his society and induced further marginalisation. But in the “Song of Roland” and more so in “Beowulf” the elderly are integrated members of the community. In the “Song of Roland” the elderly are described as hoary-headed signifying experience and the wisdom born of it.⁵¹ Ashere, the counsellor is called “ancient” and one of the warriors is described with admiration as a “terrible veteran”.⁵² In both poems the elderly have their place. Grizzled captains fight side by side with the younger men and even those who are too frail for active combat have their use as guards.⁵³ Neither are the elderly begrudged their share of the booty of war:

It came into his mind [Hrothgar]
that he would command the construction
of a huge mead-hall, a house greater
than men on earth ever heard of,
and share the gifts God had bestowed on him
upon its floor with folk young and old -⁵⁴

Indeed the opening verses of the poem advise that all men should be generous in gift-giving in their youth as a policy for ensuring a secure old age:

For in youth an atheling should so use his virtue,
Give with a free hand while in his father's house,
that in old age, when enemies gather,
Established friends shall stand by him
And serve him gladly.⁵⁵

⁵¹ The hoary-headed, the wise, *ibid.*, pp. 62, 92, 101, 104, 107, 110, 134, 144, 145, 150.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 143.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 104.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

The positive tone of the references to age in the “Song of Roland” and in “Beowulf” is however counterbalanced to some extent by other literary works of the early Middle Ages. The plaintive theme regarding the decay of the body and the emotional losses of old age which characterize later pieces such as “The Old Man’s Prayer” and “God Send Us Patience in Our Old Age” are also present in earlier Poetry. In “The Seafarer” (c. 970-90) the poet, who appears to be in old age, compares the companionable joys of youth with the unhappiness of later life, due in most part to the death of friends and family. These complaints are perhaps examples of what the “Beowulf” poet meant when he said that old men “fell to fabling of their youth with troubled breast”. If the reaction to the laments in “Beowulf” bears any resemblance to reality, the musings of the elderly appear to have been tolerated by the community and even enjoyed. But in “The Seafarer” the decline of the body is not a badge of merit as it is in “Beowulf” and the “Song of Roland”. In “The Seafarer” it is a sorry burden:

Old age advances upon him, his face grows pallid, grey-haired he mourns: he is conscious that his former friends, the sons of princes, have been committed to the earth.⁵⁶

The inevitable decay of the body is also referred to irritably in “Elene” (early 9th cent.), “.I, being old and ready to go because of this fickle carcass,..”⁵⁷

In the same way the subject of “The Wanderer” (10th cent.) reflects wearily on the mutability of the body and earthly things. At the end of his mortal life, all his trust is placed in God and the promised bliss of renewal. Again the loss of companions in old age is poignantly recalled:

When the memory of kinsfolk passes through his imagination, the man greets his comrades with cheerful words, eagerly he watches them: they drift away again.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. Bradley, S. A. J., Everyman, London, Melbourne, Toronto: Dent, 1982, p. 334.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

These examples of early medieval literature reveal a mingling of attitudes to old age. The negative aspects of the failing body and loss of loved ones are interwoven with the aged man as “Terrible Veteran” or “Wise Counsellor”. It is hard to find comparable strands of positive opinion referring to old age in later literature, however, three fifteenth-century pieces require comment. These are “Mum and the Sothsegger”, Robert Henryson’s, “In Prais of Aig” and “Meditatioun in Wyntir” by William Dunbar.

In the conclusion to her paper “Figures of Old Age in Fourteenth-Century English Literature”, Alice K. Nitecki proposed, if tentatively, that the first two of these pieces were evidence that “an idealized view of old age” in literature, which had been absent in the medieval period since the Anglo-Saxon period, was re-emerging in the fifteenth century.⁵⁹

Since the publication of Nitecki’s work, Georges Minois has considered the literature of the fifteenth century in relation to old age and has discovered it to be in every part as sour towards the elderly, if not more so, than that of the preceding century. The works which have already been explored in this chapter confirm that the fifteenth century did produce works of unremittingly negative attitudes to old age. Villon, Boccaccio, Pisan, and the popular songs such as “Old Hogyn’s Adventure” are all from this period. Minois has suggested that the explanation of the particularly harsh views on old age in the fifteenth century may be connected to the rise in the percentage of the elderly in the population from 1350-1450, that is the period following the Black Death.⁶⁰ Minois writes of the discord between the generations at this time:

⁵⁹ Nitecki, in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, p. 116. For a brief survey of positive and negative images of old age in the late Middle Ages, see Goodich, M., “The Virtues and Vices of Old People in the Late Middle Ages”, in *Internat. Jnl. of Aging and Human Development*, 1990, 30, 2, pp. 119-127.

⁶⁰ See above, p. 21, n. 23.

The increased longevity of the former [the aged] and the vulnerability of the young in the face of the Plague can only have exacerbated the impatience of the young when confronted with their elders' monopoly of authority and property.⁶¹

If in reality the elderly held a monopoly of wealth and power and by extension the upper-hand in the marriage market, it is not surprising, Minois believes, that the irritation felt by the young was expressed in poems which emphasized their vices.

Yet "In Praise of Age" and "Mum and the Sothsegger" are unusually positive towards the elderly. The old man of Henryson's poem "In Prais of Age" is decrepit; he is not even in the early phase of old age, which is generally dealt with in a kindlier way than in the case of those of seventy or over:

Wythin a garth, under a rede rosere,
 Ane ald man and decrepit herd I syng;
 Gay was the note, suete was the voce and clere;
 It was grete joy to here of sik a thing.
 "And to my dome," he said in his dytyng,
 "For to be yong I wald not, for my wis,
 Off all this warld to make me lord and king:
 The more of age, the nerar hevynnis blis."⁶²

The poem continues with another three verses in which the elderly man expresses his contempt for the ways of the world, especially miserliness. He would not be young again, he says, for now he recognises the perils to which the hot blood of youth exposed him. He asks only for God's grace and ends each verse with an optimistic view of the accumulation of years: "The more of age, the nerar hevynnis blis".

Minois dismisses Henryson as "an obscure Scottish poet" and the only discordant voice amongst the general recriminations against old age.⁶³ In a sense, Minois

⁶¹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 222.

⁶² *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Kindrick, R. L. and Bixby, K. A., Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997, pp. 237-8, lines 1-8.

need not have dismissed “In Praise of Age” as an anomaly. Henryson’s portrait is a curiously neutralised version of old age. The old man is vapid. He is not interested in money or women. He does not pose a threat. He simply wants to be absent from the world; to pass on and leave hot-blooded youth to their own devices. If Minois is correct and the general recriminations in late medieval literature do arise from malicious inter-generational conflict, it is possible to believe that from the point of view of embittered youth, this is indeed a portrait of an ideal old man. The poem may have a didactic purpose similar to that of Christine de Pisan’s advice to elderly women on how to behave towards the young. Thus it is not an exception to the trend of writing on old age in this period. It adapts well to the general theme.

“Mum and the Sothsegger” is also less of an exception to the rule than might at first have been supposed. The poem was written during the reign of Richard II of England (1377-99) and expresses another ideal view of the merits of old age, particularly in this case, of the old man as wise counsellor. The poet opens by advising the reader that the work is primarily intended to instruct the young, but if older men read it, it will do them no harm.⁶⁴ The reign of Richard II was marred by tension between the young king, his youthful and extravagant favourites and the senior members of the court and parliament who were grieved over the denial of their rights as royal advisers.⁶⁵ The content of “Mum and the Sothsegger” suggests that it is a symptom of this political tension between the young and the old at this particular time in England rather than evidence of a general resurgence in an idealized view of old age.

It is true nevertheless that the author is clearly favourable to the mature faction at court. Early in the piece, the poet addresses his king with the advice, “Your

⁶³ Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 235-6.

⁶⁴ *Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. Day, M. and Steele, R., London: EETS, o.s. no. 199, 1936, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁵ The political situation in the reign of Richard II is discussed in Thomson, J. A. F., *The Transformation of Medieval England 1370-1529*, London; New York: Longman, 1983, pp. 148-165 and *A History of Parliament*, Butt, R., London: Constable, 1989, pp. 355-450.

counsellors were too young and too low born”.⁶⁶ Later he remarks, “Youths of twenty-four years can no more advise than a cow can hop in a cage”.⁶⁷ In the same manner he says, “Young lords care for nothing but dress”.⁶⁸ It is not surprising that old men are favourably compared with these green frivolous advisers.

The poet discovers the whereabouts of the sothsegger [truth-teller] who is an elderly bee-keeper.⁶⁹ As in Henryson’s “In Praise of Age” the old man is found in a summer garden.⁷⁰ Most unusually, in the light of the descriptions of physical decline which have gone before, the old man or truth-teller is described as fair, “I went in [the garden] and wandered through the alleys. Here I met an aged man, fairer to look on than any I have ever seen”.⁷¹ The poet questions the old man on how to keep bees and the old man obliges with sound advice.⁷²

In “Meditatioun in Wyntir”, the Scots poet William Dunbar⁷³ recalls his melancholy during the dark cold months of the year. As the poet sleeps he is addressed by: Despair, Patience, Prudence, Old Age and Death. The sleeper’s attitude to the last two of these nocturnal visitors is notable:

And than sayis Age, “My freind, cum neir,
And be not strange, I thee requair:
Cum, brodir, by the hand me tak,
Remember thow hes compt to mak
Off all thi tyme thow spendit heir.”

Syne Deid castis upe his yettis wyd,
Saying, “Thir oppin sall the abyd;
Albeid that thow wer never sa stout,

⁶⁶ *Mum and the Sothsegger*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁷⁰ The garden theme may represent the ripeness of old age in its association with the fullness of the cycle of the seasons.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 56-64. The keeping of bees is an allegory of the governing of the kingdom of England.

⁷³ Dunbar is believed to have been born around 1460. Since little else is known of his personal details it is not possible to ascertain what age he was when he wrote *Meditatioun in Wyntir*.

Undir this lyntall sall thow lowt:
Thair is nane uther way besyde.”⁷⁴

Death’s tone is abrupt and pitiless. He assails the sleeper’s mind disturbing his rest with thoughts of mortality. In contrast, Old Age is gentle. He calls the poet brother and leads him companionably by the hand to the completion of his life. Age is a soothing wholesome influence, there is nothing painful in its approach. It may be that Dunbar’s attitude to old age was influenced by a comment in the *Ars Moriendi* concerning death which states that death in old age was a more gentle less painful process than that observed in younger people.⁷⁵

Since the comparison of Age and Death in Dunbar’s poem has presented old age in an unusually favourable light, part two of this chapter will continue the exploration of medieval attitudes to old age in relation to death.

(ii) Old Age and Death: Behold Your Mirror ⁷⁶

The problem will be explored by rehearsing the centrality of death in medieval culture followed by an opinion on the effects which this focus on death produced in contemporary literature and selected art forms. Attention will be given to the expression of anxiety in this material concerning human decomposition. It was noted earlier in this chapter that there are two variants of anxiety concerning decay of the body to be found in medieval literature.⁷⁷ The mildest form, that is the wistful lament in poems such as “God Send Us Patience in Our Old Age” over the loss of vigour and full use of the senses has already been discussed. The second type of anxiety is darker, more potent, and finds expression in the

⁷⁴ *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. Mackenzie, W. M., London: Faber & Faber, 1932, reprint 1950, pp. 26-7, lines 31-40.

⁷⁵ Beaty, N. L., *The Craft of Dying: A study in the Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi in England*, New Haven; London: Yale Univ. Press, 1970, p. 14.

⁷⁶ Adapted from *Mirk’s Festial*, “Gode men, as ye alle se, here is a myrroure to vs alle: a corpse broth to the church”, ed. Erbe, T., EETS, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, no. 96 e.s., 1 vol., 1905, p. 294.

⁷⁷ Above, p. 129.

contemptus mundi genre. In an attempt to discern how far the medieval Church used old age as a penitential weapon, the conclusions drawn in this chapter will be considered with those proposed in Chapter Three.⁷⁸

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church stressed the need to be ever mindful of death. Writing of the later Middle Ages, Johan Huizinga said:

No other epoch has laid ^{so much} such stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death. An everlasting call of *memento mori* resounds through life. Denis the Carthusian, in his *Directory of the Life of Nobles*, exhorts them: "And when going to bed at night, he should consider how, just as he now lies down himself, soon strange hands will lay his body in the grave". In earlier times, too, religion had insisted on the constant thought of death, but the pious treatises of these ages only reached those who had already turned away from the world. Since the thirteenth century, the popular preaching of the mendicant orders had made the eternal admonition to remember death swell into a sombre chorus ringing throughout the world.⁷⁹

In this passage Huizinga marks the quickening of the death culture in the late Middle Ages which grew out of an already vital theme in the early Middle Ages. His remarks invite the question, "Why were the people of the Middle Ages so universally fascinated by death"? It is likely that the lack of environmental control in this period and its consequences on mortality were influential in focussing the mind on death. Recurrent plagues, especially that of 1348-49, famine, drought and the consequences of war created insecurity born of daily proximity to death. But the strength and tenacity of death's allure for the Middle Ages was not entirely environmental.

Research has indicated that Christianity was the taproot of medieval death culture.⁸⁰ Death and resurrection, the corpse, its disintegration and ultimate wholeness in revival of the human body are at the centre of Christian teaching on salvation. In contrast, Jews and pagans treated the corpse as an abomination; impure. The Roman dead were buried *extra muros*, well apart from the living.

⁷⁸ Penitential weapon: The concepts which the Church used to persuade the laity to receive the Sacrament of Penance.

⁷⁹ Huizinga, J., *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p. 134.

⁸⁰ For a discussion of the influence of Christianity on medieval death culture see Binski, P., *Medieval Death: Ritual and representation*, London: British Museum Press, 1996, pp. 8-28.

Cadavers were noxious both physically and spiritually. They required separation in this world and ritual appeasement in the next. Judaism regarded contact with a corpse as defilement (Numbers 19: 11-16). Conversely, Christianity embraced the dead. Christ brought the reeking body of Lazarus out of the tomb into the midst of the living before his own resurrection (John 11: 1-45). From its inception, Christianity was concerned with the corpse and its future which would be either complete disintegration or renewed and eternal wholeness when flesh and spirit would be re-knit at the resurrection. The post resurrection being or “novus homo” of St. Augustine (above, p. 82) would be healed, replenished and in its prime. Aelfric, the Anglo-Saxon homilist, described the resurrected body thus:

The apostle Paul said, that we should arise from death at the age that Christ was when he suffered, that is about three and thirty years. Though a child depart, or a worn-out man, [forwerod man - old man, see above, p. 1, n. 1] they will, nevertheless, come to the age we before said; yet will everyone have his own growth, which he had in this life or should have had, if he had awaited it. If anyone be maimed, or limbless in this life, he will be as it is written, that “All those who belong to God’s kingdom, shall have neither blemish nor hurt on their bodies”.⁸¹

By the same reasoning, “The Pricke of Conscience” states that all who had gained salvation would be resurrected with a body which was exactly thirty-two years and three months of age.⁸² Christianity places the body at the centre of its promises about the afterlife. Jesus drew the apostles’ attention to the partly healed wounds in his hands and side to emphasize that his body, which they saw standing before them three days after his execution, was not a replica but the same body which had hung on the cross and reposed in the tomb (Luke 24: 39-43; John 20: 27-29). Thus the state of the soul determines the final state of the body.

Prudentius, a Christian of the fourth century wrote of the future of the flesh:

⁸¹ Aelfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol, 1, p. 237.

⁸² Rolle, *Pricke of Conscience*, p. 135, lines 4987-8.

But should the fiery essence of the soul think on its high origin, and cast aside the numbing stain of life: then will it carry with it, too, the flesh in which it lodged and bear it also back among the stars.⁸³

The elderly, so often vilified in literature for being dried out and so pale and wan in complexion may also have taken heart from another of Prudentius's descriptions of the post-Resurrection body:

These cheeks which now are wan and white with wasting shall have beauteous skin tinged with the bloom of blood more charming than any flower.⁸⁴

From the age of Prudentius, that is the fourth century on, Christians overturned the Roman system and re-socialized the corpse. The corpses of saints were buried in churches within the city walls where cults grew around their remains. Saintry bodies were preserved, divided and distributed. The laity sought and were granted permission, in suitable cases, to be buried in the proximity of the relic. The long medieval enchantment with death and the cadaver had begun.

It is remarkable that this developing chemistry between the dead and the living was reciprocal. The dead could aid the living through the intercession of the saints and the living repay the debt by praying for the deceased and performing good works on their behalf.

This emphasis on death and belief in the efficacy of suffrages to aid those in purgatory produced an industry of death.⁸⁵ Medieval wills attest to the huge numbers of chantries which were founded to ensure that masses were sung for the dead. Relics of the saintly dead became forms of currency. There were lavish

⁸³ Cited in Brown, P., *The Cult of Saints*, London: SCM Press, 1981, p. 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸⁵ Purgatory: The place or state of being where, "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven", see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 235, parag. 1030-32. For the medieval death industry, see Rosenthal, T., *The Purchase of Paradise*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.

tombs and funeral feasts for those who could afford them, burial clubs through the Guilds for those who could not, and mortuary fees to be paid: plentiful work for craftsmen, labourers, victuallers, lawyers and the clergy. Death provided a living.

Three literary motifs identified by Johan Huizinga provide evidence of the attitudes which were generated by the death industry.⁸⁶ All three deal with the passage of time and its effects on the human being. These were (i) *ubi sunt*, a plaintive theme concerning the fragility of fame, (ii) the spectacle of human beauty gone to decay and (iii) the Danse Macabre.

Employing a suitably plaintive phrase, Huizinga describes the *ubi sunt* theme as no more than, “a graceful and elegaic sigh” adopted from the Classical world.⁸⁷ There are many medieval works on this theme of the transitory nature of well-being or fame. The Anglo-Saxon poems, “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer” which were discussed in part one of this chapter are early examples.⁸⁸ John Lydgate’s “Of The Sodein Fal of Princes In Oure Dayes” is a later English work of the same nature.⁸⁹ Huizinga quotes the poetry of thirteenth-century Franciscans and works by Deschamps and Gerson.⁹⁰ This graceful theme however has little more to say about ageing than has already been explored in connection with “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer”. It will not therefore be considered further. The medieval mind needed an earthier reminder of the frailty of life. The image of the putrefying corpse provided this reminder.⁹¹ Attitudes to death and the corpse and its association with the ageing body will therefore be pursued in Huizinga’s two remaining themes, “beauty turned to corruption” and the “Danse Macabre”.

⁸⁶ Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages*, pp. 134 ff.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁸⁸ *Above*, p. 146.

⁸⁹ Lydgate, *Minor Poems*, Part II, pp. 660-61.

⁹⁰ Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages*, p. 135.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

Although the Christian world re-socialized the corpse, it does not follow that the cadaver was exempt from disgust in the Middle Ages. Huizinga's second theme deals with the love-hate relationship of the Middle Ages for the decaying body and is therefore of interest when considering attitudes to old age in this period. After an opening discussion of this second theme, a line of research will be opened into these attitudes by testing Huizinga's belief that such a strong attachment in the medieval period to the earthly aspect of death could not be called truly pious. Huizinga writes dismissively that the medieval mind did not look beyond the corruption of death: "The imagination of those times relished these horrors, without ever looking one stage further, to see how corruption perishes in its turn, and flowers grow where corruption lay".⁹² He proposes that fascination with the decaying body was probably nothing more than a spasmodic reaction to over-sensuality.

In medieval literature and art the horror of human putrefaction appears first in religious works and then passes to secular literature and from 1400 it is found in painting and sculpture. A generic title known as *contemptus mundi* contains conspicuous passages on physical disintegration. In these works the authors focus on the dissolution of the corpse to underline the inevitable disintegration of all flesh. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), Peter Damian (c.1007-72), Hugh of St Victor (c. 1096-1141), Pope Innocent III (1161-1216) and Bernard of Cluny (12th cent.) all wrote in this genre. Their works are similar in that they describe the decomposition of the flesh in gruesome detail. The works of Pope Innocent III (written c. 1195) and Bernard of Cluny (c.1150) will be quoted as typical of the rest.

De contemptu mundi sive de miseria conditionis humane was written when Lotario dei Conti di Segni (Innocent III) was in the prime of life, that is, approximately thirty-five years of age. The book is divided into three parts which vilify the flesh. The first and second parts concern the wretchedness of human

⁹² Ibid., p. 136.

biological conception and human aspirations such as accumulation of wealth and honour or the pursuit of pleasure. The third part dwells with disgust on the inevitable decline and putrefaction of the body, especially the elderly body. The content of this piece and the others in the genre is not original, except perhaps for the relish with which the authors deal with decomposition.⁹³ Coffman is perhaps a little harsh when he describes the piece as:

the document of a recluse, an ascetic, a misanthrope; it is a Jeremaid with pity omitted; Swiftian in its disgust of all that is physical in man; Savonarolean in its indictment of the actual and imaginary sins of the race; and vividly terrible in its promises of future punishment.⁹⁴

Innocent's writing is not unique: similar gruesome images appear in Bernard of Cluny and elsewhere. The author had intended to write a companion piece concerning the dignity of the human condition which might have given some balance to the opinions expressed in *De miseria conditionis humane* but his election as Pope in 1198 prevented him from doing so. In the passage entitled, "On the Discomforts of Old Age" Innocent is pessimistic about survival. He says that "Few now reach forty years, very few sixty".⁹⁵ He rehearses much the same, now commonplace, list of physical complaints:

...his heart weakens straightaway and his head shakes, his spirit fails and his breath stinks, his face wrinkles and his back bends, his eyes dim and his joints falter, his nose runs and his hair falls out, his touch trembles and his competence fails, his teeth rot and his ears become dirty.⁹⁶

Innocent continues with the familiar mental traits of the elderly: "An old man is provoked easily and restrained with difficulty... stingy and greedy, dejected and complaining... he praises the things of old and spurns modern things".⁹⁷

⁹³ For the sources of *De contemptu mundi* see Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer", pp. 254-56.

⁹⁴ Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer", pp. 254-255.

⁹⁵ Pope Innocent III, *De Miseria Conditionis Humane*, ed. Lewis, R. E., London: Scolar Press, 1980, p. 106. [*Conditionis*, in some manuscripts]

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-8.

Yet the intensity with which the complaints of the flesh are seized upon and in this case amplified, marks it out from the former type of conventional lament cited in part one of this chapter. In this genre the complaints of old age are the prodromal signs of the ultimate dissolution of the body which will follow close upon them. From the rottenness of the ageing body, Innocent ends by dwelling on “the rottenness of corpses”:

For man is conceived of blood made rotten by the fire of lust; in the end worms stand by his body like mourners. Alive, he brings forth lice and tapeworms; dead, he will beget worms and flies.....What more horrible than a dead man? He whose embrace was most pleasing in life will indeed be a disgusting sight in death.....he who was lately filling himself with delicacies in the dining hall is now consumed by worms in the sepulchre.⁹⁸

Bernard of Cluny is no less severe on the flesh:

O beautiful flesh, after a short time stinking and full of filth, now a flower but soon dung, the lowest dung, why are you puffed up? O flesh, you are flesh now, soon dirt, hereafter worms; you are a man now, tomorrow earth, for that we are.⁹⁹

The same acute interest in bodily decay is found in other artistic fields. A wall painting in Avignon portrays a beautiful woman with her long hair lavishly dressed and bound but there are maggots gnawing at her bowels.¹⁰⁰ In Worms Cathedral a sculpture of a woman entitled “Lady World” is ravishingly beautiful when viewed from the front, but the rear of the sculpture shows the ultimate wormy corruption of the delectable flesh. These two examples of the co-existence of beauty and decay are reminiscent of the portrait of youth and age in, “Gawain and the Green Knight” in which “the host’s wife”(youth) and Morgan le Fay (age) stand side by side in the hall. They suggest, too, the hidden venom of the female body which was believed to intensify with age to become so noxious that even a glance from an old woman could cause a baby to wither away.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 108.

⁹⁸ Ibid., Part III, pp. 204-206.

⁹⁹ Cluny, *Scorn for the World*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁰ Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages*, p. 137.

Perhaps the best artistic expression of this theme of wholeness and decay is the “cadaver tomb”. Tombs of this design originated in continental Europe but they are recorded in England from 1420.¹⁰¹ The design involves a sculpture or brass showing two reclining corpses, one above the other. The upper figure shows the undecomposed body dressed in some finery and sometimes displaying symbols of power, possibly a sword or a crozier. The lower figure is macabre, showing the cadaver in advanced putrefaction, perhaps with parasites and toads feasting on the rotting flesh.

The cadaver tombs and *contemptus mundi* literature are the products of the centrality of death in medieval Christian culture and highlight the interest in the minutiae of physical disintegration. They invoke the question: “What influences contributed to this interest in the process taking place within the grave and how did it affect attitudes to the aged, those persons whose bodies were already becoming the living mirrors of the decomposition which would bloom in the grave and which was so mindfully described by authors and artists”?

There are three possible levels of response to this. At the most superficial level, death and destruction were simply as fascinating to a medieval audience as they appear to be to modern ones. Secondly, decomposition of the body touched a collective medieval nerve regarding disintegration of social order; and thirdly, the predominance of the macabre in the late Middle Ages was an expression of ecclesiastical anxiety about growing religious indifference in that period. The inevitability of death and its physical and spiritual consequences was the surest way of stinging the population out of what Huizinga has identified as an encroaching torpor of secularity. It is expected that all three contribute to a correct answer but it is the last of the three, “the reaction to spiritual anxiety”, which is likely to be the most important.

¹⁰¹ Daniell, C., *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550*, London; New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 184.

The images of death in medieval culture were designed to stimulate anxiety. In the simplest case this may only be a pleasurable superficial anxiety and of much the same nature as the apprehension experienced by audiences of modern horror films. The horrifying process of decay depicted in film or described in *contemptus mundi* literature or exposed in the lower region of cadaver tombs is not meant to be seen in public. Putrefaction is the last private function of the human body. When Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330/335-394) had to place the body of his sister beside those of his parents in the family tomb, he remembered the divine command, "Do not uncover the shame of thy father or thy mother". The bodies of his parents had to be covered before he placed his sister beside them.¹⁰² Part of the charge of any of this gruesome material, whether medieval or modern, is seeing that which is not intended to be seen by civilized society. While it is conceded that the function of macabre literature and art in the Middle Ages was didactic, it is also probably true that the initial response of the medieval audience to this work was similar to the titillation experienced by a modern audience in response to gruesome images produced by the entertainment industry for no other purpose.

Nevertheless, there is a distinction to be made in the message which macabre material conveyed to a medieval audience and what it conveys to a modern one. The modern audience receives the image but keeps it at a distance and enjoys its gruesomeness through the relieving knowledge that this corruption is not happening to them. Despite the fact that death can be sudden and is still certain in modern society, they may watch a film involving the representation of a rotting cadaver with a sense of "otherness" in the same way that Simone de Beauvoir described the sense of otherness with which younger people view the elderly.

When a medieval audience viewed the cadaver tomb or read *contemptus mundi* material, the authors of the works would have failed in their purpose if their

¹⁰² Cited in Brown, P. (1981), *Cult of Saints*, p. 70.

audiences had received the piece with the same sense of otherness. In the medieval case the frisson was not the mere sight of corruption from a safe distance and the implied threat that if one was very unlucky this "might happen to you" as it is to a modern audience, but lies rather in the sure knowledge that "at any time", perhaps tomorrow, as the medieval authors frequently underlined, the viewer would most certainly at some stage be in the same putrefying condition, even perhaps, if one lived to be decrepit, while still alive.

In the second response to this question of medieval fascination with putrefaction, the analysis by Mary Douglas on the role of pollution in pre-modern societies is stimulating.¹⁰³ In contemporary society the products of corruption create unease and are cleansed mainly because of their known association with disease. The vectors of disease were not known in the Middle Ages and while the accumulation of filth in any society is likely to make life uncomfortable, and therefore removal desirable, the chronic anxiety surrounding the process and products of decay in the medieval period is likely to have been more complex than devotion to good housekeeping.

Mary Douglas suggests that primitive and historical societies (she does not refer to medieval society specifically) were made anxious by pollution because of the association of dirt with disorder. It is easy for a medievalist to apply this thinking to his period and feel comfortable. From the early Middle Ages the human body was used as an analogy for the "body politic": the head denoting the king, the limbs and organs the churchmen, magnates and labourers; all in proper relationship to each other and performing their appropriate functions.¹⁰⁴ There was deep concern about perceiving and maintaining that wholeness and order in society, the natural order which was ordained by God. Failure to maintain divine order brought chaos to the state and thereby to the individual. It is not

¹⁰³ Douglas, M., *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.

unreasonable to suggest therefore that portrayal of the putrefaction of the body stimulated the medieval mind at a deeper level than the prurient. It invoked fears of the breakdown of how the natural parts of the body politic related to each other, to God, and the consequences of this. This chimes with the view of the ageing body as a metaphor for original sin, a living symbol, according to St. Augustine's teaching, of the disharmony of function brought about by mankind's rebellion against God.

Huizinga's comment that interest in the macabre was a spasmodic reaction to over-sensuality introduces the third and most important reason for medieval fascination with decay. Spasmodic reactions to over-sensuality or over-complexity in religious practices are familiar features of medieval culture. Regrets concerning the loss of simplicity of former times and pleas for a return to the Christianity of the early Church are commonplace. Huizinga identifies the late Middle Ages as one such period in which there was a surge against the complexity of life. It is easy to digest his opinion that the quickening of the death-themes in art and literature at this time were in some part a reaction to another bout of over-sensuality as perceived by the times. It is the second part of Huizinga's remark that the medieval mind was so rigid that it could not look beyond the corpse on the tomb to realize that flowers would grow where corruption lay which requires testing.¹⁰⁵

The remark assumes that when a medieval person looked at a cadaver tomb he would do so in a sequence of only two stages. He would look first at the wholesome body above and then focus on the terrible scene below and absorb the message that this was the end of all flesh. But in following his ecclesiastical brief, the medieval artist may have intended a third stage of the sequence, that is that the viewer's eye should return to the intact body above; the purpose of the tombs

¹⁰⁴ The fifteenth-century English poet, John Gower wrote, "The king and his people are like the head and the body. Where the head is infirm the body is infirm", cited in Harriss, G. L., *Henry V: The Practice of Kingship*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1985, reprint 1991, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages*, p. 136.

are indeed to stimulate reflection on wholeness and disintegration but dynamically so, not unilaterally. They drew attention to the way of all flesh but the medieval observer would have been aware of the remedy for this disintegration: faith in God and the teaching of the Church. Huizinga allows only one half of this equation. Could it not also be allowed that the medieval mind would pass beyond the fearsome scene of the lower part of the cadaver tomb, as all of his Christian training would have urged him to do, and look beyond death to new life as Christ had commanded? The thirteenth-century poem by Thomas of Celano, *Dies Irae*, which is sung in the service of the dead is the literary counterpart of this interpretation of the message of the cadaver tombs. Quoting Matthew Arnold, W. S. Duffield comments that the poem was written in a century characterized by the “collision of great forces,” of Papacy and Empire, of the Crusades and the Mendicant orders.¹⁰⁶ The cadaver tombs and the *Dies Irae* also tell of the collision of great forces, of disintegration and wholeness, of death and renewal, of desolation and hope. The opening four verses of the *Dies Irae* and the last verse emphasize the raising of the dead.

1. <i>Dies irae, dies illa</i> <i>Solvat saeculum in favilla,</i> <i>Teste David cum Sybilla</i>	Day of wrath, thy fiery morning Earth consumes, no longer scorning David and the Sibyl's warning.
2. <i>Quantus tremor est futurus,</i> <i>Quando iudex est venturus,</i> <i>Cuncta stricte discussurus!</i>	Then what terror of each nation When the Judge shall take his station Strictly trying his creation!
3. <i>Tuba mirum sparget sonum</i> <i>Per sepulcra regionum,</i> <i>Coget omnes ante thronum.</i>	When the trumpet tone amazing, Through the tombs its message phrasing, All before the throne is raising.
4. <i>Mors stupebit et natura,</i> <i>Quum resurget creatura</i> <i>Judicanti responsura.</i>	Death and Nature he surprises Who, a creature, yet arises Unto those most dread assizes.
18. <i>Lachrymosa dies illa,</i> <i>Qua resurget ex favilla</i> <i>Judicandus homo reus;</i> <i>Huic ergo parce, Deus!</i>	O, that day so full of weeping When, in dust no longer sleeping, Man must face his worst behaviour! Therefore spare me, God and Saviour! ¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Duffield, S. W., *The Latin Hymn – Writers and Their Hymns*, New York ; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1889, p. 240.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 253-4.

The message of the cadaver tombs and the *Dies Irae* is that, for the elect, “flowers would grow where corruption lay”.¹⁰⁸ The medieval Christian was aware that God was as concerned with life and wholeness of the body as He was with death and would act through His saints to restore bodily health as the existence of so many healing-shrines indicates. The withered, dry, body of the aged man or the corpse would bloom again. Medieval people were mindful of this re-flowering. At the tomb of St. Severus, Gregory of Tours witnessed that dried-out lilies sprung to life every year, as an image of how “the man within ‘flourishes like a palm tree in paradise’”.¹⁰⁹

The somatic spirituality of the cadaver tombs, that is spirituality which is associated with the human body and the salvation of the individual rather than the salvation of mankind as a whole, emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Church began to emphasize the humanity of Christ in this period, particularly the vulnerability of his human body. Encouraged by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1090-1153) and St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), religious practices developed which were centred on the wounds of Christ’s hands, feet and side. Medieval Missals contained a mass in honour of “The Five Wounds of Christ” which was known as “The Golden Mass”. It was indulgenced by Pope Innocent VI (1362) and John XXII (1334). The earliest evidence of a feast in honour of the “Wounds of Christ” comes from fourteenth-century Thuringia and was kept on the Friday after the octave of Corpus Christi. In the fifteenth century it is recorded as being celebrated in Salisbury, England.¹¹⁰

In addition to this focus on the vulnerability of the body, the relationship of Christ to the individual was emphasized. In the final verse of the *Dies Irae* the

¹⁰⁸ See Huizinga’s quote that the medieval mind was incapable of perceiving that “flowers grow where corruption lay”, above, pp. 155-6.

¹⁰⁹ Cited in Brown, P. (1981), *Cult of Saints*, p. 76.

resurrected are called to the Judgement or Assize. Christ became the personal advocate of the sinner in this court of divine law before God the Father as Judge. A reflection of this new legal and personal complexion to the judgement of the soul after death can be found in the care which was taken by priests to “fit the punishment to the crime” in administering the Sacrament of Penance to individuals. Similarly, the response which the cadaver tombs evoked, was designed to be intensely personal. Some, in a painfully intimate exchange, carried a caption that invited the passerby to pause and reflect on the ultimate fate of his own body and soul and to pray for the individual whose remains lay in the tomb.

It is possible that this new focus on law and punishment, the body, and the individual had some effect on attitudes to the elderly. Many centuries earlier St Augustine had established that the ills which afflicted the bodies of elderly persons were not thought to be due entirely to original sin but also stemmed from a personal burden of sin.¹¹¹ In the heightened awareness of somatic spirituality from the twelfth century onwards, the body became, in certain circumstances, the mirror of personal sinfulness which threw an embarrassing public reflection on the state of the soul within. Specific sins were thought to invoke particular physical impressions. Sexual sin produced the disabilities of leprosy.¹¹² Avarice could “dry up the bones” drain away the vital moisture of life, thus causing premature ageing. Despair had a similar effect. Just as the leper was the half-dead exemplar of the consequences of sexual sin, the decrepit elderly person, the person who was suffering from a bad old age, was the half-dead exemplar of the fruits of a personally sinful life while those who remained healthy in old age, like Paul of Concordia (above, p. 80), were mirrors of an exemplary life unless they were in league with the devil. The fact that it is hard to find evidence of admiration or even pity for the decrepit in medieval literary sources seems to support this view.

¹¹⁰ From the Catholic Encyclopaedia, Electronic Version, New Advent, Inc. 1997, <http://www.csn.net/advent/cathen/15714a.htm>.

¹¹¹ Above, pp. 76ff.

The lack of pity towards the decrepit may be a reflection of medieval unease with liminal states of any kind. Grey areas, spiritual or physical, do not appeal to the medieval psyche. The idea of the human being in a liminal state, as a creature between life and death, has a long pedigree. Montague Summers has traced the history of the vampire from ancient civilizations through the medieval period to the present day.¹¹³ The vampire in this case is a more complex being than the blood-sucker of modern fiction, although it appears that from the earliest times the drinking of fresh blood (the bodily humour which is associated with the moist, hot, temperament of youth and prime) has been associated with the rejuvenation of failing or dead bodies.¹¹⁴

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie has reported stories concerning the living dead in his study of the rural medieval French community of Montaillou. Certain people of the community had the ability to communicate with the revenants:

Arnaude herself sees these souls ! They have flesh and bones and all their limbs: head, feet, hands and all the rest. They thus have a proper body; and they are thrown down from on high by the demons; they howl aloud; they grieve. And yet they can never die.¹¹⁵

The living-dead of Montaillou were recently deceased. They continued in this restless state between life and death for some weeks after their demise until they were released and received into a place of rest by the prayers and masses arranged by their living relatives. Those villagers who could communicate with them, such as Arnaude, reported that there were divisions of class and of age among them.

¹¹² For leprosy as a metaphor for sin, see Aelfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 1, p. 123.

¹¹³ Summers, M., "The Vampire" New York: Dorset Press, 1991, *The Origins of the Vampire*, pp. 1-76, ch. 1; see also, *The Canons of a Synod of Patrick, Auxilius, and Iserinus*, which anathematized those Christians who believed in vampires or witches; cited in *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, p. 78, no. 16.

¹¹⁴ Homer's *Odyssey* contains a passage in which Ulysses rejuvenates the dead by feeding them blood, Summers, *Vampire*, p. 15.

¹¹⁵ Le Roy Ladurie, E., *Montaillou : Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294-1324*, tr. Bray, B., Harmondsworth: Penguin; Peregrine, 1987, p. 345.

The “young” dead were in the majority and were aggressive towards the “elderly” dead:

There was a violent conflict of generations between old people, who were very oppressed, and young people, who were very aggressive; the young were present in large numbers for people died early in those days. The elderly dead were buffeted about and trodden underfoot by the youthful dead; or else they were so light that the wind blew them away like poppy-seeds, until they were trodden down again by the mass of other ‘doubles’.¹¹⁶

Even in death, it seems that the elderly were despised. The reason for the inter-generational tension expressed in these stories may lie in the “frèrèche” system of land-holding which prevailed in Languedoc at this time. In this type of arrangement the family land was jointly held with parents, children, sons and daughters-in-law all living under the same roof, presided over by the patriarch who controlled the family’s means. This family structure must have caused tensions between the older and younger members of the group. The unenviable status of the elderly dead in Montaignou’s supernatural tales may be wishful thinking on the part of the young. The treatment of the elderly dead is an indication of the bitterness of the community that so many people died before reaching maturity and still in thrall to elderly relatives. The aged died having had their fill of life and in a sense having robbed or drained the young dead of their due.

The living dead were in a liminal state, more dead perhaps than alive. The aged decrepit, by some of the accounts in the literature which has been discussed in this chapter, were also in a liminal state although perhaps slightly more alive than dead. In addition to calling old age a “healthful sickness”, Vincent of Beauvais also called it “a living death”.¹¹⁷

There is evidence that both types of liminality generated unease. The half dead and the half alive were in the same accursed condition. Death would not invite

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 346.

¹¹⁷ Above, p. 55.

them to the dance, the earth rejected the weary creatures and nature refused to play her part. It may be recalled that according to Catholic thought, ageing was natural in the sense that the body had to decay and return to the earth like a seed before the growth of the new man could occur. It was highly abnormal and perhaps a sign of supernatural punishment for a very old man to linger on.¹¹⁸

There are fearful laments over the unnatural stasis of the half dead elderly in medieval literature. Death's tendency to refuse the world-weary and prey on the vital instead evoked bitterness and horror. In the English thirteenth-century poem "Le Regret de Maximian" death does not obey the wishes of man. Death would be welcome to the weary, but their prayers are denied. Death is generous where it is an object of sorrow.¹¹⁹

To the aged, death is not necessarily an object of sorrow. It only becomes an object of sorrow when it rejects the weary, which in the case of old age, is the decrepit elderly. A bad and prolonged old age in this view is punishment for personal sins, the repulsiveness of which even death is reluctant to tolerate. This attitude to old age is described in Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale". Three young men who are searching for Death in order to kill him come instead upon a wizened old man. They ask him belligerently why he has lived so long and the ancient replies:

For I ne kan nat fynde
 A man, though that I walked into Ynde,
 Neither in citee ne in no village,
 That wolde chaunge his youthe for myn age;
 And therefore moot I han myn age stille,
 As longe tyme as it is Goddes wille.
 Ne Deeth, allas! ne wol nat han my lyf
 Thus walke I, lyk a resteless kaityf,
 And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
 I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
 And seye "Leeve mooder, leet me in!
 Lo how I vanysse, flessh, and blood, and skyn!
 Allas! whan shul my bones been at reste?
 Mooder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste
 That in my chambre longe tyme hath be,

¹¹⁸ See Psalm 90:10, "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow."

¹¹⁹ Brown, (1932), *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*, pp. 92-100.

Ye, for an heyre clowt to wrappe in me!"
 But yet to me she wol nat do that grace
 For which ful pale and welked is my face.¹²⁰

As Nitecki has said in her paper on images of old age in fourteenth-century literature, the relationship between the old man and death in the "Pardoner's Tale" is instructive. The longing for death, which the pallid old man mentions, is derived from Maximian. In the "Pardoner's Tale" however, death has cruelly rejected the old man. Death avoids him, and the old man's mother, the earth, will not receive him. His fellow humans, the three youths, are no kinder; they are unsympathetic and aggressive. This is a desolate picture of advanced old age. It is usually assumed that death is the benefactor of advanced old age. It enters and relieves the suffering which is so vividly described in the medieval literature of ageing, but in the "Pardoner's Tale" Death's attitude is the cause of old age; the refusal of Death's attention is the source of old age and the old man's suffering. In keeping with this line of thinking, youth is also responsible for suffering in old age. The old man says that he cannot die because he has never found a man who would exchange youth for age. Youth would have a world rid of death and the old man is an example of the horrible consequences of this wish. Chaucer's youths express the tension between youth and age by mistakenly accusing the old man of being in league with death. The youths think that he has been buying time for himself by plotting with death to kill younger folk,

For soothly thou art oon of his assent
 To sleen us yonge folk, thou false theef!¹²¹

Thus, the old man is Death's agent, who thieves time from the young.

This chilling view of old age, as one who steals time, draws life-blood from the young, may be the attitude which informed the storytellers of Montailou. A similar horror of liminal beings is evident in the legend of "The Three Living and

¹²⁰ *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 152, lines 721-738.

the Three Dead”.¹²² In this piece the dead do not come to steal from the living but to serve them by issuing a warning. The story is the theme of a popular woodcut by Guy Marchant (1485) and of earlier wall paintings, tapestries and illuminated books. The subject is the surprise meeting between three young gallants who are out hunting and three animated corpses. The revenants chastise the gallants for their loose way of life and remind them that inevitably they will themselves become corpses one day. The caption which accompanies the scene is always a variation on, “As we are so shall you be”. As Binski has remarked, the feckless youths are brutally “exposed to the naked truth of time”.¹²³

It is notable that Pope Innocent III used identical language when he confronts his readers not only with death but with the gruesome portrait of an old man. In *De miseria condicionis humane*, Innocent says, “.for we are what he was, someday will be what he is”.¹²⁴ This particular work supports the view that the very old man and the revenant may have been closely related in the medieval mind. The horrors of the decomposition of death and the horrors of the decomposition of old age are juxtaposed to jolt the reader into the realization of his own mortality. It is not suggested that Innocent draws attention to old age in itself to stimulate penitence and amendment of life. Old age is a secondary theme in the *contemptus mundi* genre but he does present old age as the mirror in which the awful consequences of death are magnified and brought closer to the reader.

The last type of medieval source designed to remind mankind of mortality to be considered in this chapter is the Danse Macabre. This is a generic title which refers to the artistic, literary or dramatic representation of a procession involving the living of various estates and the figure of Death which is represented by an animated skeleton. The living figures are static in the artistic representations but the figure of Death, which accompanies each living role, has its limbs disposed in

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153, lines 758-9.

¹²² For the background of this legend, see, “Encountering the Macabre: The Three Living and the Three Dead”, in Binski, *Medieval Death*, pp. 134-138.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

an attitude suggesting rhythm which accounts for the illusion of a grim dance. The origin of the word “macabre” is disputed. Possible solutions are that it may be derived from the surname of the original author of the “Danse Macabre”, or that it is derived from the Arabic word, “makabir”, meaning cemetery.¹²⁵

Versions of the Dance appear in various milieux throughout western Europe from the fifteenth century onwards. It is found in northern France, in a painted version on the walls of the charnel house of the “Cemetery of the Innocents” in Paris where it is believed to have originated although this is disputed.¹²⁶

The dancers fall into two categories according to their estate or chronological age: “Bothe yong and olde, of lowe and hy parage”.¹²⁷ The creators of the works were at pains to convey that death invited all conditions of mankind to the Dance. Both genders are represented. Ecclesiastics usually lead the procession in descending order of importance: Pope, Cardinal, Bishop, Abbot, Monk, Priest, Hermit are followed by or intermingled with Emperor, Empress, King, Queen, with various other classes of noble, academic, and tradespeople following behind.

The Dance was less popular in England than on the continent and there are only two extant insular painted versions. One, in Hexham Abbey, Northumberland, dates from the fifteenth century consisting of four roles: Pope, Cardinal, Emperor and King. The other is found in the Parish Church of Newark-on-Trent where only one role remains, that of a young nobleman. Secondary sources reveal that there were other British examples which are lost.¹²⁸ An English literary version of the Dance has survived in part. The author is the English Dominican, John

¹²⁴ Innocent, *De miseria*, p. 108.

¹²⁵ For the etymology of “macabre”, see, Clark, J. M., *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Glasgow : Jackson, Glasgow Univ. Publications, 1950, Appendix B, p. 119.

¹²⁶ For a list of English printed versions of the *Danse Macabre*, see *The Dance of Death*, ed. Warren, F. and White, B., London, EETS, no. 181, Oxford Univ. Press, 1931 (for 1929), pp. 107-9.

¹²⁷ *English Verse Between Chaucer and Surrey: being examples of conventional secular poetry*, ed. Hammond, E. P., Durham N. C.: Duke Univ. Press; London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1927, p. 131, line 8.

¹²⁸ See Clark, *Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, pp. 10 ff.

Lydgate. Lydgate's verses accompanied a painted version on the north cloister wall of Old St Paul's Cathedral. The wall was dismantled in 1549, and so the illustrations are lost, but Lydgate's verses were recorded. The poem begins by informing the reader that his verses are a translation of those which the author saw on a wall in Paris. It is reasonably safe to assume that Lydgate's work is the English translation of the Les Innocents version of the "Danse Macabre". The author warns the reader that they are not an exact translation. The Englishman added four roles to those which are known to have appeared at Les Innocents. These are a Princess, a Gentlewoman, Mr. John Rikill (Henry V's jester) and a Juror.¹²⁹

Lydgate's English poem will be used as the basis for examining themes of age in the Danse Macabre with material from other versions where this is appropriate. One other version of the Dance will be considered in detail. It is not English but it was widely copied and is the best source on the treatment of age in any of the mortality-related material which has been discussed in this chapter. It is "The Danse Macabre of Women".¹³⁰

The "A" version of Lydgate's "Danse Macabre" consists of eighty-four verses. They follow the usual scheme of a dialogue between Death and the invitee to the Dance. Death beckons each person and the individual involved responds. Seven of the verses are spoken in the voice of the Translator, one in that of the Author (a male authority figure which appears in some form in the Dances even in the "Danse Macabre des Femmes"). At the end of the English poem, a figure called Macabre le Docteur, who is similar in tone to the author, underlines the lesson that life is fragile and that the wise lay up treasure for themselves in heaven and

¹²⁹ There are two recensions of the English poem by Lydgate, A and B versions. The "A" version which is referred to here is from the manuscript, "Selden supra 53" of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, in Hammond, *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey*, pp. 131-142. Other manuscripts of the "A" version were also consulted, MSS Ellesmere 26/A.13 and Landesdowne 699, in Warren and White, *Dance of Death*.

¹³⁰ *Danse Macabre of Women*, ed. Tukey Harrison, A. with Hindman, S. L., Kent, Ohio; London: Kent State Univ. Press, 1994. See also, Wemple, S. F. and Kaiser, D. A., "Death's Dance of Women", in *Jnl. Med. Hist.*, vol. 12, 1986, pp. 333-343.

not on earth. The sequence of thirty-five roles is as follows: Translator, Pope, Emperor, Cardinal, King, Patriarch, Constable, Archbishop, Baron, Princess, Bishop, Squire, Abbot, Abbess, Bailiff, Astronomer, Burgess, Canon Secular, Merchant, Carthusian, Sergeant, Monk, Usurer and Poor Man, Amorous Squire, Gentlewoman, Man of Law, John Rikill, Parson, Juror, Minstrel, Labourer, Friar Minor, Child, Young Clerk, Hermit King Eaten of Worms, and Macabre le Docteur.

It is surprising, considering the nature of the work and the variety of the characters, that none of the roles describe an aged person specifically. It may be that internal evidence in the verses concerning the Hermit and the Labourer imply that they are old since they have spent a long time in their respective occupations; but neither Death nor the characters themselves comment on their age.

Youth has much greater importance in the poem than old age. The Amorous Squire and the Gentlewoman are both described as “of yeres yonge... in oure grene age”.¹³¹ Again, in verses seventy-three to seventy-four, it is to youth that the reader’s attention is drawn. Death takes a newborn infant. This is the only role in which Death shows any pity to his partner. He even offers the infant some consolation in saying, “Litel enfante that were but late yborn... Who lengest lyveth moost shall suffre woo”.¹³² According to Death a long life is woeful, not to be desired.

This unusual pity for the very young can be found in an even more poignant image in a pictorial version of the Dance on the walls of the fourteenth-century Abbey of La Chaise-Dieu in the Auvergne. In this painting the infant appears in swaddling near the end of the sequence. The baby is lying on the earth and Death stoops down to him in a tender gesture. He hides his eyes to avoid frightening the baby. The absence of fear on the infant’s part is obvious. In his reply to Death he

¹³¹ Hammond, *English Verse Between Chaucer and Surrey*, p. 138, vs. 55-56.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 140, v. 73.

says nonchalantly, "I cam but nowe and nowe I goo my way... The wil of god no man with stonde may. As sone dieth a yonge man as an old".¹³³ The child has no fear of dying because he has no fearful personal burden of sin and he has had no time to grow attached to the world. His parting is easy. Death consoles the child by repeating that it is he who lives longest who has the greatest woe.

Death's attitude in this piece is reminiscent of that expressed by the Anglo-Saxon homilist, Aelfric. Everyone desires that he may live long, but: "What is it to live long but long to toil."¹³⁴ The reader could perhaps be forgiven for envying the child his detachment. It is only the roles who are in a similar state of innocence to the infant who greet Death with serenity but none of these are age-linked in Lydgate's verses. The Hermit, the Carthusian, the Friar and the Labourer have all led toil-filled lives and all are reasonably sanguine at Death's approach, although the Hermit remarks that no man is entirely fearless at the moment of death.

The principal feature of Lydgate's poem (and it can be assumed that this was also the case at Les Innocents) with regard to old age is its absence. Youth appears three times. The verses given to youth are also the most emotional in the poem. This is true in the majority of the medieval versions. Clark has composed a list of the roles of eight separate Dances (the woodcut by Hans Holbien has been included for contrast although this is strictly early modern since it dates from 1538.)¹³⁵ An examination of these for roles on old age and youth produced the following results:

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 141, v. 74, lines 591-2.

¹³⁴ Aelfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 1 p. 491.

¹³⁵ Clark, *Dance of Death in the Middle Ages*, pp. 114-118.

Description	Total Number of Roles	Age-Related Roles
Basel (Klingenthal Convent), Kleinbasel	Thirty-nine	Youth, child.
Grossbasel (Dominican Cemetery)	Thirty-nine	Youth, mother and child.
Berlin	Twenty-eight	Mother and child.
Kermaria (Brittany)	Twenty-three	None
La Chaise-Dieu	Twenty-four	Infant, old woman. ¹³⁶
Blockbook, edited by Guy Marchant.	Forty	Infant.
Dansa De La Muerte, Spanish Poem.	Thirty-four	None
Blockbook, Der Doten Dantz Mit Figuren	Thirty-eight	Young noble, youth, infant.
Holbein, Lyons 1538, 1 st ed.	Forty-one	Old woman, old man, child.

Table 1. Age-Related Roles in Eight Versions of the Danse Macabre

Out of a combined figure of three hundred and six figures (a mother and child is taken as one role) only three represent old age. The only medieval figure of age, at La Chaise-Dieu, may not be of an aged person at all and both of the other figures are from the early modern period.¹³⁷

There is no mystery about the absence of old age in the medieval Dances. The voice of the Translator in Lydgate's poem says plainly that the purpose of the work is to "shewe this worlde is but a pilgrimage. Ove vn to vs our lyvves to correcte".¹³⁸ The authors of the Dances used an analogy of St. Augustine's in the "City of God" to emphasize that the pilgrimage of life was a long distance for some and shorter for others and that some people (perhaps the majority) had less time than the Biblical three score years and ten to complete the journey.

¹³⁶ According to Clark, the role of the old woman (la vieille) is disputed. The painting is indistinct here and the role appears in the position usually occupied by the physician. It has been suggested that the figure may represent a lay-brother; see, Clark, *The Dance of Death*, p. 117, No. (16).

¹³⁷ Elizabethan and later versions of the *Danse Macabre* include old age in the procession of dancers; see Gray, D., "Death and the Last Things" in *Themes and Images in the Medieval Religious Lyric*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, plate 12, "A Song of Death", facing p. 215.

¹³⁸ Hammond, *English Verse Between Chaucer and Surrey*, p. 131, v. 5.

Time haunts the reader of macabre literature but not a normal lifespan of it. It is extremes of time which bedevil the medieval person: too little of it or too much of it. In the former case, the youthful amorous squire in Lydgate's poem has just enough time to know the pleasures of life before he is called away by Death. In the latter, Chaucer's old man in the "Pardoner's Tale" has had too much time. Both situations are horrible to contemplate. In contrast there is nothing macabre in living a normal lifespan, nothing to threaten the living in the prospect of seventy years or so to correct faults and so old age sits out most of the Dances. Old Age is the prize which Death denies the dancers and where Death is apologetic for doing so, as in the case of the infant, he belittles the prize.¹³⁹ He says that a long life is only more to suffer as he leads the baby away.

The recurrent theme of the Danse Macabre, which emphasizes daily repentance because a long life cannot be relied on, is also evident in medieval sermons. The young are constantly reminded that they might not live to be old and even if they do survive, old age is nothing more than a living death:

"Thise yonge peple weneth that thei shall never die, and specially afore that thei be old! And treuly thei ben oft beguiled." They protest: "I am yonge yett. When I drawe to age I will amend me."¹⁴⁰

Thenkyth how a man is borne febull, and seke, and naked, and pore; and how he gothe yche day a jounay towards his deth, woll he, nyll he; and how that, at the last, dethe comythe and castythe hym downe seke yn hys bed, gronyng and sykyng...¹⁴¹

A good death in healthy old age which could be foreseen and prepared for was presented as the reward of a saintly life which very few could hope for. The "Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church" portray the death of the Apostle John in this way:

¹³⁹ Cf. the more aggressive attitude of old age in relation to death in the Renaissance painting *Death and the Three Ages of Woman* by Hans Baldung Grien, below, pp. 178-80.

¹⁴⁰ "MS. Roy. 18. B. xxxiii, fol. 145; also fol. 142", cited in Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England*, p. 341.

¹⁴¹ *Mirk's Festial*, p. 84.

When the apostle was ninety-nine years old the Lord Christ appeared to him with the other apostles, whom he had taken from this life, and said, "John come to me; it is time that thou with thy brethren shouldst feast at my banquet." ... The apostle greatly rejoiced at the promise, and at sunrise early rising came to the church, and from cock-crowing until the third hour, taught God's law, and sang mass to them, and said, that the Saviour called him to heaven on that day. He then ordered his grave to be dug opposite the altar...¹⁴²

The sermon underlines that it is only a Christian of the highest calibre who would be granted such an orderly death in extreme old age. The relative absence of old age in the *Danse Macabre* and the recurrent theme of death in youth in both the Dance and related sermon material confirm that in the medieval period there was no great sense of loss regarding death in old age. It was the duty of the elderly to be resigned to death. The *Danse Macabre* reveals the intimacy of medieval society's acquaintance with death and of the overpowering sense of helplessness which they experienced in relation to mortality. With the exception of the infant, Death is pitiless to the dancers. He pursues them with a relentless black humour. They become his defenceless prey. In a sense it is only the elderly among all the possible roles in the *Danse Macabre* who are not Death's victims. Old people have gambled with Death and achieved a measure of success, therefore, they are written out of the Dances.

The attitude to death and old age in the *Danse Macabre* is evidence of the contrast between the medieval perspective of death and that of early modern society. The former is fatalistic and accepting of the consequences of original sin. Subsequent generations have struggled against the idea of ageing and death. A comment is necessary, therefore, on whether the relatively more abundant presence of old age as a role in early modern versions of the *Danse Macabre* is indicative of the turning point between the passive attitudes to ageing which prevailed during the Middle Ages and those which followed.

¹⁴² Aelfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 1, p. 75.

The society of the Renaissance was largely uncomfortable with old age. With a few exceptions, views on ageing were garnered from Hellenic society's horror of ugliness and from Roman satirists, Plautus, Juvenal, and from Maximian whose old men, as already discussed, (above, pp.138-9.) were dribbling lechers and misers.¹⁴³ In a period which is characterized by the notion of re-birth and wholeness, youth, beauty and vigour, were honoured and their opposites despised. It was also a time in which educated men were beginning to believe that mankind could master its own destiny. The early modern inclusion of old age in Death's Dance suggests that the elderly were no longer regarded as they were in the medieval period, as having achieved a measure of success in gambling with Death. Medieval submissiveness to death's inevitable victory had been replaced by the struggle against mortality; in the cultural climate of the Renaissance, death in old age was as much of a defeat as death in infancy. Georges Minois describes the new attitude:

Was it not a cause of despair for humanists to know that ageing and death were to render all their intellectual achievements vain ?.....The Renaissance conducted a bitter struggle against old age, employing every available means to prolong youth and life: medicine, magic, witchcraft, fountains of youth and utopia, all in vain;.....old people's faces were henceforth to be viewed as death masks.¹⁴⁴

Minois' view of the rising interest in this period in the features of old age is supported by the increase of illustrations of the elderly by Renaissance artists.¹⁴⁵ Yet two paintings by Hans Baldung Grien (1484/5-1545) give pause to accepting his opinion of Renaissance attitudes to ageing in its entirety. It may be that an individual's attitude to old age was a matter of his current age in years rather than the age in which he lived. Both of Baldung Grien's paintings depict three stages

¹⁴³ For confirmation of Renaissance attitudes to ageing, see Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 249 ff. For ancient Greek attitudes, *ibid.*, ch. 3, p. 43ff, and Richardson, B. E., *Old Age Among the Ancient Greeks*, N.Y.: AMS Press, 1969 (reprint).

¹⁴⁴ Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 249-50.

¹⁴⁵ Holbein's inclusion of old age in his woodcut of the *Danse Macabre* has already been noted. Cf., Donatello, *Magdalene* [in old age], 1453-55, gilt and painted wood, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence; Albrecht Durer, *Portrait of Durer's Father at Seventy*, 1497, oil on panel,

in the life of woman. One is entitled “Death and the Three Ages of Woman”, dated 1510-11 (Figure 1) and the other entitled, “Death and the Ages of Woman” was produced between 1541 and 1544 (Figure 2). Neither suggest a revolution in attitudes to death but the earlier picture hints at a certain aggressiveness in the face of death which is entirely absent from medieval work, and the latter is unusual vis-à-vis the illustrations in the *Danse Macabre* in that it focuses on old age as the means of death.

The first painting, produced when the artist was about twenty-six years of age, shows three stages in the life of the same woman: a female infant, a maiden and an old woman. A triumphant corpse is holding an hour-glass in one hand above the heads of the females while its other hand is engaged in binding them in a diaphanous winding-sheet.

The attitudes of the two younger figures in this painting are reminiscent of those of various ages in the medieval *Danse Macabre*. The child sees Death and retreats behind a section of the winding-sheet (there is no sense of pity for the baby in this case), while the maiden, the symbol of vanity, is too absorbed by her reflection in a hand-mirror to notice that her time has come. In contrast, the attitude of the old woman is not found in medieval work. Her body is aged but the muscles of her legs are well-defined and suggest strength as she strides aggressively towards Death. One of the elderly woman’s hands attempts to draw the maiden’s attention from the mirror while her other hand thrusts Death’s arm away. If Death is allowed to take the maiden he will cheat the older woman of her existence therefore the figure representing old age struggles with Death in an attempt to challenge his power. This is in keeping with Minois’s description of Renaissance attitudes.

However, Baldung Grien emphasized the futility of this struggle when he returned to the same theme in 1541-45 shortly before his own death at the age of sixty-one. The later painting shows three women standing in the light of the moon. The first figure is an infant of moribund demeanour lying upon the earth. The second figure is youthful, naked, beautiful, but her face is anxious. The third woman is old, angular, pendulous, and noticeably physically weaker than the elderly woman in the earlier work. She is walking arm-in-arm with a tattered corpse who, as in the work of 1510-11, is carrying an hour-glass. The moon under which the figures stand is a symbol of mutability, particularly feminine mutability.

This second painting of Baldung Grien's is reminiscent of the theme of the medieval sculpture of "Lady World" in Worms Cathedral¹⁴⁶ where one view of the statue is of a lovely woman, while the rear shows the ravages of time in the same person – beauty turned to dust. The difference in the two works, Renaissance and medieval, lies in the presence of old age in the former as the means by which the transformation took place and the absence of any vector of decay in the latter. Similarly, none of the roles in the Danse Macabre indicate the cause of the victim's death or mention the following decay; only the bare fact of death is imparted to the audience. In the painting of 1541-44 the maiden is aware of the proximity of Death and Old Age and her face is anxious as she contemplates the hour-glass and her wizened companions. This could be interpreted in two ways: by looking back towards the medieval attitude to death or forward to that of the Renaissance. The former case recalls the message of "The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead". The young woman may be reminded that "as they are so shall she be" and that it is time to repent even in youth. In the latter case it could be assumed that the artist meant to convey that she is simply wasting her time in thinking ahead, and that she should enjoy life while it is in bloom.

¹⁴⁶ Above, p. 158.

It is notable in the later painting, in contrast to that of 1510-11, that Death and the Old Woman are companionable. They are linked arm in arm; there is no sense of aggression. The old woman places her arm around the maiden's shoulders in a gesture of surrender which hints that late in life Hans Baldung Grien had embraced the passivity towards death which is a feature of the medieval period. If in the early picture Old Age strikes a suitable Renaissance attitude in becoming Death's opponent, in the later one she is his medieval companion in arms.

Unusually, old age is prominent in one fifteenth-century version of the *Danse Macabre*. This is the "Danse Macabre of Women". It is a singular document in that all thirty-six roles (thirty in some versions) are feminine and of these, four are aged.

It is conceded that the "Danse Macabre of Women" may say more about late medieval attitudes to women than old age. Women are a convenient symbol of the transformation of beauty to decay. In an age fond of extremes, women provided two: the angel in youth and the witch in old age. Soft, warm and luscious in youth; wormy, cold, and dry in old age.

The borders to the illustration of each role in this manuscript carry motifs of caterpillars, butterflies and strawberries. The strawberry is a symbol of the transience of feminine beauty. In the Middle Ages it is a fruit which appeared only for a few brief weeks in the warmth of summer. Its flesh is soft and luscious. Thus the heat and moisture of the high summer of life of the medieval physiologists is embodied in the strawberry. It is fragile, easily bruised, inviting when fully ripe but rots quickly.

The caterpillar and the butterfly are obvious enough references to the soul in its pupal stage, encased and earthbound, then, after death, full, exquisite and free. These three images represent the reversal of the main theme of the manuscript which is death and the subsequent rotting which will take place in the tomb. They

are further evidence that, as discussed above, macabre material was designed to be read or observed in the knowledge that God had promised new life.

The “Danse Macabre of Women” was a popular work and survives in five manuscripts and two printed editions (Marchant, 1486, 1491.) The earliest manuscript is dated 1482. It post-dates The “Danse Macabre of Les Innocents” and follows it in structure. Each role is addressed by the skeleton, Death, and the dancer replies in the following verse. A colour illustration accompanies each character. The purpose of The “Dance of Women” is identical to all the other versions. It is to instruct the reader that since death cannot be resisted and may strike at any time and any class of person, the wise woman should be in a constant state of readiness.

The roles are divided into two categories according to estate and are subdivided in terms of proximity to death in the chronological sense. The elders dance with death first. The upper class ladies are arranged in the order: dames followed by demoiselles. The lower classes reflect the stages of a woman’s life in relation to marriage in reverse order, thus: veuves, mariés and pucelles.

The poem begins with verses from four lively skeleton musicians who address general remarks to the audience about the fragility of life. This is followed by a male voice of authority, which advises women to think of their souls and reform their lives. The main Dance begins with the Queen. The first role that is of interest concerning age follows the Queen; this is the Duchess (Figure 3):

Death

And, next, Madame Duchess,
I come to seek and find you.
Think no more of riches
Or amassing goods and jewels.
Today you must die,
Because your life is over.
It is madness to covet so much.

All one takes away is the deed well done.

The Duchess

I am not yet thirty.
 Alas, when I am just beginning
 To know what a good time really is,
 Death comes to take away my pleasure
 I have such important friends
 Delights, amusements, such fun people,
 That's why the dance is so displeasing to me.
 Wealthy people die thus in mid life.¹⁴⁷

The menacing attitude of Death (“I come to seek and find you”) is a common feature of the genre. The Duchess is not old but it is clear that she is avaricious. Death chides her for coveting so much. In addition to wealth and important friends, the Duchess covets the years which Death is stealing from her. She is peevish in her response to Death’s invitation: “I am not yet thirty”. This is a rare direct reference to chronological age in relation to life expectancy. It is evident that, given her due, the Duchess and the audience expected that she would live another thirty years or so. She says at the end of her verse that she is only in the middle of life. It suggests too, that in the upper classes at least, thirty was not considered to be an advanced age for a woman at this time. It appears that the perfect age of the poets, that is the early-to mid-thirties, was the same for men and women.

Death’s charge of avarice, a sin which is usually associated with old age, also deserves some comment. In the two printed versions of the “Dance of Women”, avarice is a sin which is attributed to women in general of all ages and of all estates. Diverse occupations such as the Merchant Woman, the Hostess, the Resaleswoman, the Shepherdess and the Wetnurse all carry a bulging purse at their waist, the common signifier of avarice. The Young Girl, the Pregnant Woman and the Spinster are similarly attired. The manuscript versions attenuate this view a little since fewer occupations carry purses. In the edition under

¹⁴⁷ *Danse Macabre of Women*, p. 54.

discussion in this chapter, only the Merchant Woman and the Old Servant Woman are associated with avarice as an indication of the nature of their occupations rather than their age.¹⁴⁸

The second role with a specific interest in age is the unusual figure of the female Theologian (Figure 4):

Death

Won't you say anything new,
Madame Theologian,
About the Old or New Testament ?
You see how I lead you away
And you are already very old.
It is good to recognize this
And to take the trouble to die well.
It is a great thing to know yourself.

Theologian

A woman who speaks as a member of the clergy,
To have a following or to be listened to,
Is one of the codfish on the Petit Pont
Who have large eyes and see nothing.
Wise is the one who sails smoothly around,
And the one who wants to know too much is a noisy calf.
Rising high often costs dearly.
We are all blind in our own needs.¹⁴⁹

Death calls the Theologian, “already very old,” but there is no mention of the woman’s age in years. Her verse suggests that she was licensed to teach theology. It has been noted in Chapter One above (p. 39) that in England authority to teach theology was not given before the age of thirty-five years. The Theologian must therefore have been at least this age if the same rules applied in France. It is noticeable that in the illustrations of the other aged roles in this Dance, the faces and clothes of the subject are in keeping with an elderly person. This is not true of the Theologian. In the accompanying illustration she looks no older than the Duchess or the newly-wed. Her body is not withered. She wears modish clothes

¹⁴⁸ For comments on avarice, see *Danse Macabre of Women*, pp. 18, 21.

and an attractive girdle. This poses the question whether in this case Death is referring to age in years or to age in the sense of her advanced education. In her illustration the Theologian carries a large heavy-looking book. The Abbess, the Prioress, the Hypocrite and the Old Servant also carry books but, except in the case of the Old Servant, whose book is a symbol of her false accounting, they seem less of a burden. Perhaps the Theologian is carrying the weight of hours of ceaseless study rather than of years in life. The Theologian is not physically old but she is wise beyond her years.

Death is as dismissive of her femininity as he is of her learning. Study, he suggests has aged her prematurely. In exhorting her to die well, by reason of her age, he is probably referring to the *Ars moriendi* with which as an educated woman and teacher, the Theologian would have been well acquainted. He is telling her to practise what she preached. The Theologian's reply concurs with Death's opinions. At the end of her life she gives the impression to the reader that she has wasted it in study. She admits that she is a cold fish with large eyes that are dead to the important things in life. It is a noisy calf, one who bellows but lacks strength that wants to know too much.

Other clerical women in the Dance are dealt with in a kindlier way. The Prioress has spent her life in good works and pious reading but not in exemplification. She is serene as she meets Death. The source of Death's attitude that too much study has an ageing, withering, effect on women does not lie in the mere practice of studying or in the usurpation of a male role (several of the women's' occupations could be said to do this). It may spring from discomfort concerning the idea of an opinionated woman who uses her learning to teach men. However, Death has the last word and the Theologian acknowledges her mistake.

Death is less contemptuous of the next old woman he invites to the dance. This is the Old Debutante (Figure 5). The illustration accompanying this role, in contrast

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 78.

to that of the Theologian, shows a figure with a physically old body. Her face and neck are lined. She has heavy brows, a sharp nose and a drooping mouth. She wears the “hennin” a horned headdress which was already twenty years out of fashion at the time the manuscript was published.¹⁵⁰

Death

Debutante from the good old days
 With all your old-fashioned headdresses
 It is time for you to come.
 Nature has run its course in you.
 You can't live forever
 I look ahead, come along,
 And don't linger too long.
 Old women are close to death.

Debutante

I have surely over-stayed my time
 And would rather die
 Than review the past
 And go through so much misery.
 I have seen poor people languish
 And other things I keep to myself.
 Children, to live and die well
 There is no greater blessing than peace.

The verses recall one of the universal criticisms of old people found in medieval literature, the habit of recalling the past. The Old Debutante has not moved with the times. Her mind is backward looking, a trait perhaps symbolized by her out-of-date headgear. Death cannot steal time from the Aged Debutante. He says regretfully, “Nature has run its course in you”. In this role Death is a benefactor. He offers the Old Debutante more than she must leave behind. He counsels her to look ahead. He draws her to a new horizon, “Do not linger too long” he advises her gently. To the younger women, the attitude of death is that of a sinister stranger but to this sad aged lady who is already alienated from the world around her by the passage of time, he is almost kindred. Unlike the old man in the “Pardoner’s Tale”, who suffers because Death has rejected him, Death comes to

¹⁵⁰ *Danse Macabre of Women*, p. 84, n. 2.

the Old Debutante as a suitor. Death tells her tenderly that old women are close to him.

The Debutante's response is an essay in medieval attitudes to a "good old age". She abjures all the traits which are revealed in popular literature as irritating to the young. As a good old woman she sees no point in endlessly rehearsing the past; she would rather die. She apologizes for living too long. Her family need not feel guilty because she is weary of the world. As the *Ars moriendi* advises, she intends to make a peaceful death without any fuss. The verse is a lesson on how an aged person should keep her own counsel and take her departure without regret before she becomes a burden to herself and others.

The Old Debutante represents the first stage of old age in which the afflictions of the condition (loquaciousness and attachment to the past) are predominantly psychological. The following aged role, that of "the Old Woman on Crutches" (Figure 6), develops the portrait of old age in this "Dance" to include the decrepit stage which the Old Debutante has spared herself by dying. The final stage, as usual, is marked by a heightening of both physical and mental affliction. The Old Woman on Crutches is wrinkled, shabbily dressed, and hobbles after Death on sticks:

Death

Come along, poor Old Woman on Crutches.
 You can't support yourself.
 You have no pleasure here on earth.
 So it's best for you to come.
 The other world is in the future
 When for your pain and misery you can attain great wealth.
 God repays everyone in glory.

Old Woman on Crutches

I see nothing good in old age,
 Therefore I'm not afraid of Death.
 For ten years I've had gout
 And I'm troubled by illness.
 My friends aren't nice to me,

And I'm not worth two silver coins.
 God alone is my complete comfort.
 After the rain comes fair weather.¹⁵¹

As in the previous role, Death is not threatening but neither is he tender; his tone, if anything, is weary. He bids the old lady who has no pleasures left in life to have hope (loss of which is the principal affliction of decrepitude) in the future. In this poem, Death reveals that the physical pains of extreme old age are signs of grace and not of sin. They are suffering borne in Christ's name and will be rewarded by God.¹⁵²

In keeping with the Old Debutante and the old man of the "Pardoner's Tale", the Old Woman on Crutches welcomes Death. She longs for him as a physician who will relieve her suffering. Her crutches represent her inability to support herself physically, emotionally or financially. Her friends treat her badly because she has no money and perhaps a tendency to complain. Wealth could ease the burden of old age but it could not buy tenderness and companionship. The impoverished old person could expect little pity.

Although Death showed uncharacteristic pity to the Debutante and the Cripple, it is evident later in the Dance that old age alone was not enough to secure his compassion. The two aged roles which follow are examples of what the readers might consider to be a bad old age. In the entire "Danse Macabre of Women", there are only three thoroughly negative roles. These are: the Prostitute (Figure 7), the Witch (Figure 8) and Lady Languid (Figure 9).

Lady Languid resembles the Old Woman on Crutches in that she walks with a stoop and requires a stick for support. Like the Theologian she carries a burden in the form of a large book; in this case it is the symbol of craftiness which is a

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁵² This remark of Death to the Old Woman on Crutches, answers the question in *The Old Man's Prayer*, "Sute god, whi shal it swo?" above, p. 130.

perverted sort of learning. She is emaciated and her thin mouth is turned down. She is malevolent; her headdress and robes are dark. As a decrepit figure she is an altogether more sinister than the Old Woman on Crutches:

Death

And you, Lady Languid,
Have sold lots of "surplus" items
And have provided for yourself from the money.
Your coffers are full.
After getting everything you wanted,
How to leave it all ? How to hand it over ?
According to the dress, the pleat is made.
For such a soup, such a spoon.

The Old Woman

I admit everything:
I haven't lived without reproach.
I clothed myself from my master
As a thief does, from his pocket.
I have often made hot wine from his cellar,
And I have made him spend the way I wanted.
Now Death comes near me.
If the pot goes to the well too often it breaks.¹⁵³

The verses between Death and the Witch are similarly curt. This dancer's face is hard, her skin is pocked. She wears a loose, ill-fitting dress and she is generally unkempt. Her hair is wild and undressed and, naturally, she carries a broom:

Death

Hear ye ! Hear ye ! Know ye all
That this old witch
Has caused the death and deception
Of several people in many ways.
She is condemned as a murderess
To die. She won't live much longer.
I'm taking her to her grave.
It's a fine thing to do good.

The Witch

My good people, have pity
On me a poor sinner,
And give me, for mercy's sake,
The gift of an Our Father or a Mass.

¹⁵³ *Danse Macabre of Women*, p. 98.

I did wrong in my youth
 For which I now pay the price.
 Pray God redeem my soul.
 No one can do anything contrary to one's destiny.¹⁵⁴

Although the role of the Prostitute is not associated with old age, it has been included in order to draw comparisons between it and the other negative roles which are concerned with age. Like the Witch, the Prostitute has a hard face. Her eyes are small and fixed and her eyebrows are plucked or painted into a severe line. She is handsomely dressed with a fine girdle and striped billowing sleeves. While the other figures are passive or reluctantly facing Death, the Prostitute is in a more unnatural position. She appears surprised by Death who has grasped her suddenly from behind and the tension in her body in straining away from him is more palpable than in the other figures:

Death

Worthless woman,
 Living in carnal sin,
 You have led a dissolute life
 In every season, winter and summer.
 Feel terror in your heart,
 For you will be held tight.
 One is tormented for doing bad things
 When one keeps doing it, sin is harmful.

Prostitute

I gave in to this sin
 For unbridled pleasure
 Hang the ones who led me there
 And left me to the trade.
 If I had been well brought up
 And guided in the first place,
 I would never have been found like this.
 The end follows the beginning.¹⁵⁵

These three characters, Witch, Prostitute and Lady Languid, are in ascending order of negativity, reaching the climax in Lady Languid, an aged woman in whom there are no redeeming features.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 110

Death's attitude in the case of the Witch is formal and exultant. He proclaims that his choice in leading away the hag, whom he calls old in a disparaging way which is absent in his tone to the other old women, is for the public benefit. The Witch does not call on God directly as some of the other roles do, but pleads with the readers for prayers of intercession. She blames the follies of her youth for her present misfortune. Similarly, the Prostitute tries to excuse herself by blaming others for her sins. She is the essence of woman as "blame-shifter", an attitude which is rooted in the biblical character of Eve. The Prostitute is an even less attractive figure than the Old Witch since she does not call on God, either directly or indirectly to help her.

After reviewing the aged characters in "The Danse Macabre of Women", it is clear that the most unpleasant role in the entire piece is reserved for the unrepentant old servant, Lady Languid. Her attitude as Death approaches is the antithesis of Christ's actions as he died: He prayed, He cried out, He wept. He commended his soul to the Father, and He gave up the spirit willingly (Matt:27-56, John: 19-30). Lady Languid will have none of this. She admits her sins frankly with no excuses. She does not call on God. She does not ask the readers for prayers. She has led a long life marred by disloyalty, thievery and avarice. She is far wealthier than the Old Woman on Crutches but although their juniors despise both of the women, Death promises that the latter is going to a life renewed, while it is fairly certain that the former is destined for hell.

The attitudes to old age in relation to Death which can be deduced from the various versions of the Danse Macabre are summed up in a letter from St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Bishop of Geneva, to his friend the aged President Benigne Fremyot.¹⁵⁶ Francis did not live in the Middle Ages but his advice on how to live

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁵⁶ The letter is dated 1604 when Francis was thirty- seven years of age. There is no indication of the exact age of Fremyot in 1604 but the content of this letter and other material which Francis sent to him on the subject of ageing suggests that Fremyot, the father of Francis' contemporary, St. Jane de Chantal (1572-1641), was already an old man by 1604. He died seven years later in 1611.

a good old age is not typical of the Renaissance attitudes described above (p. 178) in which the old person struggles against his condition. Francis's approach is gentler and reminiscent of the medieval belief that the wise man of any age is always prepared for death:

It seems to me that it is always a matter of great reproach to mortals that they should die without having thought about death; but it is doubly wrong for those whom Our Lord has favoured with the blessing of old age. Those who get their armour ready before the alarm sounds are always better prepared than people who rush round collecting their breastplate, thigh pieces and helmet when the alert has actually been given. We must bid the world a calm and deliberate farewell and withdraw our affections from created things little by little.

Trees uprooted by the wind are not fit for transplanting because their roots are left behind in the soil; but if they are to be moved to another plot of ground their roots must be deftly and gradually disengaged one by one. And because we are to be transplanted from this miserable earth to the land of the living we must loosen our affections one by one from this world. I am not saying that we should roughly sever all the ties we have formed (for indeed that would cost very great effort); but we must disentangle ourselves from them and loosen their hold on us. When people have to leave a place unexpectedly they may be excused if they have not said goodbye to their friends and set off ill-equipped; but not so those who have been able to foresee the probable time of their departure. We must be ready, not as if to set out before we are due to leave but so as to await the time of our leave-taking more peacefully.¹⁵⁷

In this sensitive advice to an aged friend, Francis comes to two conclusions about old age which could equally well have been drawn from the *Danse Macabre*. In the first place the Christian was expected to live prepared for death at any age; constant devout practice was his armour of protection. Secondly, there was no great merit in responding to the will of God once old age had taken hold – once “the alarm had sounded”. This second point is in keeping with the relative absence of old age in the *Danse Macabre*, and the similar lack of focus on the aged in the penitential handbooks which were discussed in Chapter Three above. Francis echoes the Old Debutante of the “*Danse Macabre of Women*” when he advises Fremyot that constant readiness for death in life allows us to take our leave peacefully when the alarm of old age has sounded.

If the constant readiness of a devout life brought a peaceful and blessed old age and a welcome death, where is the place of anxiety in relation to death and old age? The *Danse Macabre* was used as a penitential weapon by the medieval Church to stimulate anxiety about the consequences of death, mainly in the young

¹⁵⁷ *St Francis de Sales Selected Letters*, ed. Stopp, E., London: Faber, 1960, pp. 53-56, no. 5, pp. 54-55.

and those who were in the prime of life. The purpose was to save souls by frightening its members into constant vigilance. The decline of the body which was experienced by the elderly and which could be observed by younger people was certainly used by the authors of medieval sermons and the *contemptus mundi* literature to emphasize the perishable nature of all flesh; but, old age is not prominent in the Church's armoury of penitential weapons.

The reason that old age did not engender much anxiety may be that most people in medieval England did not experience death by this means. Although a sufficient percentage of people survived in the Middle Ages to stimulate hope in younger people that they might live to experience the first phase of old age, the reality for the majority was death before decrepitude. In "The Danse Macabre of Women", the Duchess complains that at nearly thirty, she had only lived half her life. According to Russell, a person of thirty living at the end of the fifteenth century could indeed expect to live another twenty-four years just short of her expectation.¹⁵⁸ But fifty-four is not a great age. If the Duchess had been born earlier in the Middle Ages her expectation of life would have been even less at around fifty years. A contemporary of the Duchess at twenty years of age could only expect to live a little over another twenty-seven years, dying at just short of forty-eight years. It was only after one reached the age of fifty (the beginning of the lower reaches of old age according to some medieval sources) that an individual's chances of living into the early sixties and true old age improved.¹⁵⁹ For those who did reach old age the source of anxiety regarding their condition was both physical and spiritual. The physical source of anxiety is well rehearsed in the literature of ageing: the drying up of the humours, the loss of mobility, sight, hearing, the ten years of painful gout which the Old Woman on Crutches in the "Danse Macabre of Women" describes. All of these, as the same old woman complains, lead to lack of independence and reliance on reluctant family and friends. But most of all it was a prolonged old age which was feared. There are

¹⁵⁸ Russell, *British Medieval Population*, pp. 186-7.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-7.

few portraits of old age as chilling as the old man in the “Pardoner’s Tale” whose life is a living death.

Spiritually, a shameful life combined with lack of repentance was most to be feared. The figure of Lady Languid in the “Dance of Women” is instructive. She has thieved all her long life but she shows no contrition. She is even defiant when Death confronts her. She admits everything. This attitude underscores one difference between medieval attitudes to old age and those prevailing today. In the modern view, Lady Languid could be received as a mettlesome old lady; but in the Middle Ages she is the epitome of a truly fearful death in old age. Although she shows no sign of despair Lady Languid is behaving irrationally on the threshold of death. The character is designed to shock the reader in revealing the consequences of refusing to amend one’s ways even in extreme old age.

In contrast, the Prostitute and the Witch have led shameful lives but they show chinks of repentance. There is no hope for Lady Languid She is hardened now in her old age. The *Ars moriendi* stresses that death occurs not with the last physical breath but with the departure of the rational being. According to this view, Lady Languid was already dead before Death came to extinguish her physical life. She is another example of the elderly person as the living dead, not this time by reason of physical decay, but by reason of a fatal moral decay which is found only in the elderly because it can only be contracted over many years of sinful living.

Chapter Four has discussed literary images of the elderly. Chapter Five will consider their actual status by exploring the quality of life of those people who survived into old age.

CHAPTER 5

The Debt of Rearing

In this chapter the social status of the elderly in the medieval period will be explored by considering the bond of reciprocal obligation between parents and their children. Three aspects of reciprocal obligation will be discussed. In the first instance, the meaning of a mutual contract between parent and child will be clarified. Secondly, the factors which damaged the function of the contract will be discussed and, finally, sources which provided support for the elderly when the family contract failed will be examined.

G. R. Lambert has defined what is meant by reciprocal obligation in this context. He writes:

By reciprocal obligations I mean simply the duty to care for one another in turn, a duty commonly felt to be entailed in the very concepts of parent and child.¹

The idea of the care of the parent for the child and, particularly in this case of the child for the aged parent, invites the questions: “Does this obligation to care for each other rest on natural affection or on the expectation of advantage?” “Did the grief of a bereaved parent spring from the loss of the personality of the child or from the loss of future services?” “By the same reasoning was the care of aged parents prompted by love or by the pressures of a society which demanded the return of services rendered?”

The debate on the idea of natural parental love for children versus advantage predates the medieval period.² Democritus (c.460-c. 400 B. C.) conceded the

¹ Lambert, G. R., *Rhetoric Rampant: the family under siege in the early western tradition*, London: Faculty of Education, Univ. of Western Ontario, 1982, p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 11-14 for a review of the classical argument on the motives of parental love.

naturalness of affection of animals, including man, for their offspring, which is shown by their willingness to feed and even die for their young. Man alone, because of his advance to civilisation, was also motivated by the expectation of advantage. Thus Democritus believed that natural love and the need for reward could co-exist without tension.

In “On Affection for Offspring”, Plutarch (46-120) argues that natural affection of the parent for the child dominated the relationship. In evidence of this he cites the love of a mother for her “wretched-looking child”.³ In Plutarch’s view, if man deviated from the love-motive for any reason, he placed himself below the standard of an animal. The two motives for obligation, natural love and right of advantage, are irreconcilable. Plutarch concedes that although primitive man should share the unconditional love of offspring with the animals, the civilised man could, with honour, hope for the “wages of rearing”. The crucial factor was that reward could only be hoped for, it could not be the motive for love; love ought to govern the child-parent relationship. The obligation of the child to return parental affection by feeding and caring for parents in their old age was secondary but could be wished for without censure.

This definition of reciprocal obligation defined by Democritus and Plutarch which is based on the hope of affection but not the enforcement of return for services rendered seems idealistic. The need to enforce filial love in caring for parents in old age by legislation in both the Roman and Greek world underscores the unsatisfactory nature of filial affection as a basis for security in old age in the classical period.⁴ In the Middle Ages there were no laws which required offspring to take care of their aged parents. The duty to do so was understood.⁵ The remainder of this chapter will explore medieval attitudes to the balance between

³ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴ For legislation to enforce filial duty in ancient Rome, see Parkin, *Age and the Aged in Roman Society*, pp. 148 ff.

⁵ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 90.

natural affection and expectation or right of services as a basis for security in old age.

The notion of honouring one's parents, as the discussion of the classical debate above reveals, precedes the establishment of Christian ethics. Since the Bible was the principal source in the medieval period through which children were taught morality and educated in the correct attitude towards aged parents some exploration of the Biblical tone towards the aged is essential.

The Hebrew scriptures are rich in the expression of the obligation to honour one's parents. Four examples of these follow:

“Honour thy father and thy mother”, (Exodus, 20:12). “The eye that looks jeeringly on a father, and scornfully on an ageing mother, shall be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, and eaten by the vultures”, (Proverbs 30:17). “Despise not a man in his old age for we also shall become old”. (Ecclesiasticus, 8:7). “..honour thy mother all the days of her life”, (Tobit, 4: 3-4).⁶

In particular, the Book of Proverbs was commended to early Christian and medieval schoolchildren for memorization.⁷ The learning by rote of verses from “Proverbs” was therefore one of the first ways in which the medieval child, at least from the literate orders of society, learned the attitudes of that society to the aged. Although Hebrew thought, as indicated by the examples cited above, is benign concerning the attitude towards aged parents, the Gospels introduce a line of tension.

The teaching of Jesus could be said to bring confusion regarding the duty of a child to its parents. In Matthew 7: 7-11, Jesus speaks of the love of a father for his child. Similarly, in Matthew 15: 3-6, He chastises the Pharisees for failing in their duty to father or mother. However, in Luke 9: 59-60 Jesus advises the rich young

⁶ In keeping with the “Old Testament”, medieval sources are also sympathetic to motherhood. Alcuin Blamires discusses medieval attitudes to honouring the mother as life-giver and healer in *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, c. 1998, 1997, pp. 70-95.

⁷ In the fourth century verses of the *Book of Proverbs* were substituted for the books of maxims which pagan children used, see Lambert, *Rhetoric Rampant*, p. 28.

man not only to give up his possessions but also to abandon his family. Jesus tells the man to leave his father unburiel, to neglect his filial duty in pursuit of a higher way of life. In the same way, Jesus says to His disciples, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters... he cannot be my disciple”. (Luke 14:26-27.) There is similar advice elsewhere in the Gospels which suggests that Christian teaching was not in harmony with the ethic of natural love and reciprocal obligation within families: Jesus substituted a new higher spiritual family for the earthly one.⁸ Furthermore He was aware of the difficulties this would cause.

And brother will deliver up brother to death, and father his child, and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. (Mark 13:12-13.)

This new code encouraged family disunity. The child should still honour the parent but the debt to the blood family was secondary to that due to the spiritual family. From the fourth century on, if a man felt called to the monastic life, he could in conscience disregard temporal obligations to his family.⁹ These attitudes brought hardship to ageing parents who required the support of their children. John Chrysostom’s widowed mother pleaded with him not to abandon her.¹⁰

By the end of the fourth century, Christian thinking had evolved to embrace the idea that salvation could be obtained by the laity. Sequestration from the blood family in a monastic community was not vital to the soul. The command to “honour thy father and mother” was re-emphasized. Even John Chrysostom, whose vocation had caused such pain to his mother, writes in his “Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children” that he

⁸ Luke, 9: 60-62, Matthew, 12: 46-50.

⁹ Lambert, *Rhetoric Rampant*, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407). Cf. the plea of the mother of Fulgentius, *ibid.* p. 39 and the life of Simeon Stylites (390-459) who abandoned his father to pursue spiritual perfection. See *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 3rd edn., pp. 436-7.

does not advise parents to hold their children back from marriage. Origen (182-251) and St. Ambrose (339-97) expressed similar sentiments.¹¹

Nevertheless, the feudal society of the Middle Ages is likely to have weakened the instinctual love motive between child and parent. The feudal structure depended on the reciprocal obligation between overlord and vassal which reflected the father-child relationship. The sense of duty, which the child owed to the parent, not out of affection but out of debt for services rendered, must therefore have been re-enforced.

Shulamith Shahar has stated that in the Middle Ages, “The duty of honouring parents and supporting them materially was a basic norm everywhere”.¹² In theory the obligation was a love bond and normative texts emphasized this point. According to Bartholomaeus Anglicus when the children are young the father feeds them and when the parent ages the children in turn feed him, like the ravens.¹³ This recalls the opinion of Plutarch of natural mutual love. The same sentiments of natural love are found in medieval bestiaries. In a bestiary of the twelfth century the author contrasts the unfilial behaviour of human children with those of fish. He writes:

Man, you have taught children the renunciation of their fathers, you have taught them separations, hatreds and enmity. Now learn what the relationship of parents and children could be. Fishes do not seek to live without water, to be separated from the fellowship of their parents, to be parted from the nourishment of the mother. It is their nature that, if separated from the sea, they die immediately.¹⁴

In this piece the sea, the enveloping life sustaining environment of the fish, suggests the bond between parent and child and expresses the supportiveness and life-sustaining quality of family love. Although texts such as these preach the

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 28-9, for the transformation of earlier Christian attitudes towards parents.

¹² Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁴ *Book of Beasts*, p. 206.

wholesomeness of the love instinct, there are more cynical pieces which underline the operation of mutual advantage in the parent–child relationship.

The story of the old man who transfers his property to his son and daughter-in-law in *Dives and Pauper* warns of the vulnerability of the elderly where filial love is absent.¹⁵ Similarly, the story of “King Lear” emphasizes the exposed position of the elderly when they resign their property to their children in return for support based on love. The aged King Lear intends to divide his kingdom between his three daughters. The two elder daughters falsely proclaim their love for the old man to prompt a division advantageous to them. When the King has divested himself of his property and has placed himself at the mercy of his daughters, they respond by treating him cruelly. Only the youngest, Cordelia, has been honest with her father and told him that she loved him, “no more or less than was her bond”. She is without guile. Cordelia is the model of the good child. She would have paid the debt of rearing, no more and no less, as a debt due to nature.¹⁶ Her expectation of inheritance is secondary to her natural inclination to be affectionate as a daughter.

St. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-74) defined the medieval understanding of natural law in this context as “What nature has taught all animals”.¹⁷ This echoes Plutarch’s opinion that if natural affection is absent in regard to parent or child, the human falls below the standard of animals.

Writing in the late Middle Ages, Christine de Pisan advises the young to respect their parents as the ancient Romans and Spartans did:

¹⁵ *Dives and Pauper*, vol. 1, p. 311 and above, p. 1

¹⁶ It is notable that Cordelia is not over effusive in her love. An attachment to parents which was too strong was as detestable as lack of affection. See Aelfric, *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 2, p. 175 ff.

¹⁷ See, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Law and Political Theory*, tr. Gilbey, T., London: Blackfriars, 1966, vol. 28, p. 83. In this definition of natural law, Aquinas is quoting the Roman jurist Ulpian in *Digest, I. I. Title I*. See also, O’Connor, D. J., *Aquinas and Natural Law*, London; Melbourne; Toronto: Macmillan, 1967, p. 58.

Do not displease or find fault with them, as some wicked young people do who are very much to be reproached for it,...

...if it were not for the wise elderly people the world would be in chaos.¹⁸

Only ill-educated children treated their parents with disdain. If the child did behave in an offensive way, bad behaviour was considered to be the result of a fault in some stage of the child's education, and not of ill treatment of the child by the parents. However, the quality of relationships must have depended to a large extent on the characters of the individuals involved. These sources for and against the bond of natural love suggest that, although the society of the Middle Ages desired to believe in natural affection, there was nevertheless insecurity about its operation in practice.

Some indication of the social reality of attitudes towards parents can be gleaned from a collection of fifteenth-century letters written by the Paston family.

Commenting on the tone of the letters written by the younger members of the family to their parents, H. S. Bennet remarks:

Children were brought up to regard their parents, and especially their fathers, with such awe that familiarity became unthinkable.¹⁹

The complexion of the letters between parents and children is dry and suggestive of the absolute power of the parents over their children. The correspondence suggests that there was little love between John Paston and his eldest son. The father was unforgiving and capable of exiling the boy from his home. He was only allowed to return following the pleas of his mother "For God's sake Sir, have pity on him".²⁰ Even after his return his behaviour was supervised and his mother was prepared in the end to support her husband rather than the child.

¹⁸ De Pisan, C, *Treasure of the City of Ladies: or The Book of the Three Virtues*, tr. Lawson, S., Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985, pp. 165, 166.

¹⁹ Bennett, H. S., *The Pastons and Their England*, Canto edn., Cambridge Univ Press, 1990, p. 71.

²⁰ *Paston Letters 1422-1509*, Gairdner, J. ed., vol. 1, Henry VI, 1422-1461, London, 1872, (Supplement, 1901) no. 500, cited in Bennett, *Pastons and Their England*, p. 75.

Since children were regarded as chattels by their parents. It is not surprising that they were bitter towards their parents. The ward of Sir John Fastolf wrote that his foster father “bought and sold him like a beast”.²¹ The same foster son later sold one of his own daughters when he was in need of money “For very need I was fain to sell a little daughter I have”.²² In this case the father’s reluctance to lose his child in this way betrays an emotional link but in the end it seems that financial considerations outweighed parental affection.

It is unlikely, in this financially predatory environment, that children would show much compassion to elderly parents. In most cases the security of the ageing parent must have depended on retaining authority for as long as possible.

Rebellious children were common. There are cases of lawsuits between parents and children in the “Early Chancery Proceedings” and cases of children charging elderly parents for board.²³ In the light of this state of affairs between parents and offspring it is not surprising that many literary texts emphasize the need for reciprocal obligation born of love but it is a counsel of perfection. An extremely bitter letter in the Paston collection sets out the situation between a father and his son when the father was on his deathbed and highlights the unstable nature of mutual obligation which is so often lauded in the texts.

William Pickering, son of the said Nicholas Pickering reckoned with his father for twenty quarters of barley, that the said William claimed of his father’s gift to his marriage and [also] for the seven day’s carriage of corn in harvest and for a thousand wattles that his father had from William’s wife’s place – the which reckoning grieved Nicholas his father who said, “Thou comest in with many back reckonings. Remember thee, that thou hast been the costliest child that ever I had, and how I gave you ten acres of free land and a place in marriage, and many other things that are much better than all thy back reckonings... If you trouble your brother John, or any of my executors, or claim any more land or goods that ever were mine, I shall give you God’s curse and mine, for thou has ever been froward with me.”²⁴

The Pastons were not of noble lineage but the same tensions between fathers and sons over inheritance can be observed in aristocratic families. In “Youth in Aristocratic Society”, Georges Duby described how fathers from the warrior class

²¹ *Paston Letters*, ed. Gairdner, 1872, “Introduction”, p. cxv.

²² Cited in *Pastons and Their England*, p. 79.

²³ Bennet, *Pastons and Their England*, p. 75. n. 5.

retained power in the face of rising pressures from their sons.²⁵ It appears that there was no questions of handing over the fief to the eldest son until the father died or his abilities were obviously waning.

Duby calculated that in the twelfth century the average span of the generations was about thirty years. A young man might take up arms between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two when his father was in his fifties and still capable of managing his own affairs for many years. Young knights were deliberately sent away on expeditions lasting one or two years. On his return it was not unusual for him to “cast envious eyes on his due”. Duby writes that stories of family quarrels over patrimony abound and that youths were sent away on further dangerous expeditions from which many did not return or were maimed. The entire offspring of a noble house could be cut down in this manner. The two sons of Henry of Bourbon died as youths and a third was blinded.²⁶

It is hard to discern the love ethic in these records or, since fathers appeared to treat their sons as expendable, the need to provide security in later life or perpetuate the family name. A superfluity of male offspring could explain this attitude to the loss of children. Equally, it may be evidence of the dominance of the ethos of group achievement in the military sense, where the survival of the family as a whole was more important than that of individuals.

The quarrelling between father and son which has been described by Duby and suggested by the Paston Letters does not however appear to be universal. The fifteenth-century correspondence of the Knyvetts, a Norfolk gentry family and contemporaries of the Pastons indicates that in some cases there was considerable trust and affection between parent and child. In 1454, John Knyvett granted full power of attorney to his son William although the boy was only about sixteen

²⁴ *Paston Letters*, supplement, no. 522, cited in *Pastons and Their England*, pp. 75-6.

²⁵ Duby, G. and Postan, C., “Youth in aristocratic society” in *The Chivalrous Society*, London: Edward Arnold, Nov. 1977.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

years of age. The father lived another thirty-six years after William had assumed control of the family estates and affairs.²⁷ Later, around 1500, another Knyvett son, Edward, is recorded as continuing to live with his aged father until he died and in 1515, Sir William Knyvett intervened to relieve his daughter's poverty after she had made an unhappy marriage.²⁸

Another factor which unbalanced the equation of reciprocal obligation between parents and children was the attraction of either party to the spiritual life. This has already been touched on concerning the early Christian period when the loss of children to the monastic life was a potent factor in undermining parental hopes of security in later life. Loss of security in old age by this means was still vital later in the Middle Ages.

Hagiographers treat hostility to the dynastic wishes of parents as a sign of exceptional piety in a child. The refusal to marry and enter a convent or monastery denies the parents the services of the child. In addition the added security for the elderly of grandchildren in old age is lost. The story of St. Wilgefortis, which is recounted by Gregory the Great, is one example of many where a daughter refuses the wishes of her parents that she should marry.²⁹ There are accounts of female saints who abandoned their children or even wished them dead yet incurred no disapproval. Margaret of Cortona and Michelina of Pesaro are two such mothers.³⁰

The discussion above suggests that the expectation of the return of services from children was by no means sound security for aged parents. The final part of this section of the chapter will examine the social safeguards for the aged of limited means who were childless or whose children may have been disinclined to honour the bond of reciprocal obligation.

²⁷ Virgoe, R., "The Earlier Knyvetts: The Rise of a Norfolk Gentry Family", in *Norfolk Archaeology*, 1992, 41, 3, II, pp. 249-78. For John and William Knyvett, see p. 249.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 261, 258.

²⁹ *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 3rd edn., p. 494, see also, St. Ursula, p. 473, Rose of Lima, p. 423, St. Petronilla, p. 396.

Recourse to law to protect the aged parents' rights vis-à-vis offspring has already been mentioned in connection with the Paston correspondence. Cases recorded in the English manor courts ensured that aged tenants who had relinquished their land and property to younger members of the family or to neighbours or even strangers were able to maintain a reasonable standard of living.

Elderly medieval peasants with at least a small strip of arable land at their disposal were able, in effect, to arrange pension plans. Elaine Clark describes this as "The old accommodated their needs for support by looking to benefactors to manage their lands and tenements".³¹ Richard M. Smith has also defined the contracts made by the elderly in manorial courts thus:

The retirement or maintenance contract in its most straightforward form afforded the elderly the means to surrender the use of their lands and resources to family members (or indeed non-kin) in exchange for individually arranged benefits or annuities.³²

Clark has analysed one hundred and fifty-nine records of such contracts in the south east of England drawn from manors in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex from 1258-1457. In the following discussion Clark's records will be supplemented with evidence drawn from "The Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield", Yorkshire, between 1274 and 1309, and "The Court Rolls of the Manor of Ingoldmells", Lincolnshire, between 1291-1569.³³

The dominance of these arrangements in England is noteworthy when compared to similar records on the continent. Formally contracted retirement was not normal in early fifteenth-century Tuscan society according to the research carried

³⁰ Ibid., Margaret of Cortona, p. 319, M. of Pesaro, Shahr, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, p. 11.

³¹ Clark, E., "Some Aspects of Social Security in Medieval England," in *Jnl. Family History*, vol. 7, no. 4, Winter 1982, p. 307.

³² Smith, R. M., "The Manorial Court and the Elderly Tenant In Late Medieval England", in *Life Death and the Elderly, Historical Perspectives*, ed. Pelling, M. and Smith, R. M., London; New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 39-61.

³³ *The Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield*, ed. Paley Baildon, W., vols. 1-, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series, vol.1 xxix, 1274-1297, 1900, vol. 2 xxxvi, 1292-1309,

out by Klapisch and Herlihy.³⁴ This study found that in Tuscany, a large number of married men who did not head their own household were living dependent on an older married-male head of household; probably their father or father-in-law. The authors deduced from this that the elderly did not generally hand over their property and power to married children living at home as appears to be the case in England. Retirement of the elderly was uncommon in Tuscany since there were very few parents whose property was listed under the names of children.

In England, land-holding and family formation appears to have been more fluid. Land was under the control of the fief-holder who was free (within the limits of seigniorial tenure) to dispose of the use of it as he pleased. English siblings do not appear to have lived together after they reached maturity. One son remained at home, married and assumed responsibility for working the land but the father may have remained in fact the head of the family. It is also true, according to the English manor court rolls, that in some cases, ageing parents formally retired and handed over authority and responsibility for farming the fief to married children. The manor court recorded this transference of responsibility. An exact record of the maintenance which the retiree expected to receive was written down and witnessed by court officials.

It cannot be assumed that these retirement documents outnumbered informal arrangements between parents and offspring based on mutual love or that the contents of the ones which do exist had anything to reveal about the emotional situation between the parties to them. The historian Alan McFarlane thought that it was extraordinary that it was necessary to draw up a lengthy document if co-residence was contemplated as if parents and children were strangers bargaining. He stated that the numbers of such cases in medieval England were

1906. *Court Rolls of the Manor of Ingoldmells*, ed. Massingberd, W. O., London: Spottiswoode, 1902.

³⁴ Herlihy D. and Klapish-Zuber, C., *Tuscans and their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427*, New Haven; London : Yale Univ. Press, 1985, cited in *Life Death and the Elderly*, p. 40.

exaggerated.³⁵ Although it is hard to discern the quantity of formal contracts of this type since many court rolls are incomplete and it is entirely impossible to gauge how many informal arrangements there were, an overview of the cases in the manor court rolls of runs of fifty years before 1350 and fifty years post 1350 has produced figures of the order of five hundred and seventy pre 1350 and three hundred and ninety seven for the later period. A drop in population following the “Black Death” probably accounts for the fall post 1350.³⁶

In support of Macfarlane’s opinion that the number of retirements of this sort in medieval England is exaggerated, Christopher Dyer found that on examining one thousand three hundred court sessions for various West Midland manors within the estate of the Bishop of Worcester after 1350, that there were only nine records of retirement documents.³⁷ The discrepancy may be explained by the fact that Dyer counts only those documents which describe payments in kind to the elderly as retirement documents. Smith and Clark have noted that after 1350 payments in cash to the elderly as the settlement for retirement arrangements were much more common which may account for the tiny proportion of retirement documents according to Dyer’s study.³⁸

In the Manor of Wakefield there were nine contracts of retirement heard in the manor court between 1274-1297, none of which involved cash payments. In the period 1297-1309, the Wakefield Court heard three cases on retirement. Again, the retiree did not receive cash payments. At Ingoldmells between 1291-1569, there were nine instances concerning retirement. Four of these (between 1400 and 1418) demanded that a sum of money be paid at intervals to the retiree.

³⁵ Macfarlane, A., *The Origins of Individualism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, p. 143 cited in *Life death and the Elderly*, pp. 42-43.

³⁶ *Life Death and the Elderly*, pp. 48-49.

³⁷ Dyer, C. C., “Changes in the Size of Peasant Holdings in Some West Midland Villages 1400-1540” in Smith, R. M., *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984, p. 289.

³⁸ *Life Death and the Elderly*, p. 49.

The texts of the agreements also provide unique information on the concerns of the elderly who were contemplating retirement. Elaine Clark has identified that prospective pensioners expressed four types of expectation in these documents. These criteria will be discussed and confirmed with evidence from the Court Rolls of the Manors of Wakefield and Ingoldmells.

The most important requirement for the elderly person was non-relocation. The retiree generally wished to remain in their own home even if this meant adjusting to younger relatives, neighbours, or even strangers moving under their roof. The wealthiest elderly could insist on a particular room (often the presence of a hearth in that room is stipulated) but, for many, retirement in one's own home was bought at the price of banishment to a loft or a bed in the corner of a communal room. The following example from the rolls of the Manor of Wakefield is typical:

Elias de Soland gives 12d. for license to take a house and acre of land in Wyrunthorpe from Robert Gonton [?] for 4 years; Robert is to have a bed in the said house, a chamber [? *Camera*] in the garden, and half the fruits of the garden. The house is to be returned at the end of the term in as good repair as when received;³⁹

It is notable that there is a term of four years set on the arrangement and that Elias and Robert do not appear to have been relatives. The four-year term suggests that when the elderly made these arrangements (usually ranging from four to nine years) they were not thinking of impending death but of how best to use their resources to provide the most comfortable life. The imposition of a time limit also provided an escape clause for either party should life under the same roof prove to be intolerable. The demand of a private room in this case is not unusual and, according to Clark, one contract in every twelve contained such a clause in the East-Anglian Manor records which she examined.⁴⁰ However, the set term of contracts of this nature and the intermittent re-negotiation which they required must have introduced an element of insecurity for the pensioner as the years progressed.

³⁹ *Court Rolls, Wakefield*, vol. 1, 13 Edward I, 1285, p. 203.

⁴⁰ Clark, E., "Some Aspects of Social Security in Medieval England", in *Jnl. Of Family History*, vol. 7, no. 4, Winter, 1982, pp. 307-20, (p. 314).

The second factor which Clark deduced from the East-Anglian sample is that ageing tenants expected to retire on only a few acres of land, usually between five and forty acres. The in-comer may therefore have had other resources from which to earn a living in addition to working the land in the retirement contract. Those who lived near major settlements such as London, York, or Lincoln or near the coast may have earned from related industries. In some cases the pensioner's land may simply have adjoined that of the party to the agreement giving that party the advantage of a larger acreage to farm. This suggests that the elderly planned very carefully to extract the maximum advantage from the assets which were available to them at the end of their life.

A similar situation regarding the size of the portions of land involved in the contracts is evident from the manor rolls of Ingoldmells and Wakefield. At Wakefield five transfers which mention the amount of land were of the order:

Walter de Fanshawe gives 2s for license to take two acres of land.
 Gerbort de Alvirthorp gives 5s for license a bovate [about 20 acres] of land to his sons.
 Margery, half a bovate
 Elias, one acre
 William Nelot, one and a quarter roods (rood =quarter of an acre)⁴¹

The situation is the same at Ingoldmells:

Agnes to her sons, one acre and one rood.
 Joan and Sarah – One acre and xx perches (perch = 5.5 yards)
 John Smith and his wife Matilda surrender one acre.⁴²

The use of such small quantities of land such as the rood and the perch for bargaining one's livelihood suggests that the elderly had to make maximum use of all available resources.

⁴¹ *Court Rolls, Wakefield*, vol. 1, pp. 86, 108, 183, 203, 252.

⁴² *Court Rolls, Ingoldmells*, pp. 108, 115, 185.

The third requirement which the elderly stipulated in their retirement contracts concerned limiting the control which the new tenants had over the property which they had just acquired. Some contracts stipulated exactly how the tenant should crop the land, the portion of the yield to which the aged person was entitled, how it was to be measured, and at what time of the year it was to be delivered.

Pensioners also kept their own gardens, hives and small orchards. A pensioner of Ingoldmells Henry Boucher took Robert ffoular to court for failing to deliver the exact number of fish (xl) which he had promised him.⁴³

At Ingoldmells, John Smyth stipulated the exact sum of ij marks which his son John was to give each year as a Mass-offering for the soul of his mother Matilda.⁴⁴

The fourth point which Clark makes regarding the contracts is that they were enforceable by the same court which issued them. The elderly were expected to enforce their rights and the manor court supported them in doing so. A contract which had been witnessed in the court could be reviewed if one of the parties defaulted. Alan Mcfarlane has questioned the enforceability of the contracts⁴⁵ but manor court proceedings show that the elderly could and did assert their rights successfully by resorting to litigation when they were denied their due.

The contracts transferred land conditionally. Any failure to discharge the obligations stipulated either in whole or in part attracted a penalty if proven by twelve honourable men of the neighbourhood. In the first instance land would revert to the previous owner. Further penalties involved distraint of goods and chattels.⁴⁶

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁴⁵ *Life Death and the Elderly*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ See Clark, "Some Aspects of Social Security in Medieval England", pp. 312-313.

An instructive case appears in the Wakefield Rolls.⁴⁷ Robert Gunne sued Richard Bonny after Bonny had allegedly received a bovate of land and two messuages which had been unjustly alienated to him by another. Robert protested that the land belonged to his deceased father and was now rightly his. Following evidence given by neighbours, Robert recovered the land.

Similarly, a case on the manor of Great Waltham in Essex in 1327 shows the enforcement machinery in action. Estrilda Nenour, a widow, had made a contract with her daughter Agnes in transferring to her fifteen acres of land and a messuage in return for lodging in the messuage and the provision of food and clothing. Estrilda returned to court and claimed default. A jury of twelve local people found that Estrilda's claim was just. The court repossessed her land, returned it to her, and awarded her compensation of 6s 8d. She subsequently entered into another maintenance arrangement with Robert and Alice Levekyn who appeared to have been unrelated to her.⁴⁸

It is also true that the manor courts acted to discourage informal arrangements between neighbours regarding the transfer of land which infringed the lord's rights. At Wakefield, Robert son of Gunne and Thomas Bonny were distrained for taking four acres of land from Eva of Ouchesthorp for six years, "outside the court". Thomas Bonny appears to have been a persistent offender in this respect since later in the same year he was distrained again with Robert son of Emma of Newton for the same offence.⁴⁹

If even very small amounts of land were utilized to the utmost by the rural elderly with or without children, it remains to examine what means of social security was available to the elderly who had no land to bargain with. The position of elderly people who could no longer support themselves will be considered next.

⁴⁷ *Court Rolls, Wakefield*, vol. 2, pp. 218-219.

⁴⁸ *Life Death and the Elderly*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ *Court Rolls, Wakefield, 1315-1317*, ed. Lister, J., vol. iv, lxxvii, 1930, pp. 25, 32.

Again, the primary means of support for such people was according to literary sources the family and particularly children, but it is impossible to know the proportion of the elderly who were cared for in this way. An unusual passage from the “Book of Margery Kempe” suggests that in some cases the frail elderly were indeed supported by relatives out of a sense of duty. Mistress Kempe records that she feared incurring the disapproval of her neighbours if she failed in her obligation to nurse her aged husband. This comment indicates that community pressure had some part in enforcing the obligation to care for disabled members of the family.

It happened one time that the husband of the said creature – a man of great age, over sixty years old – would have come down from his chamber bare-foot and bare-legged, and he slithered, or else missed his footing, and fell to the ground from the stairs, with his head twisted underneath him, seriously broken and bruised, so much so that he had five linen plugs in the wounds in his head (to drain the wounds) for many days while his head was healing.....

Then...his wife, was sent for, and she came to him. Then he was taken up and his head was sewn, and he was ill for a long time after, so that people thought he would die. And then people said, if he died, his wife deserved to be hanged for his death, for as much as she could have looked after him and did not. They did not live together, nor did they sleep together.... They had made a vow to live chaste.... Then she prayed to our Lord that her husband might live a year, and she be delivered from slander, if it were his pleasure. ...

Then she took her husband home and looked after him for years afterwards, as long as he lived. She had very much trouble with him, for in his last days he turned childish and lacked reason, so that he could not go to a stool to relieve himself, or else he would not, but like a child discharged his excrement into his linen clothes as he sat there by the fire or at table – wherever it was, he would spare no place. And therefore her labour was all the greater, in washing and wringing, and so were her expenses for keeping a fire going.⁵⁰

The elderly who did not have a child or spouse who was willing to care for them, may have found relief of a kind from two other principal sources of social security: a guild of tradespeople, if he or she was a member, or a charitable institution such as a hospital or almshouse.

The Cartulary of St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, London (late twelfth to fifteenth century) contains a number of entries involving the care of the elderly. After the “Black Death” the “Statute of Labourers” had imposed compulsory service on all

⁵⁰ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, tr. Windeatt, B. A., London: Penguin, 1994, pp. 219-221, ch. 76.

those under sixty years of age.⁵¹ Vagrancy, even of the elderly, was punishable until 1504 when penalties were mitigated for those of sixty years of age or more. Municipal authorities were however agreed that alms to the aged were a worthy use of money.⁵² According to the foundation document of St. Bartholomew's, the hospital was intended for the relief of the poor, not only in London but also from other parts of the country. In the introduction to her edition of the Cartulary, N. J. M. Kerling says this of the categories of people which the hospital served:

Apart from the sick and the wayfarers and perhaps pilgrims who needed shelter for the night, older people desired food and care when no one else could look after them. If possible they handed their property over to the brethren, like Ralph de Quatremaras and his wife Aubrey who in c.1200 gave their house standing beside the Church of All Hallows Bread Street. In exchange they expected to be looked after in their own home or if this was impossible in the hospital itself [cart. Entry no. 726].⁵³

This pension arrangement of Ralph de Quatremaras and his wife proves that the hospital did provide security for the aged who were without family in much the same way as the pension arrangements recorded in the manor courts. However there is only one entry of this quality in the cartulary. A number of grants to the hospital which do not specify the return which was expected from the brethren may have involved care in old age but it is impossible to be certain. There are more entries which specify spiritual benefits for deceased relatives than nursing care in old age:

Grant by the same (s) to Alan, m. of SBH, of land as in 342. Rent:2d Fine:1lib of pepper. SBH will allow Walter and the souls of his father and mother to participate in the benefits of SBH.⁵⁴

It has been established above that the pension arrangements ratified in the manor courts set out in detail the exact benefits which the pensioners were to receive.

⁵¹ *Statutes of the Realm 1235-1713*, ed. Luders, A., Raithby, J., Great Britain Record Commission, vol. 1, p. 307, cited in Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*. pp. 26-7.

⁵² For the position of the London Municipal Authorities, see, Clay, R. M., *The Mediaeval Hospitals of England*, London: Methuen, 1909, p. 7. For a more recent survey of English medieval hospitals, see, Orme, N. and Webster, M., *The English Hospital 1070-1570*, New Haven; London: Yale Univ Press, 1995.

⁵³ *Cartulary of St. Bartholomew's Hospital*, ed. Kerling, N. J. M., London: St. Bartholomew's Hospital, 1973, p. 9, part b.

Equally, hospital statutes reveal some indication of the quality of life elderly residents could expect in specifying the rights and services to which the poor were entitled. The statutes of the Savoy Hospital, London are instructive.⁵⁵ The hospital was founded in 1517 and its statutes are drawn up under forty-three heads. They legislate in precise detail from the appointment of the master, chaplains and ancillary staff, to the numbers of sheets and blankets on the poor men's beds. There were four Chaplains at the Savoy. Each had to be thirty years of age or more, of good character and hold no other benefice. They were responsible for victualling and housekeeping, divine service, hearing confessions and visiting the sick. The hospital appears to have been adequately staffed. As in the case of the chaplains, there were stipulations regarding their ages. The porter was required to be over forty years of age. Women staff were to be of at least thirty-six years of age. A gardener, a kitchen clerk, a butler, a cook, an undercook, an underporter and two part-time honest men skilled in medicine and surgery were employed to look after the residents.

Rules of conduct prohibited the playing of dice or cards or of bringing dogs or game birds or women (who were not residents) onto the premises. A bath and clean clothes were provided. Unlike St. Bartholomew's, the Savoy was not supposed to offer more than one night's lodging at a time, which, if acted upon in the case of elderly beneficiaries, must have caused a measure of anxiety. The statutes allowed the men to sit in the great dormitory at one of the two fires which were kept burning in winter and to engage in modest conversation, but games of chance (dice) were prohibited. They were required to retire at eight o'clock in winter and ten in the summer. There were one hundred beds in the great dormitory, each with a flock mattress bolster pillow and three pairs of sheets each and two pairs of blankets. In addition each bed had a linen coverlet and a counterpane of tapestry. A curtain could be pulled to screen the bed. Mass was

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 44, no. 343. Arrangements for the souls of relatives at pp. 46:364, 65:599. No. 479 specifies lights for the sick in return for a grant of rent to the hospital.

⁵⁵ Somerville, R., *The Savoy: manor, hospital, chapel*, London: the Chancellor and Council of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1960, pp. 25-33.

celebrated at six am. All the inmates had to be up between five and seven in summer and seven and eight in winter, with the exception of the sick who remained in bed and were visited by the chaplains and physicians.

With the exception of the statute which could limit the length of stay of a resident, the Savoy offered a reasonable quality of life. The Statutes of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, Oxford (drawn up in 1246) reveal an almost identical regime.⁵⁶ As at the Savoy, the characters and duties of the staff are stipulated in detail.⁵⁷ Domestic servants were employed to cater for the elderly and other residents.⁵⁸

In matters of conduct St. John's appears to have been more severe than the Savoy since in addition to the prohibition of drinking and gambling with dice (*Nullus ad decios vel ad taxillos ludat*) the residents were obliged to maintain silence in dormitory and refectory.⁵⁹

Two items mentioned in the St. John's rule, which do not appear in the Savoy document, may have had implications specifically for the elderly. The first of these concerns instructions at St. John's that certain types of person were to be denied admittance: lepers, madmen, diseased itinerant labourers, but also *paraliticos* and *ydropicos*.⁶⁰ Since elderly people are liable to suffer from stroke and therefore from paralysis of varying degrees and from dropsy as a complication of cardiovascular disease, it is likely that they would have been turned away from St. John's unless, as the rule provides, there was room to

⁵⁶ "A Cartulary of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist", ed. Salter, H. E., 3 vols., Oxford Historical Society (Series); 66, 68, 69, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914-17, "The Rule of the Hospital", vol. III, pp.1-6.

⁵⁷ The cellerer was to be a sober God-fearing man of exemplary character, *sobrius, non multum edax, non elatus non turbilentius [sic], non iniuriosus, non piger, non tenax, non avarus* – not gluttonous, calm, not inclined to stir up trouble or be unjust and neither indolent, niggardly or covetous; *ibid.*, vol. III, p. 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 63; In the "Physic Garden Ledger", 1528, Robert Dewhurst was appointed to the almshouse to "wash the sheets of the poor people and look after the door" in addition to other duties.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. III, pp. 5, 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

accommodate them in the porch. Secondly, although sleeping accommodation at the Savoy was in dormitories, each bed had a curtain which afforded some privacy. There are no such accoutrements at St. John's. The rule states rather harshly, considering the value which manor court retirement documents place on privacy, that "*Omnes simul iaceant in uno dormitorio et de communi omnes cibentur et potentur in uno refectorio.*"⁶¹

The Statutes of the College of St. Mary and All Saints Fotheringay also offer some insight into the living conditions of the medieval elderly who were in care.⁶² The college of chantry priests was probably founded in 1398 but it had become a centre for poor-relief by 1441 or 1442.⁶³ Again, the Fotheringay statutes, like those of the Savoy and St. John's are precise about staffing, the services which were to be offered to the poor and the conduct expected from them in return. At Fotheringay, a precentor regulated the life and morals of the community in cooperation with the master and the chaplains.

The numbers of the poor admitted to the institution was more restricted than at the other two institutions. Three poor folk were admitted on a Sunday in honour of the Trinity, nine on a Monday in honour of St. Michael and the nine orders of angels, one only on Tuesdays Wednesdays and Thursdays in honour of Saint Thomas, St. Lawrence and St. John the Baptist, five males on Friday in honour of the "Five Wounds of Christ" and five women on Saturday in honour of the "Five Joys of Our Lady". Beneficiaries were chosen locally and were not in receipt of a pension.

It is evident from a reading of the various statutes that social provision for elderly person without family or means was available, but hospital residence involved considerable insecurity which the elderly who made retirement contracts in their

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶² "The Statutes of the College of St. Mary and All Saints, Fotheringay" in *Archaeological Jnl.*, lxxv, (2nd series, xxv), 1918, pp. 241-309.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 243, 267.

manor courts and thus retained some measure of control over their situation were spared.

It has been noted above that the manor courts enforced the agreements between the elderly and younger tenants. In the case of the hospitals it is less clear how the arrangements between the two parties could be enforced if the hospital authorities defaulted. The Crown, in the person of the Royal Almoner (from the reign of Henry III, 1216-72) and the local bishop, had jurisdiction over administration of the foundation statutes, visitation and reform of the hospitals. Special visitations by a local jury of investigation are recorded.⁶⁴ The need for such visitations implies that abuses were not unknown. Some of the men appointed as wardens misused their authority in a variety of ways. Relatives were given lucrative posts in some institutions at the expense of the residents. Beds were sold to visitors for money. The situation must have been serious enough to stimulate action since a statute for the reformation of hospitals was introduced in 1414.⁶⁵

Similarly, lack of privacy must be emphasized as one of the most negative aspects of hospital living where the elderly are concerned. It has already been mentioned that one of the four most important expectations of the elderly which were identified from manor court cases was the opportunity to remain in the family home. Even the couple who could afford to donate their property to Saint Bartholomew's hospital in return for care stipulated that "if possible" this was to be provided in their own home. It is evident that the elderly who relied on charitable institutions suffered dislocation and loss of dignity which did not affect those who bargained in their own courts. In a more positive light, the hospital statutes indicate that pensioners in a well-managed institution would have been warm, adequately fed and receiving medical and spiritual care which may not have been available to those who remained at home.

⁶⁴ Chancery Miscellanea, P.R.O., cited in Clay, *Mediaeval Hospitals of England*, p. 195.

⁶⁵ Letters Patent, Univ. of Oxford, no. 42, cited in Clay, *Mediaeval Hospitals of England*, pp. 212 ff.

If an aged person was a member of a guild, either of a trade or of a religious fraternity, it is likely that he or she would have received some form of aid in distressed old age. The guild member paid weekly dues to the guild throughout his working life and in return gained the security of access to alms either in money or in foodstuffs or other services if he became unable to support himself through illness or old age.

It appears however from a reading of the guild ordinances that the provision of alms was means-tested.⁶⁶ One guild stipulates that the recipient of alms had to have been a member for seven years.⁶⁷ Two others note that help will be given to those who were in genuine need and not to those who had brought about their misfortunes by folly.⁶⁸ It is not possible to tell from the age related entries in the ordinances what criteria were applied to identify a person in need. None of the documents mention age in years. It is possible that a guild member became eligible for benefits at the age of sixty in accordance with the Statute of Labourers⁶⁹ but it is probable that decrepitude and disability were the yardsticks of eligibility.

The frequency and type of help offered to the distressed varied. Sixteen guilds out of those examined state simply that help would be given to poor brethren. Only one guild does not mention any poor relief in its ordinances with the exception of services for the dead and a farthing in alms.⁷⁰ Six guilds make specific mention of old age and stipulate weekly payments to their elderly impecunious members. Five guilds specify both that the poor will be fed or that bread or meat and drink will be given to the poor. One of these is specific in that the guild will feed the same number of poor people as it has active members.⁷¹ Other guilds mention

⁶⁶ *English Guilds: The Original Ordinances of More Than One Hundred Early English Guilds*, ed. Smith, T., EETS, 40, London: Trubner, 1870.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 38.

⁶⁹ *Above*, pp. 212-13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 117, 166, 172, 173.

visiting and helping the bedridden and the infirm.⁷² One is specific in donating coals to the almshouse.⁷³ The guilds also provided services of a practical and of a spiritual nature. Help with burial charges appears in five ordinances and one provides for dirges to be sung after the members' deaths.⁷⁴

Poverty-stricken elderly who were not members of guilds could have found some relief on an ad hoc basis from the alms reserved for the poor which were often mentioned in medieval wills.⁷⁵ Testators may also have left pensions to particular servants. Shulamith Shahar has noted that, where the age of the beneficiary was specified, legacies were more often left to younger people than to the aged. In some cases an impoverished retainer may have petitioned his lord for help, as the "Petition of Thomas Hostelle" of 1429 suggests:

To the king oure souverain lorde,

Besechithe mekely youre povere liegeman and humble horatour, Thomas Hostelle, that, in consideracone of his service doon to youre noble progenitours of ful blessid memory, kyng Henri the iiiith

And kyng henri the fift...being at the siege of Hareflewe there smyten with a springbolt through the hedye, lesying his oon eye and his chekboon broken; also at the bataille of Agincours, and afore at the taking of the carrakes on the see. There with a gadde of yrene his plates smyten into his body and is hande smyten in sondre, and sore hurte, maimed and wounded, by mean whereof he being sore febled and debrused, now falle to greet age and poverte gretly endetted, and may not help himself, havvyng not wherewith to be sustained ne relevede, but of mennes gracious almesse. and being for his saif service never yet recompensed ne rewarded; it plese youre and excellent grace, to releve and refresshe your saide povere oratour as it shal plese you with youre most gracious almesse,...

This letter highlights the plight of an individual who has lost the ability (through injury and age in this case) to support himself. The author has no land or goods to bargain a pension with the able-bodied. He says that he must rely on alms which

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 150, 119.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 7, 8, 10, 15, 20.

⁷⁵ See *The Medieval Records of a London City Church (St. Mary at Hill), 1420-1559*, ed. Littlehales, H., EETS, 2 vols., nos. 125, 128, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1905; the bequests of John Bedeham, vol. 128, "Churchwarden's Accounts" pp. 89 (1477-9), 97 (1479-81), 110 (1479-81), and the "Will of John Mongeham" (1514), *idem.*, p. 20.

⁷⁶ *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*, ed. Gray, D., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, pp. 35-36, lines 1-16.

he cannot obtain in sufficient quantity to sustain a reasonable quality of life. This reveals something of the medieval attitude to aged soldiers in particular. It seems dire, if the letter is reliable, that a veteran of such a famous battle as Agincourt should be left to languish in the conditions which the writer describes.

It remains to consider one last category of elderly person in terms of old age social security. This is the clergy. For the purposes of this investigation, the clergy will be divided into two groups: monastic orders and secular clergy, either beneficed or unbeneficed.

The elderly monk or nun was perhaps in the best position of any of the individuals who have been described in this chapter since their house would provide for their needs when age prevented them from carrying out their duties.⁷⁷ The Rule of St. Benedict is specific about treatment of brothers debilitated by age. They were to be assigned light work with separate living quarters if necessary and allowed to eat a nourishing diet outside the normal refectory hours.⁷⁸ Equally special arrangements were made for the aged abbots of great houses. Following a visitation by the Bishop of Lincoln an order was issued concerning the retirement of the abbot of a house of regular canons in his diocese. The abbot was to be assigned a private room for his personal use with all his personal possessions and was to receive twice as much food and clothing as the other canons.⁷⁹ The heads of monastic houses thus appear to have retired under very favourable conditions.

⁷⁷ Shulamith Shahar has noted that Templar houses in Europe housed a greater number of men over sixty than those in the Kingdom of Jerusalem; Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 101. The reason for this discrepancy probably lies in the fact that the Templars were a fighting order. Elderly men, who by reason of their age could no longer participate in war, would return to houses in Europe rather than remain as part of the force in the Holy Land. Orderic Vitalis noted that, "It is the custom to allow persons of sixty years to repose after their warfare" in *The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy*, vol. 1, p. 26. In this instance, Orderic was speaking in the spiritual sense but he may have mentioned an age in years which would have been significant to his readers as the age at which physical warfare ceased. In the Kingdom of Jerusalem of the thirteenth century, knights were exempt by law from personal military service after the age of sixty years.

⁷⁸ *Rule of St. Benedict*, tr. Fry, pp. 70, 90.

⁷⁹ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 103.

Shulamith Shahar notes that in the high and late Middle Ages, a significant number of lay women, usually widows, retired to convents and took vows when they were already mature women.⁸⁰ However some orders refused elderly entrants. In 1252 the “Rule of the Poor Clares” prevented entry to the order by the infirm or those of advanced age.⁸¹ Most elderly entrants to monasteries did not take vows. They entered as pensioners or corrodians. This route to security in old age was open to lay people and secular clergy. The corrody will be discussed before the arrangements particular to the secular clergy are considered.

The corrodian, that is the individual in receipt of a pension from a monastic house, could live within the curtilage of the monastery or at some distance without. The records of corrodies suggest that pensioners of monasteries preferred to remain outside the monastic house. Barbara Harvey has referred to the corrody as “a bundle of privileges” which the monastic lodger or corrodian obtained from the monastery.⁸²

The benefits were similar to those obtained by pensioners who bargained with family or neighbours in the manor courts for food fuel, clothing and shelter. The overall value of the corrody varied according to the bargaining power of the prospective pensioner. Barbara Harvey has described and discussed the different types of corrodies and corrodians.⁸³ It is not the case that every corrodian was aged and few, if any, were truly poor. The case of Ernulf of Seint Oweyn is instructive. Ernulf held an estate in Wiltshire with fifteen hides of land. In the mid-twelfth century he surrendered the estate to Malmesbury Abbey. Ernulf received a corrody of food and wine, clothing, fuel and shelter in the form of a house to live in and confraternity with the monks. His sons were to be helped to enter holy orders. Ernulf was persuaded to enter into this contract by pressure

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 100.

⁸² Harvey, B., *Living and Dying in England: 1100-1540*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 179.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 181ff.

from the monks who had noticed a flaw in his title to the estate which suggested that the Abbey may well have had a competent claim to his land in any case. Ernulf therefore exchanged his estate for security. There is no indication of Ernulf's age but it is likely that he was not an elderly man, since he had sons who were still dependent on him. He may therefore have been in receipt of his corrody for some years.

Similarly there are records of corrodians of Westminster Abbey who held their corrodies for a significant number of years which implies that the pensioner was not aged when the contract began. One corrodian enjoyed his or her "parcel of benefits" for forty-eight years.⁸⁴

The expectations of elderly peasant farmers which have been discussed above in terms of their pension contracts are also evident in the types of corrody arrangements described by Harvey. The opportunity of staying in one's own home and of driving as hard a bargain as possible is as evident in the records of corrodies as it is in manor court proceedings. In 1373, Thomas Gynes succeeded in persuading the monks of Westminster to deliver fuel to his own door in exchange for surrendering his rights in the office of a perpetual servant in the Abbey kitchen.⁸⁵

It must be presumed that the holder of a corrody would have had much the same protection at law if the Abbey defaulted on the agreement as the holder of a contract registered in his manor court. It has already been noted that abuses did occur and were pursued and rectified in the courts. It appears that the elderly recipient of alms in one of the charitable institutions such as the Savoy, St. John's or St. Mary's Fotheringay was the least secure and vulnerable to abuse, but occasionally monastic pensioners fared no better. Some corrodies were "greatly

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204. Further examples of corrodians surviving forty years and more after purchase, *ibid.*, p. 208.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

to the disadvantage of the corrodian and his family”.⁸⁶ The case of Ernulf of St. Oweyn, who was in possession of a sizeable estate with sons to support him in old age and inherit his land, is one which might be considered as disadvantageous to the recipient since the monks exploited a weakness in his title to force the arrangement. Edmund King has written of a sustained campaign by the monks of Peterborough Abbey in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries to recover what had once been demesne land from freeholders on terms advantageous to the Abbey.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, monasteries were also vulnerable to loss in the case of a corrodian who lived to receive his benefits for many decades and in some cases religious houses were the victims of abuse by the Crown who pressured them to provide free corrodies for veterans. At Glastonbury Abbey, records of ninety-six corrodies show that fifty-one per cent were the result of royal nominations.⁸⁸ It is true, however, that the corrody released parents from reliance on the debt of obligation of their children which as has already been discussed earlier in this chapter was fragile.

The position of aged secular clergy requires comment. Some attention has already been given to the circumstances surrounding the retirement of the upper strata of the clergy.⁸⁹ They will not therefore be examined here at length. Bishops were in much the same condition regarding retirement as the abbots of great houses. The minimum age for appointment to a bishopric was thirty years and many stayed in office until an advanced age. Some were still producing written works in their old age. St. Anselm wrote *Cur Deus Homo* while in his sixties. Even if a bishop was

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 181.

⁸⁷ King, E., *Peterborough Abbey 1086-1310: a study in the land market*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973, p. 67.

⁸⁸ It is possible that as a veteran of Agincourt, Thomas Hostelle's purpose in petitioning the king was the procurement of a corrody (above, pp. 219-20). The Crown obtained corrodies from monasteries for aged retainers and retired warriors without reimbursing the monks. In 1315 the monasteries formally complained about corrodians foisted on them by the King. Edward III 1327-77 (b. 1312) undertook to ask for corrodies only “where he ought”; see Harvey, *Living and Dying in England*, pp. 184-185, 189, 190, 109.

⁸⁹ Above, pp. 93-4.

incapable of carrying out his duties due to the afflictions of age it was unlikely that he would be removed from office. As the Letters of Pope Gregory I revealed it is more likely that a deputy would be appointed for him until his death. Most stayed in office until an advanced age. Three Archbishops of Canterbury illustrate this point. All died in office. Lanfranc (c.1010-89) was eighty or older. Similarly, St Anselm (1033-1109) was seventy-five and Stephen Langton (c.1150-1228) was seventy-eight years of age at death.

Nicholas Orme has produced a study of beneficed and unbeneficed clergy in the diocese of Exeter (Devon and Cornwall) for the years 1300-1540 using the bishop's register as source material.⁹⁰ The register reveals that the Church did recognise its duty to care for clergy who were made infirm by age. The records show many interventions by the bishop in cases of long-term infirmity. When the physical or mental state of a beneficed priest made him unable to carry out his duties, his curate could deputise for him if the amount of his benefice provided for this. In cases where the bishop intervened there were two options: a curator could be appointed if there was no curate and the parish priest remained in his position, or the aged priest was required to retire with a pension which usually amounted to one third of his benefice. The Exeter records show that there were sixty appointments of curators over the period and two hundred and sixty two retirements with pensions. Most of the appointments of curators fall in the earlier portion of the records with preference for pensions in the later period. However the negotiation of a pension with a successor was no easy matter and because of the danger of simony the bishop's license had to be obtained.

Values of pensions in the diocese ranged from one pound to twenty pounds per annum. The minimum income for a reasonable standard of living at the time was five pounds. It seems likely, therefore, that if priests at the lower end of the scale did not have access to another source of income or charity, voluntary retirement

⁹⁰ Orme, N., "Sufferings of the Clergy: Illness and old age in Exeter diocese, 1300-1540", in *Life Death and the Elderly*, pp 62-73.

at least was not an option. It must be presumed that most impoverished clergy in this position would only have had access to the same sources of charity as the laity, in hospitals and almshouses. Bishop Edmund Stafford of Exeter (1359-1419) had two priests admitted to local almshouses. There were two or three dozen such houses in Exeter after the twelfth century catering for the poor of all estates and some exclusively for lepers. There were at least some almshouses whose main purpose was to cater for priests.

In the fifteenth century, The Register of Bishop Hallum contains an ordinance confirming the foundation of one such almshouse:

for the needs of poor priests, in particular those unable to carry out their duties due to age or infirmity as well as poor travellers to have a night's lodging.⁹¹

The item goes on to specify strict rules for the conduct of priests in the almshouse. Living and sleeping in common, wearing a uniform, no personal possessions and attendance at canonical hours and mass. This compares unfavourably with the retirement of wealthier churchmen who were to have their own furniture and where they remained in the house associated with the parish even had claim to the second best room for his own use when the new priest took over his duties.

The status of unbeneficed clergy was not to be envied. Chaplains, curates, chantry priests or guild priests come into this category and received their salary from religious or lay patrons. They could thus easily lose their posts via many vicissitudes. They were poorly paid. In 1287 the minimum salary (set by the bishop) was two pounds and ten shillings per annum for chantry priests and three pounds for curates. Even the poorest of beneficed clergy may have been able to

⁹¹ *The Register of Robert Hallum, Bishop of Salisbury, 1407-1417*, ed. Horn, J. M., Canterbury and York Society, Torquay Devonshire Press, vol. 72, 1982, p. 153, item no. 1020. There was also one hospital of this nature in the Diocese of Exeter; Clyst Gabriel, founded 1309-12; see *Life Death and the Elderly*, p. 70. After the Black Death the numbers of poor clergy fell and the

negotiate for shelter with an incoming priest but the unbeneficed were at the mercy of their families or the charitable institutions mentioned above.

The Church did recognise the problems which aged clergymen experienced and in many cases took action to alleviate their difficulties. But the ecclesiastical situation appears to have been no different from that experienced by the aged generally. Security in old age depended upon the quality of the aged person's relationship with family members and in particular how much wealth he had at his disposal to bargain with juniors.

hospital could not be maintained. It was closed in 1508 and priests had to rely on general hospitals.

Conclusion

The principal objective of this thesis was to explore how medieval people perceived ageing and reacted to the elderly. The first line of enquiry into the problem involved examining medieval attitudes to the threshold of old age. The following chapters attempted to add substance to the definition of the old man as a mere chronological entity by considering medieval ideas about biological, psychological and spiritual ageing and their social implications.

On reviewing the conclusions drawn in these four areas of study it is correct to say that medieval society attached no great merit in living to an advanced age.¹ There were few personal or public honours for survival. The outstanding duty of the elderly person, it seems, was to die at the appropriate time. For the medieval elderly, Psalm Ninety: “The days of our years are three score years and ten; and if by strength they be fourscore years; yet is their strength labour and sorrow”, is painfully accurate.

The great majority of medieval sources, whether physiological or literary, which deal with chronological age mark seventy years as the beginning of *senium* or decrepitude; this is the stage of life at which the physical weakening of age has functional consequences for most people. Although a significant number of medieval sources place the threshold of old age at around fifty years, the negative images of age refer to *senium* almost exclusively.

Until the onset of the functional incapacity which accompanied *senium*, ageing had few consequences in medieval society. If physical and mental health endured, the medieval individual continued in his estate until death or until he chose to retire on his own terms; but the option to remain; the refusal to relinquish power,

¹ Parkin confirms that this was also the case in Roman society, see *Age and the Aged in Roman Society*, pp. 199-200.

left him vulnerable to resentment by juniors which is clearly expressed in the literary sources.

There were concessions to the elderly such as exemption from military service or compulsory labour after the age of sixty years but these were granted out of pragmatism rather than respect. In the same way where the sources reveal special consideration for the aged such as those examples which were discussed from the “Rule of Benedict” which protects the position of the elderly and encourages the continuing participation of elderly brethren in the work of the monastic community, the motivating factor is a general sense of compassion for the weak, rather than esteem for age itself.

The idea of the handsome old man as wise counsellor which is described in “Mum and the Sothsegger”² or the terrible veteran of the Chansons de Geste³ are medieval versions of a golden old age but they are the stuff of fantasy. The “Petition of Thomas Hostelle”⁴ a veteran of Agincourt gives a more accurate view of the fate of the medieval war veteran. Similarly the elderly were more often despised as meddlers rather than respected as experienced counsellors if they offered advice to their juniors. The portrait of the “Old Debutante” in the “Danse Macabre des Femmes” who would rather die than rehearse the past or the callous manner in which Chaucer’s youths respond to the old man in the “Pardoner’s Tale” are pithy enough examples of medieval attitudes to the wisdom of age.⁵

When *senium* resulted, as it would in most cases, in the loss of functional capacity and the subject became unable to support himself, it is likely that the individual was cruelly marginalised. The elderly person of good fortune whose relationship with his family allowed him to depend on the bond of love was indeed blessed. The fate of the old man in *Dives and Pauper* who became a

² Above, pp. 149-50.

³ Above, pp. 142ff.

⁴ Above, p. 219.

⁵ Above, pp. 186-88 and pp. 168-70.

burdensome, non-productive extra mouth to feed after he had relinquished property and power to his son was probably nearer to the truth for most medieval elderly.

The contracts drawn up in the manor courts and the records of bargains made with religious institutions prove that retaining control over assets, and thus a measure of personal independence, was of the utmost importance for retirees.

Although the elderly who became residents of hospitals and almshouses were in a precarious social condition when they surrendered their independence to a charity they may have gained in other respects in a well-run institution. The foundation documents of the organizations which were discussed on Chapter Five reveal an holistic approach to the management of old age. In addition to domestic comfort the moral and spiritual needs of the aged were catered for. Although penitential handbooks confirm that there was no special attention paid to the elderly as sinners they do suggest that there was scope for dealing leniently with them in individual cases.

Medieval medical sources reveal however that there was little effective pain-relief for age-related pathologies. Treatment was confined to palliative warming and moistening regimes administered parenterally. Where conditions were considered amenable to the surgical techniques which were available in the Middle Ages, such as the draining of superfluous fluid from joints or the removal of kidney stones, there was natural reluctance on the part of physicians to intervene in persons over sixty years of age.

It was proposed in the Introduction to this thesis that the problems and attitudes associated with old age are broadly similar in any period of history: these are the maintenance of biological and spiritual health, social security and human affection. The research which has been undertaken has confirmed that circumstance largely dictates the level of comfort which an elderly person,

whether medieval or modern, can achieve in these areas. Then, as now, the fortunate rely on sufficient savings, insurance policies and a generous family; when these fail there is the religious or state institution.

The medieval and modern attitude to old age differs markedly in two areas. The first of these is the degree of “otherness” which the respective societies apply to the elderly. In chronological and social terms at least, the modern elderly are more easily defined and set apart than their medieval forbears. Modern Youth regards Age, as Simone de Beauvoir has argued, as a separate species.⁶

Conversely, in a society in which individuals continued to function as usual until no longer physically able and in which the attributes of old age: decay and death, were familiar throughout life, the elderly become less noticeable; less “other”.

The second area of contrast in attitudes to old age between modern and medieval society is the degree of certainty with which the latter approached the problem of ageing, both physically and spiritually. Biologically, ageing was due to the cooling and drying of the organism: the medieval physician was not burdened by the multiplicity of theories which are currently available. In the spiritual sense ageing was suffused with meaning for the medieval person as part of the drama of salvation. This being so, in an age of faith, the medieval elderly were consoled in their declining years by confidence in the regeneration which Christ had promised.

⁶ Above, p. 16.

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