

Dignified, Powerful, and Respected Old People in Medieval and Early Modern Literature: The Worthy Hero and the Wise Old Person Versus the Old Fool

Subjects: **Literature**

Contributor: Albrecht Classen

To understand the topic of old age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, we can draw much information from relevant literary texts among other sources because the poets operated with general notions commonly subscribed to by their audiences. Old people appear in many different roles already in the pre-modern world, but here the focus will rest mostly on worthy, dignified, mighty, and even ferocious old warriors in heroic poetry. Those stand out because of their strength, their knowledge, their resolve, their wisdom, and their extensive and varied abilities, but this does not automatically mean that they were flawless. To round off this entry, the attention will finally turn to remarkable examples of old but highly respected people in the verse narratives by the German poet Heinrich Kaufringer, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a harbinger of the Italian Renaissance, in Christine de Pizan's didactic writings, and in the Old Norse *Njáls Saga*.

old age in medieval heroic literature

Beowulf

"Hildebrandslied"

Kudrun

Heinrich Kaufringer

Boccaccio

Njáls Saga

Medieval literature was filled with numerous comments about old people; many times, authors made their audiences laugh about old men and old women and ruthlessly ridiculed them in their attempts to compete with young people even in areas such as sexuality, fertility, and physical attractiveness. The best examples for this would be Marie de France's "Guigemar" or "Milun" (ca. 1190) where a young woman is married to an old and mean husband, the result of an arrangement by the parents, leading to profound unhappiness for both and hence a major intergenerational conflict. Another famous example is Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde* (ca. 1210), where the rather old King Mark has to watch hopelessly, himself being a tragic figure in that respect, as his young wife Isolde and his nephew Tristan are loving each other behind his back. Particularly late medieval literature teems with examples of satirical treatments of old people of both genders, such as when old women marry young men and vice versa (Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, Georg Wickram, Johannes Pauli, Marguerite de Navarre, etc.) ^{[1][2]}. Various times, we hear of famous mystical authors who were married to much older husbands, who strongly opposed their efforts to achieve mystical unions with God (Angela da Foligno, Bridget of Sweden, Margery Kempe, Dorothea of Montau). In that context, we are also informed about the difficulties by those women who had to take care of their old, ill, and dying husbands.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the world of craftsmen was often determined by old men because there was no real sense of retirement, and most people worked as long as they were physically able to do so. Similarly, old women certainly played an important role in public and private lives as well, as is richly documented in contemporary literature (Christine de Pizan) and the visual arts (religious art, see, e.g., the depiction of St. Anne, or see the figures of old mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen or Mechthild of Magdeburg, Birgitta of Sweden or Catherine of Siena) [3], along with historical documents mirroring the existence of mighty widows or unmarried old women (see [4][5][6][7]). Of course, the old woman as a go-between or matchmaker served a particular prurient interest by many poets, but we can be certain that for many former prostitutes, there were not really good opportunities to re-enter honorable society for those marginalized women [8].

But the discourse on old age was much more complex than these few literary examples indicate and as most recent research has carefully examined in a variety of approaches [9]. The focus here rests on individual groups of old people in the Middle Ages, old individuals in the urban context, old age in the monastic community, and the moral and ethical perspectives toward old age. In essence, however, the approach pursued here seems to be rather traditional and almost repetitive. In Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1205), and especially *Titelrei* (ca. 1218), the founder of the Grail is glorified as the most dignified old man. In didactic literature, such as Der Stricker's various verse narratives (ca. 1220–ca. 1240), old people are criticized for their foolish reliance on their children. In Don Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor* (ca. 1330), the old councilor provides wise advice to the young king and serves basically as a teacher by telling didactic tales. Christine de Pizan (1364–1431) repeatedly reflects on old and young women at large and particularly presents a wise old lady as the princess's advisor in her *Le Livre du duc des vrais amants* (ca. 1402–1405). Undoubtedly, in her autobiographical narratives, she idealizes her old parents who have passed away. By contrast, late medieval satirical poets such as Sebastian Brant laughed about the foolishness of old people in his *Das Narrenschiff* (1494; *The Ship of Fools*).

So, what does 'old' really mean in medieval terms and why would this topic matter for us today? We can be certain that quite a lot of truly old people operate in a variety of texts and contexts because 'old' did not have quite the same connotations as in our modern world. Many times, kings and emperors such as Charlemagne (748–814) reached a very respectable old age and appear to have performed quite successfully as generals and leaders of their people until their old age [10]. Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) reached the impressive age of 70 years, after having ruled independently for 45 years. But much depends on the circumstances and concrete factors, and neither chronicles nor literary texts allow us to reach simple or straightforward answers as to the general perceptions and specific roles of old people in the Middle Ages and the early modern age [11].

When old men or women marry much younger partners, they easily became the object of ridicule, and this both in the thirteenth-century Old French *fabliaux* (or German *mæren*, Italian *novelle*, or English *tales*) and in sixteenth-century sermon narratives by Johannes Pauli or jest narratives by Georg Wickram, or didactic-entertaining tales by Marguerite de Navarre and Gian Francesco Straparola [12].

However, when we turn our attention to the genre of heroic epics from the early Middle Ages, many times, the old warriors are the most fearsome and powerful individuals completely defying our concepts of old age as a time

when people commonly experience physical and mental decline. Similarly, when the narrative focus turns to the political sphere, we often encounter wise old advisors in a range of heroic texts (*El Poema de Mío Cid*, *Chanson de Roland*, Priest Konrad's *Rolandslied*, Der Stricker's *Karl der Große*, etc. Old age seems to have mattered critically also in late medieval politics and hence literature, if we think, for example, of the highly popular collection of *Dolopathos*, or, in Old French, the *Roman des sept sages*, versions of which exist in many different languages ^[6]. In other words, in our investigations of old age, much depends on the specific lens we might use. Searching for examples of foolish old individuals can easily yield rich results. But when we search for dignified, powerful, and influential old people, also in medieval literature, we are easily rewarded as well, which previous scholarship has not yet fully registered ^[13].

As recent research has already demonstrated quite extensively, the medieval and early modern discourse of old age in Europe was very expansive, discriminating, satirical, honorable, filled with admiration, or with disrespect ^[14]. Hence, we can be certain that old people mattered critically both within their families and in public, as the wide range of roles assumed by them indicates. Naturally, they could also be viewed through a satirical, even hateful lens, all depending on the narrative genre, as various scholars have already pointed out for quite some time ^[9]. The present article will first examine old people as military leaders and heroes; then it will briefly turn to the facetious topic of old and lustful and yet impotent husbands (Boccaccio) to identify a contrastive foil. Finally, old advisors, male and female, will gain our attention as well, which altogether will allow us to identify the rather complex reflections on that topic in the pre-modern world, that is, the discourse on old age as it dominated high and late medieval society ^[15]. Of course, the purpose cannot be to revisit the complete topic of old age; instead, the focus will mostly rest on the positive image of mighty, strong, wise, and admirable old individuals to defy common notions today about medieval society's disregard of its old members. To do more justice to this topic, I also widen the perspective and include literary examples from across medieval Europe from the early to the late Middle Ages ^[16] ^[17].

References

1. Classen, A. Der alte Mensch in den spätmittelalterlichen Mæren: Die Komplexität der Alterserfahrung im Spätmittelalter aus mentalitätsgeschichtlicher Sicht. In *Alterskulturen des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit: Internationaler Kongress, Krems an der Donau, 16. bis 18. Oktober 2006*; Vavra, E., Ed.; Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit, 21; Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: Vienna, Austria, 2008; pp. 219–241.
2. Thema: "Alter und Altern im Mittelalter" Protokoll über die Arbeitstagung auf der Insel Reichenau vom 10–13 Oktober 2023; Giese, M., Ed.; Protokoll über die Arbeitstagung auf der Insel Reichenau, 429; Konstanzer Arbeitskreis für mittelalterliche Geschichte: Constance, Germany, 2024.

3. Classen, A. Visual Representation of Old Age in Medieval and Early Modern Religious Art. In *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (EBR)*; Furey, C.M., Gemeinhardt, P., LeMon, J.M., Römer, T., Schröter, J., Walfish, B.D., Ziolkowski, E., Eds.; Walter de Gruyter: Berlin, Germany; Boston, MA, USA, 2024; Volume 22, pp. 95–98.
4. Cavallo, S.; Warner, L. (Eds.) *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe; Women and Men in History*; Pearson: New York, NY, USA, 1999.
5. Fischer, D. Witwe als Weiblicher Lebensentwurf in Deutschen Texten des 13. bis 16. Jahrhunderts; *Europäische Hochschulschriften. Reihe I: Deutsche Sprache und Literatur*, 1820; Peter Lang: Frankfurt/Berlin, Germany, 2002.
6. Classen, A. Widows: Their Social and Religious Functions According to Medieval German Literature, with Special Emphasis on Erhart Gross's *Witwenbuch* (1446). *Fifteenth-Century Stud.* 2003, 28, 65–79.
7. Kruse, B.-J. *Witwen: Kulturgeschichte Eines Stands in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*; Walter de Gruyter: Berlin, Germany; New York, NY, USA, 2007.
8. Mieszkowski, G. *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus; The New Middle Ages*; Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY, USA, 2006.
9. Classen, A. (Ed.) *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic; Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 2; Walter de Gruyter: Berlin, Germany; New York, NY, USA, 2007.
10. Stuckey, J. (Ed.) *The Legend of Charlemagne: Envisioning Empire in the Middle Ages; Explorations in Medieval Culture*, 15; Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston, MA, USA, 2022.
11. Neumann, C.A. (Ed.) *Old Age Before Modernity: Case Studies and Methodological Perspectives, 500 BC–1700 AD*; Heidelberg University Publishing: Heidelberg, Germany, 2023.
12. Steinmetz, R.-H. *Exempel und Auslegung: Studien zu den <Sieben weisen Meistern>*; *Scrinium Friburgense*, 14; Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz: Freiburg, Germany, 2000.
13. van Opstall, E. The Wicked Stepmother: A Comparative Case Study of the Byzantine Syntipas and the Latin Dolopathos. *Fabula* 2023, 64, 298–321.
14. Shahar, S. *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain'*; Lotan, Y., Translator; Routledge: London, UK, 1997.
15. Homet, R. *Los Viejos y la Vejez en la Edad Media: Sociedad e Imaginario*; Pontifica Universidad Católica Argentina: Rosario, Argentina, 1997.
16. *Vieillesse et Vieillissement au Moyen Âge*; *Senefiance*, 19; Presses Universitaires de Provence: Aix-en-Provence, France, 1987.

17. Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe, Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada, 25–26 February and 11–12 November 1983; Sheehan, M.M., Ed.; CSB, Papers in Mediaeval Studies, 11; Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies: Toronto, ON, Canada, 1990.
-

Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/history/show/129598>