

The Representation of Old Age in French Medieval Literature

Abstract

Our Western society has inherited a paradoxical and ambivalent view of old age from Antiquity, but above all from the Middle Ages. Although old age has been analysed with respect to selected works of French medieval literature, a more comprehensive and systematic treatment is still lacking, which is a gap that this paper aims to fill. It intends to propose an overview of medieval literary texts of various genres – epics, courtly romances, satires and allegorical poetry – in order to understand how old age was perceived and represented. Sometimes, the fictional literary works integrate knowledge from non-fictional texts such as encyclopaedias and medical treatises. When old age is portrayed, a broad panorama of positive and negative attributes and topoi are employed: on the one hand, wisdom, counsel, prowess, and exemplary behaviour, while on the other hand, the loss of mental and psychic abilities, physical frailty, ugliness and marginality. The main focus will be placed on questions of gender, which still deserve more attention. It will be examined to what extent the portrayal of male and female old age differs, whether the representation of each gender is balanced in itself or is rather one-sided, to what extent the physical and psychological changes occurring during old age are correlated, and finally, how much the comparisons of old age to the other stages of life and interactions between older and younger characters matter.

1 Introduction

Before turning forty, Jean Froissart looks back on his past with yearning and composes the “Joli buisson de jeunesse” (“Joyous Grove of Youth”),¹ whilst there is still time, as he says

I would like to thank Christian Alexander Neumann for his help in preparing the English version of this paper.

1 Jean Froissart is well-known above all as being one of the most famous chroniclers of the Middle Ages, especially for his writings on the Hundred Years’ War. He was also a courtly poet, in particular

in the prologue: “Des aventures me souvient / Dou temps passé. Or le couvient / Entroes que j’ai sens et memore ... Et volenté appareillie / Qui m’amonneste et me remort / Que je remonstre avant me mort / Comment ou Buisson de Jonece / Fui jadis, et par quel adrece”.² Apart from Froissart, some other medieval writers engaged in a retrospective in the middle of life. Christine de Pizan recalls her happy and carefree childhood in the “Mutacion de Fortune”, which she composed when she was about 40 years old. Being still in her middle years, she castigates the madness of youth in “Charles V” and the “Advision”.³ At the very beginning of “Le Testament”, François Villon tells the reader that he, being in his thirties, is “neither mad nor wise”.⁴

Old age frees man from passions and brings wisdom but, at the same time, weakness of the body. As Jacques Le Goff notes, old age “wavers between admiration and disapproval” (“oscille entre admiration et reprobation”).⁵ Medieval literature inherits this duality, which is dealt with in different ways depending on the genre, the motifs and themes employed. As characters or allegorical figures, elderly men and women appear many times.⁶ I here propose a ‘round’ in French medieval literature including several

under the sponsorship of Philippa of Hainault, the wife of King Edward III of England. Froissart produced some lyric pieces related to courtly love and several *dits*. The “Joli Buisson de Jonece” is one of them, and is, to some extent, an echo of “L’Espinette amoureuse”, an older allegorical text. Regarding the tradition of the *dit*, cf. Bernard Ribémont (Ed.), *Écrire pour dire. Études sur le dit médiéval*, Paris 1990 (Collection “Sapience” 3); Monique Léonard, *Le Dit et sa technique littéraire des origines à 1340*, Paris 1996 (Nouvelle bibliothèque du Moyen Âge 38).

2 Jean Froissart, *Le Joli Buisson de Jonece*, ed. by Anthime Fourrier, Genève 1975 (Textes littéraires français 222), vv. 1–10. “I am remembering the adventures of the past; while I still have reason, memory and willpower encouraging and admonishing me to show before my death how I formerly was in the Grove of Youth” (own translation).

3 Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre de l’advision Cristine*, ed. by Christine Reno / Liliane Dulac, Paris 2001 (Études christiniennes 4).

4 François Villon, *Le Testament*, in: *Lais, Testament, Poésies diverses. Avec Ballades en jargon*, ed. by Jean-Claude Mühlethaler / Éric Hicks, Paris 2004 (Champion Classiques. Moyen Âge 10), pp. 83–207. In the Middle Ages, members of the wealthier classes wrote their wills while still young (Danièle Alexandre-Bidon, *La Mort au Moyen Âge [XIII^e–XVI^e siècle]*, Paris 1998 [La vie quotidienne], pp. 71–76).

5 Jacques Le Goff / Nicolas Truong, *Une histoire du corps au Moyen Âge*, Paris 2003, p. 113.

6 Cf. in particular, Georges Minois, *La Vieillesse dans la littérature religieuse du Haut Moyen Âge*, in: *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l’Ouest* 92,4 (1985), pp. 389–401; *Vieillesse et vieillissement au Moyen Âge, Aix-en-Provence* 1987 (Senefiance 19); Georges Minois, *Histoire de la vieillesse en Occident. De l’Antiquité à la Renaissance*, Paris 1987 (Nouvelles études historiques); Bernard Ribémont, *Sur quelques aspects de la relation vieillesse / sagesse au Moyen Âge. L’exemple du Chevalier au Barisel*, in: *Vieillesse et vieillissement* (see above), pp. 299–316; Shulamith Sha-

genres: fictional representations as seen in courtly love poetry, chivalric novels, epics, allegorical texts, and non-fictional references as seen in medical and encyclopaedic texts.

Considering French medieval literature in this article, some links to general representations of old age in the Latin West can be made. The Middle Ages inherited ancient models, particularly from comedy: from Plautus (for example Melenis in “Cistellaria”) and Terentius (for example Syra in “Hecyra”); and also the tradition of “De vetula” (“On the Old Woman”) falsely attributed to Ovid⁷ and the “Matron of Ephesus” by Petronius⁸. Later on, with the advent of Christianity, religious and patristic literature produced an image of old age between wisdom and madness⁹. Medieval literature incorporated all these models, developing and shaping them according to the literary genres and morals that were to be conveyed. In order to study the representation of old age in literature, it is necessary to give some observations about the status of older people in society, i. e. the social environment that generated the literature in question.

From a social point of view, the elderly were not rejected, as they were integrated into family and kinship relationships.¹⁰ Some forms of retirement and support existed

har, Who were Old in the Middle Ages?, in: *Social History of Medicine* 6,3 (1993), pp. 313–341; Michael E. Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age. The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought. 1250–1350*, Lanham 1989; Paul Johnson / Pat Thane (Eds.), *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*, London-New-York 1998 (Routledge Studies in Cultural History 1); Bernard Ribémont, *Femme, vieillesse et sexualité dans la littérature médiévale française (XIII^e–XV^e s.)*. De la nostalgie à la lubricité, in: Alain Montandon (Ed.), *Éros, blessures et folie. Détresses du vieillir*, Clermont-Ferrand 2006, pp. 57–77; Albrecht Classen (Ed.), *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, Berlin-New York 2007 (Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 2).

7 Karen Pratt, *De vetula. The Figure of the Old Woman in Old French Literature*, in: Classen (Ed.), *Old Age in the Middle Ages* (see note 6), pp. 321–342.

8 Killis Campbell lists 73 versions of the tale: Killis Campbell, Introduction, in: *The Seven Sages of Rome*, ed. by id., New York 1907, pp. XI–LXXII. Cf. also Camille Fort, *De Pétrone à Fry, la matrone d’Éphèse. Tribulations d’un cadaver conjugal*, in: *Textualités* 8 (2007), pp. 35–47, at p. 35; *La Matrone d’Éphèse. Histoire d’un conte mythique*, 2 vols., Trois-Rivières 2003 (Cahiers des études anciennes 39–40), and in particular Yasminah Foehr-Janssens, *Mourir d’aimer. Le récit de la Matrone d’Éphèse dans le miroir des fabliaux du Moyen Âge*, in: *La Matrone d’Éphèse* (see above), pp. 89–100.

9 Minois, *La Vieillesse dans la littérature religieuse* (see note 6), pp. 389–401.

10 Jean-Pierre Bois observes that their exclusion, according to the poverty registers, started only at the beginning of the 16th century: Jean-Pierre Bois, *Exclusion et vieillesse. Introduction historique* in: *Gérontologie et Société* 25 (2002–2003), pp. 13–24. Cf. also, for a particular example, Lucie Laumonier, *En prévision des vieux jours. Les personnes âgées à Montpellier à la fin du Moyen Âge*, in: *Médiévales* 68 (2015), pp. 119–146.

in the form of guilds and corporations,¹¹ and also the Church¹² which gave assistance to the elderly poor¹³. When dealing with a specific age, one has to consider all the ages of man and the distinctions between them.¹⁴ The Greco-Roman categories of *infans*, *puer*, *adulescens*, *juvenis*, *senior*, and *senex*¹⁵ were passed on, even if, under the influence of the Church Fathers in particular, the chronological limits and meanings were modified.¹⁶ The end of childhood was generally set at fifteen years¹⁷ and old age

11 For example, in the weavers guild, a master craftsman who was too old or infirm to work received one *denier* per week from his fellow weavers; in the marshals guild, it was two *deniers*. The musicians founded their own hospital in the *faubourg* Saint-Martin for the sick of their profession (Étienne Martin Saint-Léon, *Histoire des corporations de métiers depuis leurs origines jusqu'à leur suppression en 1791, suivie d'une étude sur l'évolution de l'idée corporative au XIX^e siècle et sur les syndicats professionnels*, Paris 1922, URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4057358/texteBrut;7.6.2022>).

12 Kirsi Salonen, What Happened to Aged Priests in the Late Middle Ages?, in: Christian Krötzl / Katariina Mustakallio (Eds.), *On Old Age. Approaching Death in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Turnhout 2011 (*History of Daily Life* 2), pp. 183–196; Nicholas I. Orme, *Sufferings of the Clergy. Illness and Old Age in Exeter Diocese, 1300–1540*, in: Margaret Pelling / Richard M. Smith (Eds.), *Life, Death, and the Elderly*, London et al. 1991 (*Studies in the Social History of Medicine*), pp. 62–73.

13 Michel Mollat, *Les Pauvres au Moyen Âge. Étude sociale*, Paris 1978 (*Le temps et les hommes*). In fact, the action of the Church with regard to charity and assistance focused on the poor in general, both young and old. There are no studies, as far as I know, specifically devoted to the elderly poor. We can measure the action of the Church through the history of its foundation of God's houses; for example, cf. Jean-François Cordier, *Lieux d'Assistance et d'Hospitalité au Moyen Âge*, in: *Bulletin de l'Académie Nationale de Médecine* 202,8–9 (2018), pp. 2069–2083.

14 Henri Dubois / Michel Zink (Eds.), *Les Âges de la vie au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1992 (*Cultures et civilisations médiévales* 7); John A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man, A Study of Medieval Writing and Thought*, Oxford 1986. Many medieval authors use a distinction of the ages of man to support their writing and in accordance with their work. Cf., for example, the treatise by Philip of Novara: Philippe de Novare, *Des quatre âges de l'homme. Traité de morale de Philippe de Novare*, ed. by Marcel de Fréville, Paris 1888 (*Société des anciens textes français*); Elisabeth Schulze-Busacker, *Philippe de Novare. Les Quatre âges de l'homme*, in: *Romania* 127, 505–506 (2009), pp. 104–146.

15 Moses I. Finley, *Les personnes âgées dans l'Antiquité classique*, in: *Communications* 37 (1983), pp. 31–45.

16 Jean Gerson in his "Sermon", for example, counts seven ages (Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, *La relève des générations. Sociologie, mythes et réalités*, in: *Revista d'Història Medieval* 5 [1994] pp. 13–40, at p. 16).

17 *L'Enfant au Moyen Âge. Littérature et civilisation*, Aix-en-Provence 1980 (*Sénéfiance* 9); Didier Lett, *L'Enfant des miracles. Enfance et société au Moyen Âge (XII^e–XIII^e siècle)*, Paris 1997 (Col-

started at sixty,¹⁸ which was an age that very few actually reached within an essentially young society.¹⁹

From the viewpoint of medicine, medical treatises devoted little space to ageing, as Marie-Thérèse Lorcin points out.²⁰ According to the Hippocratic tradition,²¹ the body should be cared for in every stage of life and only a few diseases are attributed to a particular age. It is therefore necessary to turn to the medieval *regimina sanitatis* to find some, often scattered, advice for the elderly.²² It is undoubtedly Roger Bacon, building on various sources, above all ancient and Arabic, who took a special interest in old age. Most famous is his “Epistola de retardatione accidentium senectutis”.²³ In this work, Bacon expounds on medicine and miraculous remedies to retard the ageing process, which is

lection historique); Danièle Alexandre-Bidon/Didier Lett, *Les enfants au Moyen Âge (V^e–XV^e siècle)*, Paris 2013.

18 Isidore of Seville puts the limit at 70 years (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*, vol. 2, ed. by Wallace M. Lindsay, Oxford 1911, lib. XI. 2, 6–7; Isidoro di Siviglia, *Etimologie, libro XI [De homine et portentis]*, ed. by Fabio Gasti, Paris 2010 [Auteurs latins du Moyen Âge 20], pp. 107–132 [“De aetatibus hominis”], at p. 108). Bartholomew the Englishman compiles the distinctions by various authors, such as Remigius of Auxerre, Constantine the African, and especially Isidore in the first chapter of Book VI of the “De proprietatibus rerum” (Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, Regensburg 1505, lib. VI, ch. 1 [De etate hominis], s. p.).

19 Georges Duby, *Dans la France du Nord-Ouest au XII^e siècle. Les “jeunes” dans la société aristocratique*, in: *Annales ESC* 19,5 (1964), pp. 835–846; Giovanni Levi/Jean-Claude Schmitt (Eds.), *Histoire des jeunes en Occident, vol. 1: De l’Antiquité à l’époque moderne*, Paris 1996 (L’Univers historique); Didier Lett, *Genre et jeunesse au Moyen Âge*, in: *Genre & Histoire* 5 (2009) (URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/genrehistoire/859>; 7. 6. 2022).

20 Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, *Vieillesse et vieillissement vus par les médecins du Moyen Âge*, in: *Bulletin du Centre Pierre Léon* 4 (1983), pp. 5–22; ead., *Gérontologie et gériatrie au Moyen Âge*, in: *Vieillesse et vieillissement* (see note 6), pp. 201–213.

21 Véronique Boudon-Millot, *La vieillesse est-elle une maladie? Le point de vue de la médecine antique*, in: *Cahiers des études anciennes* 55 (2018), pp. 97–124.

22 Marilyn Nicoud, *Les Régimes de santé au Moyen Âge. Naissance et diffusion d’une écriture médicale (XIII^e–XV^e siècle)*, 2 vols., Rome 2007 (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d’Athènes et Rome 333,1–2).

23 Roger Bacon, *Epistola de retardatione accidentium senectutis*, in: id., *De retardatione accidentium senectutis (cum aliis opusculis de rebus medicinalibus)*, ed. by Andrew G. Little/Edward T. Withington, Oxford 1928 (*Opera hactenus inedita Rogeri Baconis* 9), pp. 1–83; Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, *Il mito della *prolongatio vitae* e la corte pontificia del Duecento. Il *De retardatione accidentium senectutis**, in: id., *Medicina e Scienze della natura alla corte dei papi del Duecento*, Spoleto 1991 (Biblioteca di Medioevo latino 4), pp. 281–326. The “De conservanda juventute et retardanda senectute” attributed to Arnau de Vilanova is largely based on the mentioned treatise (Arnaldus

revealing of the fact that it is youth (around 25–30 years of age) that is regarded as being the prime of life. At the end of the 15th century, Galen's work was again thoroughly studied, leading Gabriele Zerbi to publish his "Gerentocomia" in 1489, which one can consider a *summa* of the geriatric knowledge from the Renaissance.²⁴ In the medical and also encyclopaedic discourse, old age is characterised primarily by the greying or whitening of the hair²⁵ which is due to phlegm and the loss of the inner heat and humidity, as, for example, Jean Corbechon, the translator of Bartholomew the Englishman into French, notes in the "Livre des propriétés des choses".²⁶ But although the elderly person's complexion becomes frail, his or her mental capacities, above all wisdom, increase.²⁷ This concept, that one may call "good ageing" or "good old age" can be found, for instance, in

Villanovanus, *De conservanda iuventute et retardanda senectute*, in: Arnaldi Villanovani Opera Medica Omnia, Basel 1585, cc. 813–838).

24 Gabriele Zerbi, *Gerentocomia*, Roma 1489; Gabriele Zerbi, *Gerentocomia. On the Care of the Aged and Maximianus. Elegies on Old Age and Love*, transl. by Levi R. Lind, Philadelphia 1988 (Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society 182). On this topic, cf. Natale Gaspare De Santo / Carmela Bisaccia / Rosa Maria De Santo / Alain Touwaide, *The Pre-Vesalian Kidney. Gabriele Zerbi. 1445–1505*, in: *American Journal of Nephrology* 22 (2002), pp. 164–171; Margaret Wade Labarge, *Gerentocomia. On the Care of the Aged. A Fifteenth Century Italian Guide by Gabriele Zerbi (1445–1505)*, in: Rowena E. Archer (Ed.), *Crown, Government and People in the Fifteenth Century*, Stroud 1995, pp. 209–221.

25 On the symbolism of hair in medieval literature, cf. Chantal Connochie-Bourgne (Ed.), *La chevelure dans la littérature et l'art du Moyen Âge*, Aix-en-Provence 2004 (Senefiance 50).

26 Barthélemy l'Anglais, *Livre des propriétés des choses*, transl. by Jean Corbechon, lib. V, ms. franç. BNF 16993, fol. 73 v. Cf. also Roger Bacon and Sydrac the Philosopher: Roger Bacon, *Epistola de retardatione* (see note 23), p. 6; Sydrac le philosophe, *Le Livre de la fontaine de toutes sciences*, ed. by Ernstpeter Ruhe, Wiesbaden 2000 (Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter 34), § 856, p. 28.

27 As for Sydrac: "Les vieulx si ont l'ame plus ferme et plus sage et plus sachante de faire toutes choses, car ele a plus oÿ et plus veu et plus usé de faire les choses" (Sydrac le philosophe, *Le livre de la fontaine* [see note 26], § 471, p. 187). "Elderly people have a stronger soul, are wiser and more learned because they have heard more, seen more and are more experimented being used to do a lot of things" (own translation). "Le viell doit plus apprendre que le joenne, car il a plus cler entendement" (ibid., § 717, p. 252). "The old man should learn more than a young man because he has a better understanding" (own translation). As for Isidore of Seville: "Senectus autem multa secum et bona et mala. Bona, quia nos ab inpuidentissimis dominis liberat, uoluptatibus inponit modum, libidinis frangit impetus, auget sapientiam, dat maturiora consilia: mala autem, quia senium miserrimum est debilitate et odio" (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiarum libri* [see note 18], lib. XI. 2, 30). "Old age brings with it both good and bad things. Good things because it frees us from unbridled lords, gives moderation to pleasures, destroys desire, increases wisdom and enables one to give prudent advice. It brings bad things because very miserable old age is characterised by weakness and hate" (own translation).

Petrarch²⁸ and in a number of texts, especially from the late Middle Ages, for example, in the “Passe temps” by the 15th-century Burgundian poet Michault Caron, also known as Taillevent.²⁹

2 The Old Man

Medieval narrative literature portrays many older or old men with different characteristics and ways of behaving in both a positive and negative light. Whatever the genre – epic, courteous, satirical, allegorical – the old man presents a rather flat and topical description in accordance with the features that prevail in medical and encyclopaedic texts, i. e. the whiteness of his hair and beard. One can here mention Charlemagne with his white beard and head³⁰ and his faithful adviser, Naimes de Bavière, who is also white-bearded, and – in a very different tradition, namely didactic – as the wise Dolopathos, whose “head was white and hoary” (“chiés estoit blans et chanuz”).³¹ In the allegorical-didactic genre, the hermit Arsène of Philippe de Mézières’ “Songe du vieil Pélerin” (“The Dream of the Old Pilgrim”) is described as having hair that is whiter than snow.³² Furthermore, the “Roman de Renart” obviously plays on this topos, as Renart at the time of his judgement cunningly announces: “G’ai tote chenué la gorge. / Vels sui, si ne me puis me aidier, / Si n’ai

28 Francesco Pétrarque, *Lettres de la vieillesse. Rerum senilium libri*, ed. by Elvira Nota; transl. by Frédérique Castelli/François Fabre/Antoine de Rosny, 5 vols., Paris 2002–2013 (*Les classiques de l’humanisme*).

29 “De Viellesse suiz bien content / Bien sçay qu’il fault viel devenir / Et aussi sçay je bien qu’on tent / Tousjours a la fin a venir ... Qui despent temps en bon usage / Il est de joye aprez refait / En ses vieulx jours / pour ce bon fait / Mener sa vie riglement” (Michault Taillevent, *Un poète bourguignon du XV^e siècle. Édition et étude*, ed. by Robert Deschaux, Genève 1975 [*Publications romanes et françaises* 132], vv. 21–24, 605–608). “I’m happy of old age. I know that we have to become old. And I also know that we always go to the end ... Who is spending his time in a good manner is rewarded in his old days. That is why it is good to get on with one’s life wisely” (own translation).

30 “Blanche ad la barbe e tut flurit le chef” ([La] *Chanson de Roland*, ed. by Cesare Segre, Genève 2003 [*Textes littéraires français* 368], v. 117).

31 (Le) *Roman de Dolopathos*. Édition du manuscrit H 436 de la Bibliothèque de l’École de médecine de Montpellier, vol. 1, ed. by Jean-Luc Leclanche, Paris 1997 (*Les Classiques français du Moyen Âge* 124), v. 1104. This text is to be considered in the tradition of the “Seven Wise Men of Rome”.

32 Philippe de Mézières, *Le Songe du Vieil Pelerin*, vol. 1, ed. by George W. Coopland, Cambridge 1969, p. 192.

mes cure de plaidier”,³³ in order to escape justice. Exaggeration is employed as well: the influence of the Old Testament and its extreme old patriarchs is certain, which explains why more than a hundred years of age are very often attributed to Charlemagne,³⁴ and even to William of Orange in the “Moniage”.³⁵

Cicero’s “De Senectute” left a lasting trace in the Middle Ages and beyond concerning the representation of old age as a period of life marked by wisdom, measure, moderation, and reason which overcomes the passions and whose role model is Cato the Elder.³⁶ The influence of the work increased at the end of the Middle Ages, when France was in turmoil,³⁷ under the influence of Petrarch³⁸ and Laurent de Premierfait’s

33 *Le Roman de Renart*, ed. by Jean Dufournet, Paris 1970 (Garnier-Flammarion 233), branche I, vv. 1266–1267. “My head is all white / I am old, when I am no longer able to sustain myself / So I cannot plead no more” (own translation).

34 In “Song of Roland”, Blancandrin tells that Charlemagne “he is very old, he is worn out. In my opinion, he is more than hundred years old”, “est mult vielz, si ad sun tens user / Men escient dous cenz anz ad passet” ([La] *Chanson de Roland*, ed. by Segre [see note 30], Genève 2003, vv. 523–524). The juggler in “Gaydon” attributes two hundred years to Charlemagne (Gaydon. *Chanson de geste du XIII^e siècle*, ed. by Jean Subrenat, Louvain-Paris 2007 [Ktēmata 19], v. 10543).

35 *Les deux rédactions en vers du Moniage Guillaume, chansons de geste du XII^e siècle*, vol. 1, ed. by Wilhelm Cloetta, Paris 1906, v. 7.

36 Regarding the success of the “Disticha Catonis”, cf. Birger Munk Olsen, *L’étude des auteurs classiques latins aux XI^e et XII^e siècles*. Catalogue des manuscrits classiques latins copiés du IX^e au XII^e siècle, vol. 1, Paris 1982 (Documents, études et répertoires), pp. 61–86 (Dionysius Cato, Cato Minor); Richard Hazelton, “The Christianization of ‘Cato’”. *The Disticha Catonis in the Light of Late Medieval Commentaries*, in: *Mediaeval Studies* 19 (1957), pp. 157–173; Ernstpeter Ruhe, *Untersuchungen zu den altfranzösischen Übersetzungen der Disticha Catonis*, München 1968 (Beiträge zur romanischen Philologie des Mittelalters 2).

37 At the end of the Middle Ages, the kingdom of France was in such turmoil (Hundred Years’ War, plague, civil war etc.) that it was thought ‘that God had abandoned it’. During that period texts full of morbidity appeared. They convey the image of a tragic and sudden death that can hit people from all walks of life just as the genre of the “Dance of Death” does. On the other hand, as a counterpoint to the brevity of life, a long life was praised and associated with wisdom in old age.

38 In his “Letters of Old Age”, Petrarch emphasis the need to train one’s memory, which is an aspect that medieval literature takes little account of (Laure Hermand-Schebat, “Lege memoriter”. *Lecture, écriture et mémoire chez Pétrarque*, in: Hélène Casanova-Robin [Ed.], *Écritures latines de la mémoire de l’Antiquité au XVI^e siècle*, Paris 2010 [Colloques, congrès et conférences sur la Renaissance européenne 66], pp. 267–284, at pp. 8–9; ead., *Pétrarque épistolier et Cicéron. Étude d’une filiation*, Paris 2011 [Rome et ses renaissances]). Petrarch begins to be well known in France in the milieu of the first so-called French Humanism, with scholars and writers such as Jean Gerson, Jean de Montreuil, Laurent le Premierfait, and Nicolas de Clamanges, who intended to retrieve a classical Latin as that of Cicero. On this topic, cf. Dario Cecchetti, “Sic me Cicero laudare docuerat.”

French translation of “De Senectute”³⁹. The connection between old age and wisdom is a moral and literary topos repeated in many texts. When, for example, wise men are to be summoned, as in the “Sept Sages de Rome” (“Seven Wise Men of Rome”), they are old.⁴⁰

The old man is a positive character in basically three respects: firstly, as a man of experience, for he acts as an adviser to the young in matters of chivalry and courtesy, secondly, he is a person who gives advice concerning custom, law and good conduct to be observed on various occasions, and which, especially in military matters should be listened to, and, finally, it is worthwhile to follow his example in terms of faith and morals. In the latter case, narrative literature offers an archetype, that of the hermit, a recurrent character in the novels of chivalry. As Pierre Jonin notes, old age and the hermit are strongly linked as a topos.⁴¹ As one example of many, one can cite the description of the character in “Robert le Diable” (“Robert the Devil”): “Es vous venu l’iermite esrant / Le saint homme kenu, ferrant / Sur une potente que il tient / Tout apoiant au postic vient”.⁴² The hermit’s age is associated with wisdom, as Henri d’Arci notes in his “Vitas

La retorica nel primo umanesimo francese, in: Carla Bozzolo/Ezio Ornato (Eds.), *Préludes à la Renaissance. Aspects de la vie intellectuelle en France au XV^e siècle*, Paris 1992, pp. 47–106. For a synthesis and bibliography on French Humanism, cf. Yelena Mazour-Matisevich, *Gerson et Pétrarque. Humanisme et l’idée nationale*, in: *Renaissance and Reformation. New Series 25,1* (2001), pp. 45–80; cf. also *L’Humanisme français au début de la Renaissance. XIV^e colloque international de Tours*, Paris 1973 (De Pétrarque à Descartes 29); Matteo Roccati, *La formation des humanistes dans le dernier quart du XIV^e siècle*, in: Monique Ornato/Nicole Pons (Eds.), *Pratiques de la culture écrite en France au XV^e siècle*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1995 (Textes et études du moyen âge 2), pp. 55–73.

39 Laurent de Premierfait, *Livre de vieillesse*, ed. Stefania Marzano, Turnhout 2009 (Texte, codex & contexte 6).

40 Voir Régine Colliot, *La mauvaise vieillesse des Sept Sages de Rome*, in: *Vieillesse et vieillissement* (see note 6), pp. 55–71, at p. 59. Regarding this novel, cf. Yasmina Fochr-Janssens, *Le Temps des fables. Le Roman des Sept Sages, ou l’autre voie du roman*, Paris 1994 (Nouvelle bibliothèque du moyen âge 27).

41 Pierre Jonin, *Des premiers ermites à ceux de la Queste del Saint Graal*, in: *Annales de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines d’Aix-en-Provence 44* (1968), pp. 293–350, at p. 327. Paul Bretel, however, mentions cases of young hermits (Paul Bretel, *Les ermites et les moines dans la littérature française du Moyen Âge [1150–1250]*, Paris 1995 [Nouvelle bibliothèque du Moyen Âge 32], pp. 483–484).

42 *Robert le Diable*, ed. by Élisabeth Gaucher, Paris 2006 (Champion classiques. Série Moyen Âge 17), vv. 971–974. “The hermit came straight away, the old and hoary saintly man. He went to the gate leaning on a stick he held in his hand” (own translation). The famous hermit, Ogrin, in “Tristan” by Béroul also uses a walking stick (Béroul, *Tristan*, in: *Tristan et Iseut. Les poèmes*

Patrum” speaking of a “a saint hermit who is an aged and wise man”.⁴³ Exaggerating the chronological age can underline this aspect, as in the case of the hermit of more than one hundred years who is presented in the Third “Continuation de Perceval”, written by Manessier.⁴⁴

Chrétien de Troyes, in “Le Chevalier de la charrette” (“The Knight of the Cart”), depicts a significant scene of an old knight reprimanding a young man, in this case his son, in the episode where Lancelot arrives on his cart of infamy at a meadow where young ladies and bachelors enjoy various games. The description of the old man – “extremely aged” (“hors d’âge”) and “hoary” (“chenu”) – above all his countenance and the richness of his harness and clothing, clearly reflect his positive character: “Uns chevaliers auques d’ahé / estoit de l’autre part del pré / sor un cheval d’Espagne sor, s’avoit lorain et sele d’or / et s’estoit de chienes meslez / Une main a l’un de ses lez / avoit par contenance mise ... Un mantel ot par ses espauls, d’escarlata et de veir antier”.⁴⁵ He tries to calm the temper of his son because he suspects that Lancelot will defeat him. Faced with the young man’s stubbornness, he is forced to have him seized and tied up for his own good.

In chivalric literature, the wisdom of the aged man is often indicated by the term *preudhomme* which means “a wise or prudent man”. This term, however, remains ambiguous with respect to exact age. A few explicit references that reveal that *preudhomme* refers to an elderly man will be now considered. In the “Queste del Saint Graal”, when Gauvain, after the episode of the “Castle of the Virgins”, meets a hermit, he decides to confess to him, as he inspires his confidence by being at an age that implies *preudom-*

français, la saga norroise, ed. by Daniel Lacroix/Philippe Walter, Paris 1989, pp. 22–231, at p. 84, v. 1368). It can be noted that Ogrin’s advice is not always moral, as is apparent in the second meeting where the hermit acts as a de facto accomplice to the ‘false true’ oath (Bernard Ribémont, Justice et procédure dans le Tristan de Béroul, in: Méthode. Revue de littératures française et comparée [2011], pp. 1–14). Additionally, one can mention the hermit in the “Chevalier au barisel” who “heavily leans on his cane”, “tout apoiant / li febles hom de son baston” (Chevalier au barisel. Conte pieux du XIII^e siècle, ed. by Felix Lecoy, Paris 1965 [Classiques français du Moyen Âge 82], vv. 212–213); Bernard Ribémont, Sur quelques aspects de la relation vieillesse/sagesse au Moyen Âge. L’exemple du Chevalier au barisel, in: Vieillesse et vieillissement [see note 6], pp. 299–316).

43 Bretel, Les ermites (see note 41), p. 485.

44 Manessier, The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes, vol. 5: The Third Continuation, ed. by William Roach, Philadelphia 1983, vv. 5, 37513.

45 Chrétien de Troyes, Le Chevalier de la charrette, ed. by Catherine Croizy-Naquet, Paris 2006 (Champion classiques 18), vv. 1655–1665. “A very old knight with some grey hair was on the other side of the field, mounted on a golden-coated horse from Spain. It had reins and saddle made of gold. The man, to put on a bold front, had put his hand on his hip ... He wore on his shoulders a coat entirely made of precious scarlet material and fur” (own translation).

mie (“wisdom”).⁴⁶ The role model of an aged educator can be illustrated by Gornemont de Gohort from Chrétien de Troyes’ “Conte du Graal”. His age is not specified, but he is accompanied by two young men, “vaslets”, which suggests that he is already of an advanced age. In addition, he is constantly referred to as a “prodon”. In “Erec et Enide”, Chrétien also presents the wisdom of the old man through the character of Enide’s father, who shows all the qualities of courtesy in spite of his poverty. The portrait given is topical as well: “Un vavassor d’auques de jorz / Mes mout estoit povre sa corz / Biaux hon estoit, chenuz et blans / De bon’eire, jantis et frans”.⁴⁷ Finally, it should be pointed out that an elderly man, if he possesses the qualities of wisdom and courtesy, can also be a master of certain special knowledge. This is the case with regard to medicine in the “Mort du roi Arthur”. When Lancelot was seriously injured by Bohort at the Winchester tournament, an old knight was called in.⁴⁸

The last major positive facet of the elderly man’s wisdom, which is not independent of the preceding ones, is that of a wise counsellor. According to feudal customs, the vassal owed two main services to his lord, namely *auxilium* and *consilium*. Counsel is most often needed when a serious decision has to be taken, for example in the case of war, or when a court of law is to be held. In chivalric literature, therefore, counsellors are portrayed in situations which, although fictional, are modelled on the practices of feudal society. It is in the *chanson de geste* that scenes of councils, trials and embassies are given a lot of importance. They are recurrent motifs, true *topoi*, which repeat and recreate

46 “Et mesires Gauvains resgarde le preudome, si le voit vielet ancien, et tant li semble preudons que si li prent talent de fere soi confés a lui” (La Queste del Saint Graal. Roman du XIII^e siècle, ed. by Albert Pauphilet, Paris 1980 [Les classiques français du Moyen Âge 33], p. 54). “And Monsignor Gauvain looks at the prudent man and sees that he is very old; and he seems so wise that he decides to confess to him” (own translation).

47 Chrétien de Troyes, Erec et Enide, ed. by Michel Rousse, Paris 1994 (GF 763. Bilingue), vv. 375–378. “A very old vassal, the court of whom was poor, was a gentle man, hoary with white hair, from a noble birth, noble and free hearted” (own translation).

48 “Et quant li chevaliers voit la plaie, si en est touz esmaiez, si mande au plus tost que il puet I vielz chevalier qui près d’iluec manoit, qui s’entremetoit de plaies garir et plus en savoit que nus qui el país fust” ([La] Mort le roi Artu, ed. by Emmanuèle Baumgartner / Marie-Thérèse de Medeiros, Paris 2007 [Champion classiques. Moyen Âge 20], p. 72). “And when the knight sees the wound, he is deeply moved; so, as soon as he is able to, he asks for an old knight living in the area who knew how to cure wounds and had the best knowledge in that field throughout the country” (own translation).

the image of the wise old counsellor. The most famous is certainly Naime de Bavière,⁴⁹ Charlemagne's faithful counsellor, the one whom the Oxford manuscript describes as "his best vassal at court".⁵⁰ He is closest to the emperor who, after having consulted his barons, relies on him for "good personal advice" in the "Roland version" of Paris. He is the one who regularly "puts the king to reason",⁵¹ because he is, as Aiquin's juggler says, "a man of utmost prudence" ("hom de sen assis").⁵² It is on him that Charlemagne leans when he faints, as is described in the Paris version of "Roland", for example.⁵³ Generally speaking, the epic tradition presents him as a sage *par excellence*, the *Weise* of the "Rolandslied".⁵⁴ It is undoubtedly the "Chanson d'Aspremont" which offers the longest portrayal of him:

"Tel conseillier n'orent onques li Franc;
Il n'aloit mie les barons aspirant.
Ne ne donna conseil petit ne grant
Par coi proudome deserité fussant,
Les veves fames ne li petit anfant.
...
Les frans linages fist au roi essaucier,
Et dou servise son seignor aprochier.
Em poi de terme les sot si avemicier
Que n'i estut achoison apuier".⁵⁵

49 For information on this character, cf. Gerhard Moldenhauer, Herzog Naimen im altfranzösischen Epos, Halle 1922; Jean Subrenat, Les "vieux sages" épiques (l'exemple de Naimen de Bavière, Rioul des Mans dans Gaydon), in: Vieillesse et vieillissement (see note 6), pp. 413–424.

50 La Chanson de Roland, ed. by Segre (see note 30), v. 231.

51 La Chanson de Roland. The French Corpus, vol. 3, ed. by Joseph J. Duggan, Turnhout 2005, V/193, v. 2434.

52 Aiquin ou la conquête de la Bretagne par le roi Charlemagne, ed. by Francis Jacques, Aix-en-Provence 1979 (Senefiance 8), v. 439.

53 La Chanson de Roland, vol. 3, ed. by Duggan (see note 51), IV/282, vv. 4767–4768.

54 Das Rolandslied, ed. by Karl Bartsch, Leipzig 1874 (Deutsche Dichtungen des Mittelalters 3), p. 41.

55 Aspremont. Chanson de geste du XII^e siècle, ed. by François Suard, Paris 2008 (Champion classiques. Moyen Âge 23), vv. 4–27. "The Franks never had such a counsellor. He did not wish harm for the knights and never gave any advice, however little or important, that could be bad for proud people, widows or children ... He advised the king to support the noble lineages, permitting them to be on duty by his side. In a short time, he improved their position, so that there was nothing to say about them" (own translation).

Even if Naime is not always identified as an old man – he is still a courageous warrior both in “Roland” and “Aspremont” – the regular mention of his sons who are knights (Bertrand of the song “Gui de Bourgogne”) and his nephews indicates that he is not a young man anymore. Some songs are more explicit in attributing traditional signs of old age to him. In the “Cambridge Version” of “Roland”, he is portrayed as being an old man “having a white beard and greying hair” (“blanche avoir la barbe et tout le pel ferrant”);⁵⁶ the same portrayal is also found in the “Venice 4 Version”.⁵⁷ The epic “Fierabras” repeatedly mentions his “greyish beard”, “guernon meslez” (c. 2682). In the same song, one also finds “Naime the white-bearded”, “Nainmon le floris”.⁵⁸ These topical attributes of the elderly man are not exclusively reserved for Christians. Naime’s counterpart in the “Roland” can be seen in Blancandrin, the Sarracen King Marsile’s adviser. In the Oxford manuscript, he himself mentions his beard which descends down to his chest and, in the “Venice 4 Version”, the juggler says about him: “Blançandin est plus saçes çivaler / blança oit la barbe et lo vis cler / De vassalaçe ert pro et bier / prodom est por son signor aider.”⁵⁹

The *chanson de geste* “Gui de Bourgogne” offers an unconventional example of the treatment of the relationship between *juvenes* and *senes*. Indeed, when Gui orders his young knights to prepare an expedition to rescue the old men who are stuck in the mud before Córdoba, he orders his troops to set off in chariots on which they should carry the old men. This author states, with a somewhat astonishing precision: “Quant li jone seront as ruistes cous doner / Et li viel demorront por bons consaus doner”.⁶⁰

It is relatively rare to find, but nonetheless noteworthy about the *senex*, that he can also be portrayed as a man of extreme generosity towards his children or towards the young in general. A good example is provided by the *fabliau* “La Housse partie”, a text in which a *preudon*, a widower who was very old, gives away all his possessions in order to be able to marry his son to a young lady whose father demands the couple’s property in

56 La Chanson de Roland, vol. 3, ed. by Duggan (see note 51), V/97, v. 11.

57 “Davanti Çarlo et li dux Naimes venu, / blança la barba et tut lo pel çanu” (La Chanson de Roland, vol. 1, ed. by Duggan [see note 51], II/112, v. 703).

58 Fierabras. Chanson de geste du XII^e siècle, ed. by Marc Le Person, Paris 2003 (Les classiques français du Moyen Âge 142), v. 1799.

59 La Chanson de Roland, vol. 1, ed. by Duggan (see note 51), II/88, vv. 27–30. “Blancandin is a wise knight; he has a white beard and a light face. He is a brave and valiant knight, bold to help his lord” (own translation).

60 Gui de Bourgogne. Chanson de geste du XIII^e siècle, ed. by Françoise E. Denis / William W. Kibler, Paris 2019 (Classiques français du Moyen Âge 187), vv. 243–244 (ms. Tours). “When the young knights will be busy to give hard blows, the old ones will stay in the background to give good advice” (own translation).

its entirety. He will later regret his generosity because of his daughter-in-law's behaviour which is described as "proud and haughty".⁶¹

But while old age gives man wisdom, it also weakens the body, rendering the valiant knight as a so-called "recreant" who is no longer capable of fulfilling his military duties, that are the basis of his life and honour. The emperor of "Huon de Bordeaux" gives a very striking description of the frailty of his body.⁶² Olivier de la Marche, speaking to Philip "the Fair", Duke of Burgundy, regrets that he can no longer serve him in accordance with his vassal duties.⁶³ The "Châteauroux-Venice 7" manuscript portrays a Charlemagne who has become weak due to old age and has to lean on Naimes, who is younger than him.⁶⁴ In the song "Anseïs de Carthage", when the angel appears to entrust him with the mission of liberating the city from the hands of the Saracens, Charles acknowledges his age and weakness.⁶⁵ Even if nothing is specified with regard to his exact age, one can wonder about Chrétien de Troyes' King Arthur in "Yvain", "Chevalier de la Charrette" and "Conte du Graal". In these three works, Arthur displays complete helplessness in facing the provocations of the knights who come to offend him in front of his court. In "Yvain", while Calogrenant falls victim to chivalrous dishonour, Arthur goes to take a rest.

61 La Housse partie, in: *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles*, vol. 1, ed. by Anatole de Montaiglon/Gaston Raynaud, Paris 1872, pp. 82–96.

62 "Viez sus et fraille, si ai le poil chaingier / .IX.xx. ans ait que montait sor destrier / Et .vii.xx. ans que fuit fait chevalier / Li corps me tramble soz l'ermine dougiér / Je ne peüs mais errer ne chavalchier" (Huon de Bordeaux. *Chanson de geste du XIII^e siècle*, ed. William W. Kibler/François Suard, Paris 2003 [Champion classiques. Moyen Âge 7], vv. 81–85). "I am old and weak, and my hair whitened. I have ridden for 180 years on a steed and there are 140 years that I was dubbed. My limbs are trembling under the fine ermine. I can't ride and travel anymore" (own translation).

63 "A cause de mon viel eage ne vous puis faire service personnellement selon mon desir, tant en armes, en ambassades et aultres travaux" (Olivier de la Marche, *Mémoires d'Olivier de la Marche*, vol. 1, ed. by Henri Beaune/Jean d'Arbaumont, Paris 1883 [Société de l'Histoire de France 213], p. 9). "Upon my desire, because of my old age, I cannot be anymore on duty by you, as well as in war, diplomatic missions or other duties" (own translation).

64 "Au col Naimon s'apoia, ce m'est vis / Blanche ot la barbe plus que n'est flor de lis" (La Chanson de Roland, vol. 2, ed. by Duggan [see note 51], III/432, vv. 7623–7624). "In my opinion, he leant on Naimes' shoulder. His beard was whiter than a lily flower" (own translation).

65 "Or me covient ostoier, che m'est vis / Mais tant sui foibles et de fort mal aquis / Ne m'a mestier palefrois ne ronchis / A moi porter, trop sui vieus et afflis" (Anseïs de Carthage / Anseïs von Karthago, ed. by Johann Alton, Tübingen 1892 [Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart 194], vv. 9320–9323). "I think I have to rest; I am so weak and in a bad state. Neither palfrey nor pack horse has to carry me; I am too old and decrepit" (own translation).

It must be noted, however, that the association between advanced age and bodily weakness is not systematic in epic literature. Naimes is also a valiant fighter and the old Aymeri of Narbonne still has all his strength to chase away his sons and to slap his wife in “Les Narbonnais” where, although “having a white beard, he has a bright looking face”.⁶⁶ At the beginning of “Roland”, the juggler draws parallels between the young and the old who repose after having fought in battle, associating old knights with wisdom. The two groups are contrasted, but it is understood that both fought for seven years in Spain, which shows that the physical characteristics linked to old age do not always automatically appear in a stereotypical manner.⁶⁷ The traits that are actually mentioned rather depend on the characters’ function and the genre of the text.

Physical weakness due to advanced age may also be associated with mental impairment. Depending on the perspective and nature of the text, the topos of the ‘childish’ and ‘foolish’ king is formed. In “Gaydon”, for example, Charles, who follows bad advice, is described as being “childish” (“assoté”).⁶⁸ The same is true in “Huon of Bordeaux”, when the emperor is so enraged with Huon that even Naime calls him “foolish” (“rasoté”), daring to tell him straight to his face that “you have become very childish in your old age”.⁶⁹

Medieval narrative literature thus depicts the older man using a rich variety of facets. On the one hand, the old man is wise through his life experience, even if it may have been very challenging, and through this life experience, he gains the ability to act prudently. Therefore, old age can be regarded as a “good companion” as Jean de Meun does.⁷⁰ On the other hand, there are negative facets such as physical frailty and mental weakness. Jean de Condé draws a very negative portrait of the old man in his “Lay dou blanc chevalier”,

66 “Blanche ot la barbe, si ot fresche color” (Les Narbonnais. *Chanson de geste*, vol. 1, ed. by Hermann Suchier, Paris 1898 [Société des anciens textes français 42], v. 26).

67 “As tables jüent pur els esbaneir / E as eschecs li plus saive et li veill / E escremissent cil bachelier leger” ([La] *Chanson de Roland*, ed. by Segre [see note 30], vv. 111–113). “For their entertainment, the older and wiser ones, play checkers and chess whereas the young knights are jousting” (own translation).

68 Gaydon, ed. by Subrenat (see note 34), v. 3314.

69 “Qu’èn vo vieillece estes tous asotis” (Cited by Micheline de Combarieu, *Les “vieux fous” épiques*, in: *Vieillesse et vieillissement* [see note 6], pp. 367–390, at p. 379).

70 “Vieillece, qui les acompaigne / Qui mout lor est bonne compaigne / Qu’el les ramaine a droite voie / Et jusqu’èn la fin les convoie” (Guillaume de Lorris/Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. by Armand Strubel, Paris 1992 [Le livre de poche. *Lettres gothiques* 4533], vv. 4483–4486). “Old Age is going with them; he is a good companion who gets them on the straight and narrow and is on their side till the end” (own translation).

referring to a niggling and avaricious person full of bitterness.⁷¹ While the treatment of the old man is, in general, rather ambivalent, the old woman, in contrast, is portrayed in a much more one-sided and caricatural way which will be shown in the following section. Despite some similarities, considerable differences can be observed between the representation of the old man and that of the old woman.⁷²

3 The Old Woman

It cannot be said that the old woman is always presented in a negative way. A positive image is given, for example, of Ermengarde, the wife of Aymeri de Narbonne, “the wise” (“la sachante”), as the juggler of Guibert d’Adrenas calls her.⁷³ This work takes up the scene from “Les Narbonnais”, when Aymeri chases away his sons. He alludes to his old age, mentioning his “old body” and the rest he intends to take together with his wife (vv. 310–311).⁷⁴ Ermengarde, on the other hand, is described as a caring mother and a courageous woman who does not hesitate to defy her husband in order to remind him of the law of inheritance.⁷⁵

Although their age is not specified, the positive portrayal of some women in epics can be mentioned. The beginning of the “Moniage Guillaume” shows Guillaume d’Orange broken by the death of his wife Guibourc and deciding, as he is an old man, to retire from the world. Aye d’Avignon – the eponymous heroine of the epic “Aye d’Avignon” – is described in a very positive way.⁷⁶ During the “Geste de Nanteuil” she experiences many adventures and two marriages. The end of “Gui de Nanteuil” implicitly

71 “Ch’est de viel homme la coustume / Rioteus et plains d’amertume / Et avarissieus devient” (Baudoin de Condé/Jean de Condé, *Dits et Contes de Baudoin de Condé et de son fils Jean*, ed. by Auguste Scheler, vol. 2, Bruxelles 1866–1867, vv. 521–523). “The old man usually becomes a ‘moaneur’, full of bitterness and avaricious” (own translation).

72 A PhD thesis on this subject is currently being written by Julien Maudoux at the University of Bordeaux-III under the direction of Danièle James-Raoul and Géraldine Puccini.

73 Guibert d’Adrenas, ed. by Muriel Ott, Paris 2004 (*Les classiques français du Moyen Âge* 147), v. 531.

74 “Dormir porré en ma sale hautaigne / Entre les bras Hermanjart ma compaigne” (ibid., vv. 236–237). “I’ll be able to sleep in my upper room between the arms of my wife Hermenjart” (own translation).

75 *Les Narbonnais*, ed. by Suchier (see note 66), vv. 364–373.

76 Bernard Ribémont, *Droit des fiefs, droit matrimonial. Du juridique au code d’honneur et au motif épique. Le cas d’Aye d’Avignon*, in: Émilie Goudeau/Françoise Laurent/Michel Quéreuil

presents Aye who has aged, according to the logic of the two songs “Aye d’Avignon” and “Gui de Nanteuil”. The fact that her exact age is not given is a matter of the logic of the genre. It is significant, for example, that the text “Gui de Nanteuil” continuously stresses the formula “Ganor and Aye, his wife” (“Ganor et Aye sa moillier”). From this point of view, their age underlines the high level of wisdom they have reached in relation to both their husbands and their children. But, at the same time, a woman who is the wife of a hero, is necessarily beautiful which is why the phrase “bright face” (“vis cler”) is recurrently found also with reference to elderly women. Not explicitly mentioning a woman’s physical signs of old age therefore helps to maintain their positive image.

Old age is, however, hardly favourable to women, and negative examples abound. In his satirical Bible, Guiot de Provins contrasts the three virtues of Charity, Truth and Righteousness with three “old abhorrent” ones which “are ugly and cruel” (“moult sont et laides et cruels”), namely Treason, Hypocrisy and Simony.⁷⁷ The female figure of “Vieillesse”, painted on the wall that encloses the “Garden of Love” in the “Roman de la Rose” by Guillaume de Lorris is portrayed in the company of vices such as envy, avarice and hypocrisy: topically, her head is “white” (“chenue”) and “white as if it was snow” (“blanche cum s’el fust florie”). She is “childish”, her body is “dry”, her face is wrinkled, her ears are “mossy”, and she has lost all her teeth. One also finds the topos of the needed walking stick.⁷⁸

If, then, the portrait of the old man is generally not very detailed, that of the woman, on the other hand, presents many repellent aspects to clearly mark the loss of youth, which is revealed not only by physical weakness, but also and above all by hideousness, which can even reach grotesque proportions. This can be exemplified by the following description of the old woman Heaumière de Villon: “Le front ridé, les cheveux griz / Les sourciz cheux, les yeulx estains ... Nez courbes, de beaulté loingtaings / Oreilles pendentes, moussues / Le vizz paly, mort et destains / Menton froncé, levres peaussues ...”.⁷⁹ In the same way, the *fabliaux* of 13th century do not spare elderly women who are no longer capable of leading the trio “cuckolded husband, lover, and cunning

(Eds.), *Le Monde entour et environ. La geste, la route et le livre dans la littérature médiévale*, Clermont-Ferrand 2017 (Erga 14), pp. 133–142.

77 Guiot de Provins, *Les Œuvres de Guiot de Provins, poète lyrique et satirique*, ed. by John Orr, Manchester 1915 (Publications of the University of Manchester. Série française 1), v. 1145.

78 “Tant par estoit de grant viellune / Qu’el n’alast mie la montance / De quatre toises sans potence” (Roman de la rose, ed. by Strubel [see note 70], vv. 358–360). “She was so old that she was not able to walk four toises without a stick” (own translation).

79 François Villon, *Le Testament*, ed. by Mühlethaler (see note 4), vv. 509–516.

woman". The description of an old mother in "Le prêtre qui ot mere a force" ("The Priest who Raped the Mother") offers a particularly repulsive portrait.⁸⁰

Such a description stands in contrast to the topical description of the young woman – the 'top model' of the time – who is blonde, with a bright, rose-coloured face and blue eyes ("vairs"). Therefore, the old woman most often represents the counterpart which almost automatically places her in the field of seduction and sexuality. Indeed, in chivalric literature as in the poetry written by *troubadours* and *trouvères*, the woman, the *domna*, is the object of seduction. The eye is considered to be the principal organ through which one falls in love: Cupid's arrow passes through it to strike the heart, as Guillaume de Lorris reminds us.⁸¹ The man's gaze on the woman is thus determined by her beauty.

Having become ugly with regard to the contemporary criteria of youth and beauty, the old woman is thrown into some kind of dark sphere that makes it quite easy to apply a lot of negative characteristics to her. This is in accordance with the idea that the soul is the image of the body and vice versa. The way is thus open for matchmaking, cantankerousness, jealousy, envy and ridiculous lechery. From the prologue of the "Belle Hélène de Constantinople" onward, the juggler castigates the "evil old woman" ("malle vielle"), Henry's mother, for causing Helen's misfortunes by her nastiness.⁸² In his version in verses, Wauquelin insists on the wickedness of "the old queen, who is so full of envy and bad intentions".⁸³ In a similar register of envy, jealousy and vile conspiracy against a young woman, Adenet le Roi presents Berthe's governess as the cause of her misfortunes, which is, according to the traditional pattern of *prolepsis*, identical to that of the juggler of the "Belle Hélène de Constantinople" in verse, when he speaks of an "ugly repulsive

80 "Mout felonnesses et mout avere / Bochue estoit, noire et hideuse / Et de tous biens contralieuse / Tout li mont l'avoit contre cuer" (Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux, vol. 5, ed. by Willem Noomen, Assen 1990, no. 41, vv. 4–7). "She was very perfidious and avaricious. She was hunch-backed, black and hideous" (own translation). In this particularly harsh category, we can also put the fabliau "Le Moine" which describes a sex market with a description of old women who are very unpleasant (ibid., vol. 10, no. 125, vv. 111–117, 128–131).

81 "Et trait a moi par tel devise / Que parmi l'oel m'a ou cors mise / La saiete par grant roidor" (Roman de la rose, ed. by Strubel [see note 70] vv. 1693–1695). "And he shot me in such a manner that through my eye he put its arrow into my body" (own translation).

82 La Belle Hélène de Constantinople. Chanson de geste du XIV^e siècle, ed. by Claude Roussel, Genève 1995 (Textes littéraires français 454), v. 12.

83 "la vieille royne, qui tant estoit remplie d'envye et de mauvais courage" (Jehan Wauquelin, La Belle Hélène de Constantinople. Mise en prose d'une chanson de geste, ed. by Marie-Claude de Crécy, Genève 2002 [Textes littéraires français 547], pp. 89–90).

old woman” (“orde vielle pullente”).⁸⁴ In the prose version, it is noteworthy that the author most often refers to Margiste as “the old Margiste”, or even “the false old woman” (“faulce vielle”).⁸⁵ The case of Berthe is interesting in so far as it places the old governess in the role of the matchmaker. It is through the fear that she instils in the young girl about the wedding night that she manages to cheat her.

It is in this field of sexuality and seduction that the representation of the old woman is particularly developed. André le Chapelain’s “De amore” contrasts with the “Roman de la Rose” in one quite significant aspect in this regard: in a short inserted narrative which describes the procession of women towards the Palace of Love, the unhappy, haggard and very ugly women arrive last, in tatters and mounted on old horses – “during their lifetime they have denied access to the ‘Palace of Love’ to those who wished to enter it”.⁸⁶ They are destined to live in the “Land of Dryness”, in the midst of thorns that tear them apart, in other words in a ‘Hell of Love’. The two representations are both characterised by ugliness and misery: one finds the old woman who can no longer love because she has become ugly, and the old woman who has spent her life refusing to love. Both underline the fact that female identity is almost exclusively marked by the relationship to love.

In this context, some encyclopaedic and medical texts are to be considered from which one learns about contemporary medical conceptions most probably also known to the writers of the time.⁸⁷ In the 13th century encyclopaedia “Dialogue de Placides et Timéo”, the central point regarding sexuality, based on the medicine of humours and qualities, is that hot and cold attract each other. The man, through the sexual act, regulates his inner warmth and, the more he makes love, the more “he cools down”, as the text says.⁸⁸ The woman, on the other hand, is regarded in ways that may seem contradictory. She is warm, as Isidore of Seville says, also based on the etymology of the word itself.⁸⁹

84 Adenet le Roi, *Berte as grans piés*, ed. by Albert Henry, Genève 1982 (Textes littéraires français 305), v. 289.

85 *Histoire de la reine Berthe et du roy Pepin. Mise en prose d’une chanson de geste*, ed. by Piotr Tylus, Genève 2001 (Textes littéraires français 536), pp. 136–137.

86 “pendant leur vie ont interdit l’accès du palais d’Amour à ceux qui désiraient y entrer” (André le Chapelain, *Traité de l’amour courtois*, ed. and transl. by Claude Buridant, Paris 1974 [Bibliothèque française et romane. Sér. D. Initiation, textes et documents 9], p. 87).

87 For more details, cf. Ribémont, *Femme, vieillesse et sexualité* (see note 6), pp. 57–77. I am going to take some aspects from this article here.

88 *Placides et Timéo ou li secrés as philosophes*, ed. by Claude A. Thomasset, Genève 1980 (Textes littéraires français 289), § 269, p. 122.

89 According to Isidore, the woman is hotter than the man according to the etymology that certain people, “alii”, adopt: “alii Graeca etymologia feminam ab ignea vi dictam putant, quia vehementer

But, according to her humours, she is cold and wet. So, a distinction must be made between sexual behaviour and humoral disposition. This duality is clearly expressed in the “*De proprietatibus rerum*” by Bartholomew the Englishman and in its translation by Jean Corbechon: “‘Female’ also comes from ‘fire’ because, ... the female is hotter than the male and she is more aroused by love ... The female is by nature weaker and more obedient than the male: this is due to a lack of warmth and abundance of cold humours ...”.⁹⁰ The woman must therefore warm herself through intimate contact with the man and look for men to satisfy her cravings, as they are insatiable.⁹¹ One recalls Juvenal’s image of the woman “exhausted, but not satisfied” (“*lassata, sed non satiata*”),⁹² an expression taken up again in the 13th century by the encyclopaedist Vincent of Beauvais.⁹³ The woman is considered passive, “always prepared for sexual intercourse” (“*semper parata ad coitum*”), and voracious, which is dangerous for men.⁹⁴ Elderly women are excluded from the world of love because their faces and bodies have lost the canonical attributes of beauty. Adam de la Halle cynically expresses this thought in the “*Jeu de la feuillée*” (“Play of the Greensward”), when he describes his wife as having grown old and become “abhorrent, misshapen” (“*crasse, mautaille*”).⁹⁵ The old woman finds herself between nostalgia for a bygone time, which can lead, on the one hand, to bitterness and even to a desire

concupiscit” (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiarum libri* [see note 18], lib. XI. 2, 24). “Others think that ‘woman’ by a Greek etymology is derived from the power of fire because she has a fierce desire” (own translation).

90 Jean Corbechon, *Le Livre des propriétés des choses. Une encyclopédie au XIV^e siècle*, transl. by Bernard Ribémont, Paris 1999, book XVIII, chap. 47, p. 282.

91 “et plus en fait la femme, et plus en vorroit faire et ne mie tant seulement le fait plus entalente-ment en chelle heure que en autre, mais tous jours, se malades n’est ou carquie de douleur” (Placides et Timéo, ed. by Thomasset [see note 88], § 269, pp. 122–123). “The more the woman do and the more she wants to do, and not especially at one precise hour, but every day except if she is ill or wracked with pain” (own translation).

92 Juvenal, *Satires*, no. 6, v. 130. For an edition, cf. for example: Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis, *Satirae*, ed. and transl. by Joachim Adamietz, München 1993 (*Sammlung Tusculum*), lib. II, *satura VI*, p. 98, v. 130.

93 Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum quadruplex sive speculum maius*, vol. 1: *Speculum naturale*, Graz 1964, lib. 31, ch. 5, cc. 2294–2295.

94 “la femme s’efforce par nature, ne mie par volenté qui a raison, mais par le volenté de le char, avoir chaleur d’omme” (Placides et Timéo, ed. by Thomasset [see note 88], § 271, p. 123). “The woman, because of her nature, not by her will or her reason, but due to the strength of her flesh, strives to get the heat of the man” (own translation).

95 Adam de la Halle, *Le Jeu de la Feuillée*, ed. by Jean Dufournet, Paris 1989 (*Garnier Flammarion 520*), v. 73.

for revenge – which is why she becomes completely cynical and immoral – and, on the other, to a sexual craving that is very difficult to satisfy. In a cruel and very biting way, De la Halle proposes to put mustard on his penis in order to “wean” (“sevrer”) his spouse who does not like it (vv. 43–44).

Jean de Meun brilliantly stages his character of the old woman between nostalgia and cynicism.⁹⁶ The old woman, being in the service of “Jalousie” (jealousy), which she fears, has the function of guarding “Bel Accueil”, an allegorical figure representing the positive feelings that the young girl, the rose, might have towards the one who is wooing her, the narrator-dreamer created by Guillaume de Lorris. When she arrives at “Bel Accueil”, the old woman plays the role of a procuress, giving a speech aimed at convincing the young girl.

One of the major attributes of the procuress is the art of discourse and rhetoric. Jean de Meun lets his old woman hold a speech of a disproportionate length, namely of almost 2 000 verses,⁹⁷ thus making the old woman a true master of rhetoric and even a scholar who knows Plato and Al-Khwarizmi and teaches the science of love from the pulpit (v. 12821). The two main elements correspond to the major characteristics of the old woman: the first is regret and nostalgia for the past. The old woman laments the fact that she did not follow the advice she is giving right now. She did not know how to take advantage of love, conceived as physical, when she was young and beautiful. Nor did she know how to use her charms to manipulate men and to enrich herself at their expense (vv. 14461–14484). The second line of the speech is an “admonition” (“chastoiement”), but far from following the rules of the genre, as it proposes a very peculiar morality. The old woman teaches the young girl all the tricks a woman must use to seduce a man continuing the tradition of “De ornatu mulierum”:⁹⁸ the dress, the make-up, the

96 Bernard Ribémont, *La Vieille et le sexe, ou la revanche du chatoisement (à propos du Roman de la Rose)*, in: Corinne Fug-Pierreville (Ed.), *Entremetteurs et entremetteuses dans la littérature de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, Lyon 2007 (CEDIC 28), pp. 31–42.

97 *Roman de la rose*, ed. by Strubel (see note 70), vv. 12559–14550.

98 The textual tradition of the “De ornatu mulierum” is relatively complex. Originally, we find the “De ornatu mulierum” of Trotula, also called the “Trotula minor”, the second part of the book of medicine written by “Trotula”, the famous woman of the Salernitan School, the “Trotula Major”, a study in the feminine diseases (*The Trotula. A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, ed. by Monica H. Green, Philadelphia 2001 [The Middle Ages Series]; Ferruccio Bertini [Ed.], *Trotula. Il medico, Medioevo al femminile*, Roma-Bari 2005; Jane Bael, *Trota of Salerno. Women's Medicine in Medieval Italy*, in: *Midwifery Today Int Midwife* 118 [2016], pp. 46–47. See also Marie-Geneviève Grossel, *Entre médecine et magie. Les gestes de beauté (l'Ornatus mulierum)*, in: *Le Geste et les gestes au Moyen Âge*, Aix-en-Provence 1998 [Senefiance 41], pp. 255–272).

breathing, the movements, etc. are explained in detail according to the circumstances and the physical appearance of the woman. All means are good to attract male desire and to take advantage of it, there are no scruples and every cunning must be used to exploit men.⁹⁹ This representation of the old woman can also be found in the character of the beautiful Heaumière. In the “Testament”, her speech is composed of two sections: in the first, regrets are expressed,¹⁰⁰ and in the second, advice is given, which is similar to that of the old woman in the “Roman de la Rose”, above all consisting of advice for ensnaring and exploiting men.¹⁰¹ The “Évangiles des Quenouilles”, an anti-feminist text dating to the 15th century, does not present only one *vieille*, but rather a whole group of six matrons, aged between 57 and 80 years, whose description is repulsive, symbolising gluttony and lustfulness.¹⁰² The old women are the custodians of secrets that are passed down from generation to generation, and at the same time they express their experience, their regrets about the past and their greed which is also shown by their mouths being wide open.

It is the *fabliau* that most radically portrays the old lecherous woman by introducing the character of the ‘gigolo’ *ante litteram* into French literature. Only one emblematic

99 This character, between ‘teacher’, madam and matchmaker, gave rise to a very famous text in Spain, the “Celestina” by the converted Jew Fernando de Rojas. On this topic, cf. Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina. Comedia o tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, ed. by Peter E. Russell, Madrid 2008; Jean-Paul Lecertua, *Le jardin de Mélibée. Métaphores sexuelles et connotations symboliques dans quelques épisodes de La Célestine*, in: *Trames. Études Ibériques* 2 (1978), pp. 105–138; Vincent Parello, *Aquel mudar de trajes, aquel derribar j renovar edificios. La modernité historico-sociale de La Celestina*, in: George Martin (Ed.), *Fernando de Rojas. La Celestina. Comedia o tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, Paris 2008, pp. 7–20; Carlos Heusch, *L’invention de Rojas. La Célestine*, Paris 2008 Collection (CNED-PUF. Série Espagnol), pp. 137–146; Odile Lasserre Dempure, *La Celestina de Fernando de Rojas. Un monde plein de vide*, in: *Babel. Littératures plurielles* 22 (2010), pp. 11–30.

100 “Ainsi le bon temps regretons ... Et jadis fusmes si mignotes” (Villon, *Le Testament*, ed. by Mühlethaler [see note 4], vv. 525, 531). “So we regret the old time ... And formerly we were so pretty” (own translation). The regrets comprise verses 453–532 of the cited edition and the advice comprise verses 533–624, which is followed by a ballad on the same theme, incorporating ancient examples as does Jean de Meun’s *vieille*.

101 “Prenz a destre et a senestre / N’espargniez homme, je vous prie / Car vieilles n’ont ne cours nē estre / Ne que monnoye qu’on descrye” (ibid., vv. 537–540). “Take as much as possible, to the left, to the link. Don’t spare any man, I beg you, because old women have neither nobody nor life for themselves, except the money that is disparaged” (own translation).

102 *Les Évangiles des Quenouilles*, ed. by Madeleine Jeay, Paris 1985 (Études médiévales); Anne Paupert, *Sages femmes ou sorcières? Les vieilles femmes des Évangiles aux Quenouilles*, in: *Vieillesse et vieillissement* (see note 6), pp. 265–282.

example shall be mentioned here, namely that of Gautier le Leu's *fabliau* "Li provance de femme".¹⁰³ Gautier presents a widow of a certain age who covers her wrinkled cheeks (v. 177). When night comes, her brain warms up and she dreams of a handsome young man who would come to satisfy her desire because "all she needs now is a piece of wood / to cure her kidney ache" ("il ne lui manque plus que le bout de bois / qui guérisse son mal de reins") (vv. 219–220). The lady, worked by her 'Goliath', who "so much harasses and arouses her" (v. 400), ends up luring a young man into her trap. 'The poor one must boldly perform his task' if he wants to be fed, housed, clothed and receive a sum of money, a significant amount of 30 *deniers*. Old men and women have one thing in common in terms of love. André le Chapelain says: "Age is an obstacle, because after 60 years for a man, 50 for a woman, although love is still possible, the pleasures it brings cannot generate love".¹⁰⁴ However, the consequences are quite different. For, if the man loses his potency, all that remains, as Andrew says, is "the consolation of eating and drinking". However, the woman is driven by an inextinguishable lust.

4 Concluding Remarks

In the formation of European mentalities, the medieval period serves as a bridge to modern times, having created representations that have proven to be particularly durable in many fields (myths, religion, superstition, morality etc.). In this paper, I have tried to give an overview of ideas that contributed to the shaping of Western Christian European perceptions of old age. How old age is viewed today leans on this basis. The preceding development did not follow certain aims and showed fluctuations. In fact, it is linked to the nature of a given society and is dependent on the political, religious, legal, and moral views of specific historical periods. Compared to the Middle Ages, ageing takes place in a radically changed context today: gerontology and geriatrics are established fields of research and support systems for elderly people have been created. It would be of great interest to study the evolution of the representation of old age and ageing in literature using an interdisciplinary approach, in particular with regard to legal texts.

103 Gautier le Leu, *Li provance de femme*, in: *Fabliaux érotiques. Textes de jongleurs des XII^e et XIII^e siècles*, ed. by Luciano Rossi, Paris 1992, pp. 301–343.

104 "L'âge est un obstacle, car passé soixante ans pour un homme, cinquante pour une femme, bien que les rapports amoureux soient encore possibles, les plaisirs qu'ils procurent ne peuvent engendrer l'amour" (André le Chapelain, *Traité de l'amour courtois*, ed. by Buridant [see note 86], p. 51).

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This aspect was not included in the framework of this paper, which means that the perspective presented is necessarily limited.

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