

Old Age in the Old Times

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Growing Old in the Middles Ages – “Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain”

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One of the most important changes brought about by technological developments has been the increase in human life. While this has, in the first instance, resulted in us focusing on the matters of health and quality of life, it has also had a big impact on social and demographic changes. Indeed, the activeness of groups of individuals over the age of 60 or 65 – who we generally perceive as being old – has also changed in line with these developments. Aging studies are no longer only directed at ensuring a comfortable life to a particular age group, in the medical and physical sense, but also at their visibility within society, the manner in which they are perceived by other individuals of society and the manner of living and thinking of these individuals. As such, aging studies has been transformed into a comprehensive field. The work entitled, Growing Old in the

Middles Ages – “Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain”, written by S. Shahar, looks into the position of the individuals within this age group during the Middle Ages. It evaluates their positions in urban and rural areas and working life, and the approaches of society and the social institutions to the aged, in the light of sources from the Middle Ages.

The chapter entitled, Introduction: On the history of old age in Medieval Europe [1-11]), begins with examples related to the existence of the aged as a social class, which was both a symbolic and an actual part of the world and society, in the Late Middle Ages Period, which is accepted as being the period between the 12th and 15th centuries. Old age in the Middle Ages is like a double-faced medallion. While on the one hand, it is identified with both mental and physical weakness, on the other hand it is also seen as a period of life where wisdom has

been reached and where individuals have been cleansed of their lustful desires. When a priest, who was receiving confessions in the Middle Ages, categorised the individual in front of him within society, he would first ask whether they were free or enslaved, rich or poor, healthy or sick, married or single and whether their mental condition was stable or not, followed by whether they were children, youth, adults or old aged (*infantes, adolescentes, iuvenes et senes*). The other matters which are focused on in the chapter are the fact that the aged were a marginal class, together with women and children, they lacked an institutional structure concerned with their needs, and were appraised from the point of view of their “usefulness”. The chapter describes the scope of the book as the definition and image of old age in the Middle Ages, their position within the symbolic order and their status in Latin Europe, and the work continues with the first main chapter entitled, *Who were the Old in the Middle Ages?* [12-35].

The fundamental issue of the chapter answers the question, “After what age were people deemed to be old in the Middle Ages?” The author argues that the perception that people over the age of 40 were deemed to be old was not the reality and gives supporting evidence from legal texts. He shows that the categorisation of 3, 4, 6 and 7-stage life spans covers different periods in literary works and letters. Indeed, the word *senectus*, which means “old aged” in Latin, has been used in a manner meaning middle-aged in some texts, while the word *senium* has been used as a different word for the very old. While legal texts refer to varying figures between 55 and 70, the age limit for exemption from work requiring physical strength, such as serving the king, taking part in battle and swearing an oath of vassalage in person is stated as 60, and the age limit for participating in administrative duties and being elected for these is stated as

70. Therefore, the author posits that old age was not perceived at a very early age, but, contrary to popular assumptions, as a period which began to be experienced between the ages of 60 and 70.

The chapter entitled, *The Old Body* [36-59], has been separated into the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of old age, in the physical sense, during the Middle Ages. The medical texts from the period portray old age as something which cannot be avoided or reversed, but which can be delayed. Texts from the Middle Ages give advice – which we are also accustomed to hearing today – such as eating small amounts frequently, benefiting from the sun, light exercise and avoiding stress and worry in order to experience old age, which was thought to emerge as a result of the loss of moisture and heat from the body, at a later time and in a more comfortable manner. In addition to providing a physiological definition, this chapter also discusses the metaphoric meanings ascribed to an old body. While on the one hand, the old body – which is generally envisioned as male – represents peace and wisdom, as it has moved away from lust, on the other, it purports both physical and mental incompetence in the texts where previously associated with physical and mental strength. An old woman, on the other hand, always evokes evil and sin, while; what is good and beautiful is envisioned as young.

Chapter four, entitled, *Transcending Age, Transcending the Body* [60-69], deals with opposing concepts such as old age and youth and the body and the spirit, based on statements in texts from the Middle Ages. Various statements centred on the body and age point to the existence of 4 fundamental ideals in the Middle Ages. These are the “prolonging of the period of remaining young”, which deals with old age as a completely negative process, “long life or the surpassing of estimated life expectancy by

an individual", "the establishment of equality between the ages" and "a spirit which will remain young forever".

The chapter entitled, Who and What is an Old Man, and How He Should Conduct Himself? [70-87], is of a nature which completes the other three chapters, which endeavour to define old age in the Middle Ages. In the first part of the chapter, expectations of the "old" are examined within a social framework. Within this context, the expectations of the old and the role assigned to them by society on matters such as love, sex and marriage, have been discussed. This is followed by discussions on the areas wherein older adults were utilised within society, and which were deemed to be their duties and responsibilities, which make them visible within society, such as acting as witnesses both within the community and in court and their importance in the evidencing of nobility. In contrast with the other matters, the fact that social expectations directed at men and women are dealt with separately, and the fact that social gender roles related to older adults are included in the literary and legal texts, is a characteristic which sets this chapter apart from other chapters in the book.

In the Middle Ages, religion was a phenomenon which influenced social life, the economy and politics and religious texts also included guidance which referred to expectations of relationships between parents and their children. The short chapter entitled, 'Honour Thy Father and Thy Mother' [88-97], references examples in the Bible and other books and statements in literary works (and indeed, the laws which established penalties for not looking after parents who were in need of care in England and Italy) and discusses the approaches requiring children to honour and respect their parents in the Middle Ages.

From the chapter entitled, Churchmen in their Old Age [98-113], the old aged population is closely examined within different sub-groups and social strata. It can be seen that the church had a positive impact on the employment of the elderly, in a manner which contradicts the belief that growing old constitutes a barrier to working. Indeed, even if gerontologists were united in the opinion that intellectual activity slows down together with physical activity, the wisdom, virtue and experience brought by old age provides them an advantage in religious duties.

Chapter five, entitled, Old Age in the Ranks of the Rulers and Soldiers [114-131], discusses the governing classes, such as the kings, rulers and feudal lords from the viewpoint of age. It can be seen that kings were crowned at an early age in order to ensure the continuity of their dynasty and that only a few would be accepted as being old when they died. On the other hand, the rulers with authority in institutions such as the council and the assembly, were mostly restricted to lower age limits such as 25, 30 or 40, as old age and wisdom were mostly deemed to accompany each other, and as a result, older individuals were more widespread in these positions. In addition to this, the fact that baboons, which possess a social network, select their leaders from among their older members, despite being more physically weak, is an interesting example, which is given as an analogy.

The work continues to examine the position of the elderly from different segments of society, in the chapter entitled, Old Age in the Urban Society [132-145]. Here, it concentrates especially on the working lives and retirement periods of older adults in urban life. While retirement age differed from occupation to occupation, it can be seen that merchants retired at a considerably older age and that doctors and craftsmen mostly

worked until they died. The chapter, where men and women are discussed separately, states that the aged left capital to the young, before they began their working lives, in order to ensure both commercial continuity and the continuation of the family vocation.

In contrast, as survival in village life was highly dependent on physical endeavour, the position of older individuals in rural areas was different from those who lived in the cities. Even without any underlying illnesses or disabilities, the loss of physical strength has an impact on the retirement periods of older individuals in particular. Chapter nine, entitled, Old Age in the Peasantry [146-162]), discusses two fundamental retirement models, one of which is where an older individual leaves his land and property to his sons, and the other is where he continues to manage them, while at the same time having ceased active working life, and the effects of these models on the older and younger generations.

The final chapter, entitled, The Old and The Charitable Organizations [162-170], deals with old age within the context of charitable activities in the Middle Ages. There was no support system directed at the elderly during the Middle Ages. However, the church, which also possessed both a political and a social function, organized the structuring of charitable activities. It provided offerings made by its constituency to the older adults as well as the social groups that were in need of support. The chapter ends by evaluating the activities of the church and the support provided to older adults.

The study has emerged as a result of a meticulous examination of the primary and secondary political and legal texts, as well as the literary texts belonging to the Middle Ages. It presents a revised historical point of view of aging in the Middle Ages as a reference point for those of us working in fields related to aging today.