

Entry

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

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Definition: 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*.

Keywords: old age in medieval heroic literature; *Beowulf*; "Hildebrandslied"; *Kudrun*; Heinrich Kaufringer; Boccaccio; *Njáls Saga*



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1. Introduction

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 [4–7]. 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 *Titirel* (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].

2. Framework of This Entry

Within the framework of the history of mentality and the history of everyday life, both the topics of childhood and old age have gained much interest, as is well documented by the contributors to the excellent volume edited by Peter Dinzelbacher ([18,19]; cf. also [20,21]). Research reports have underscored multiple times how prominently old individuals emerge in the various written documents and visual representations. The old father of Jesus, Joseph, and the Apostles are regularly depicted as old men, but then not necessarily at all as decrepit, weak, lacking in intelligence, alertness of mind, and physical abilities [3]. Similarly, when we study depictions of craftsmen in late medieval illustrated manuscripts, we regularly face older men, as indicated by their long beard and bald heads [22,23]. Discussing the various roles of old people in the pre-modern era allows us to understand a number of critical aspects which might have quite an impact on us today: First, in the Middle Ages, old age was not simply a fact of life but a concept about the course of human existence from birth to death which was subject to a fluctuating discourse among the intellectuals, poets, and artists, as Shulamith Shahar [14] and J. A. Burrow [21] have already unearthed (cf. [9]), where I list the most important critical studies on this topic]. Second, both then and today, old age constitutes a difficult challenge for society at large because of the need for healthcare for the old. Many medieval monasteries had taken on this task, and the Franciscan Tertiaries were particularly dedicated to this service (see, for instance, Angela da Foligno, but also Elizabeth of Thuringia and her hospital in Marburg). Third, old leaders have regularly faced competition from the young ones, a phenomenon we observe both in the animal kingdom and in human societies. Fourth, old age is not simply the eclipse of a human mind; on the contrary, old people tend to preserve an enormous treasure of knowledge, wisdom, and experience, and any good government is well advised to listen to them and pay respect to their opinions, depending on the circumstances, of course. Fifth, it has always been difficult for old people to cope in the changing world because it is hard for the body and the mind constantly to keep up with the technological, intellectual, religious, or cultural changes—see, for instance, the computer, the internet, AI, etc., in the twenty-first century.

Hence, old age could be an advantage or a hindrance, a barrier or a sign of personal power, all depending on the perspectives one pursues, the social and economic circumstances, and the attitude any society embraces regarding old age. Finally, even within old age, gender could matter much since old male rulers appear to have mostly enjoyed great respect, whereas old women do not seem to have fared so well, disregarding a number of amazing exceptions [16,17]. When we consider, for example, late medieval erotic texts, we regularly hear about old women who are destitute and make their living through being a go-between [8]. Old men, by contrast, are identified as those who are privileged to marry young women and to have more children with them.

Altogether, with this topic, we encounter an enormous potential to dive deeply into medieval and early modern mentality, the history of emotions, and the history of everyday life with this topic on old age. But we also need to focus on specific materials that allow for comparisons and a more detailed theme within the broader discourse of old age. It would be easy but ultimately also fairly useless to assemble references to a wide range of medieval literature where old people appear. Some of them are described as worthy and noble, others are ridiculed and laughed at, and some are simply present without assuming any particular role. After all, every person grows old, which poets have commonly noted as well. The question hence does not pertain so much to old age at large but to the specific perception of and attitude toward old individuals in their specific social function (see the contributions to note [2,16–19]).

To achieve a new perspective and to gain solid results, this entry will take into view the major functions of old individuals as leaders of their people. This implies that contrary to our modern assumptions about old age as a time in human life of physical and mental decline, medieval and early modern poets tended to project the very opposite, portraying the old heroes as the most respected and dignified personalities. To complement this phenomenon, I will also consider a number of examples in late medieval literature where ethics, morality, wisdom, and rationality matter centrally and where old people also emerge as worthy and honorable individuals of great relevance for their society.

3. Old Men in Heroic Epics

3.1. *Beowulf*

The genre of heroic epics composed throughout the European Middle Ages contains many examples of old men who enjoy the highest respect. When we consider the oldest Anglo-Saxon epic poem, *Beowulf* (ca. 700/750), we come across the intriguing example of a protagonist who first appears on the stage as a youthful leader of his people who comes to the rescue of the Danish King Hrothgar against the flesh-eating monsters Grendel and then his mother. Although they are daunting opponents, mighty Beowulf is capable of defeating and killing both. Subsequently, highly rewarded and greatly respected, the hero travels home to Sweden and assumes the throne there. The narrative then rapidly moves forward by fifty years and shows us an old man who has suddenly to face the most dangerous monster, the fire-breathing dragon that protects a hoard and at the same time threatens Beowulf's people [24]. As concrete the entire episode appears to be, with the dragon and the battle against it, developing gruesome images of the fight for life and death, in essence, the poet uses this imagery to ponder specifically the meaning of old age and death, which is unavoidable and comes whenever destiny calls [25].

The narrator is consistent throughout the poem depicting the protagonist as a noble and worthy character. Although this epic is already very well known among Anglo-Saxonists, I need to highlight relevant passages to support the thesis I want to pursue here: "The king hardy in adversity then sat on the headland while the gold friend of Geats saluted his close comrades. His mood was mournful, restless and ready for death, his destiny

incalculably near, he who was to face the ancient one, go after its soul's board, divide life from body" (245). Beowulf reflects on his youth and remembers the death penalty for his foster-father's eldest son, so when he laments: "It is similarly grievous for an old man to live to see his young boy mount the gallows" (247). Life simply consists of a vast or short span, as the old man notes, as fond as his memories of the past might be. However, turning to himself, in his old age, he emphasizes his lifelong commitment to loyalty and military service: "I intended always to be to the fore of him in the ranks, alone in the vanguard, and thus I shall always pursue a conflict, as long as this sword holds out which has often supported me early and late" (251). And now, Beowulf faces the dragon, his own nemesis which he intends to take on all by himself despite the threat of fire spewing from its mouth. He is confident that he can defeat the monster, as in the old days, yet this then proves to be problematic, if not almost impossible, although he considers this his very own task as the leader of his people.

As the poet explicitly laments, Beowulf's retainers are not there simply to support their lord. After all, at the end, only the young Wiglaf jumps into the fight, and both the old and the young man ultimately manage to overcome the monster, but not without Beowulf being bitten by the dragon, which allows poison to enter his bloodstream leading to his death. Although Beowulf had specifically claimed this battle for himself alone, Wiglaf bitterly complains to the other retainers that they abandoned their old lord at a time of greatest need: "help our general now that there is this heat, this grim, frightful conflagration" (261). And: "I think it unseemly that we bear shields back home unless we can first fell the foe, preserve the life of the lord of Weders" (261). Not by accident does Beowulf's sword then shatter; it is his own synecdoche (263), anticipating his death arriving soon, but not before the two men have managed to kill the dragon (265).

Beowulf has only little time to lament his destiny, expressing his deep sadness that he does not have a son to pass on his kingdom. He looks backwards and reflects on his old age: "I governed this nation fifty winters. . . I lived out at home my allotment of time, managed well what was mine. . ." (267), and yet, there is no hope left for him; he fades fast and succumbs to the dragon's poison raging through his body. The old man has to die, and thus he knows fully well that his dynasty has come to an end: "events have swept all my kin to their appointed end, men of valor; I shall go after them" (271). This old man is filled with nostalgia, but there is no hope left for him to experience renovation or invigoration, the end is near, both for himself and his society, if not the entire generation at large. Shame, cowardice, and lack of honor on the part of the retainers have deprived their community of its traditional values and ideals; hence, we could call *Beowulf* a poetic paean on old age, a most precious time in one's life, however, here determined by a universal decline and loss of leadership. Nevertheless, Beowulf's final deed also means the dragon's death, so evil is overcome, even though at the cost of the old leader's death [26].

Corruption, greed, and deception take over, with society thus experiencing a tragic loss of its own core values: "Then one warrior plundered another" (283). As Wiglaf prophetically announces: "the Swedish people will come in search of us, the keen Scylfings, after they discover that our lord is no longer living, who guarded the hoard and kingdom against opponents after the fall of champions, furthered the people's interest, or what is more, accomplished heroic acts" (285). Death has fallen upon them all, the greatest mystery and tragedy of all (289), but the old man, a grand hero, has succumbed to his destiny: "he was the worthiest warrior of men far and wider over the earth while he was permitted the use of fortress-riches" (291). Beowulf had to give up his life in return for the dragon's death, and he passes away in good conscience knowing that he had been a respected, honorable, and just ruler over his people [27–30].

3.2. “Hildebrandslied”

Almost as old as *Beowulf*, the Old High German balladic poem “Hildebrandslied” (ca. 820; the Song of Hildebrand; the original version was probably composed much earlier) specifically engages with the conflict between young and old and offers critical comments about the shortcomings of the two protagonists [31]. Although this fragmentary poem consists of only 65 stanzas with four or five verses, it represents one of the most powerful, meaningful, and yet also mysterious heroic ballads in the history of German literature. Old age matters centrally because the old warrior Hildebrand, leader of a Hunnish army, suddenly encounters a Germanic army under the command of young Hadubrand. The former quickly realizes through the opponent’s few words that the latter is his son. He himself had to leave home and hearth thirty years ago because he had been obligated to follow his liege lord Theoderic, or Dietrich, who had been forced by his enemy, the Byzantine general Odoacer to leave his country and to go into exile which he found at the court of the Hunnish ruler Etzel or Attila [32–35].

Hildebrand had asked the young man for his name and family, whereas he himself did not divulge much at all about his origin and identity. To his great surprise, he has to learn that Hadubrand feels bitter about his father’s disappearance in the East, having left behind his home and family out of his feudal obligation. But the young man also voices considerable pride in his father who had been, as he had been told by sailors and others, a mighty hero who has passed away by then.

Of course, Hildebrand is his father, and he is alive and well, although he does not know how to communicate properly with the young opponent. His efforts to reach out to him by means of heavy golden bracelets as gifts utterly fail because Hadubrand regards this gesture as nothing but an attempt by this old and possibly weak man to bribe him into submission. But Hadubrand has risen to the highest military rank, he is the leader of his troops, and he adamantly refuses to engage with this strange opponent. He brusquely rejects the gift and readies himself for the fight, refusing to engage with Hildebrand in any further communication. The latter had sworn by the gods that he was his closest blood relative, i.e., his father, but this has no effect because the two men have met in a battlefield where any signs of weakness could have fatal consequences. The poem is entirely predicated on the traditional values of military heroism, and as much as Hildebrand appears to appreciate his mother who had been abandoned by her husband, and to glorify the memory of his father, only the language of the weapons speaks here.

How does the poet portray the older man, certainly a notable and meaningful component in the textual development? He is an amazingly knowledgeable leader of his people, as he says at the beginning that he would need to know only the one name of the opponent to know all the rest of his tribe. Once he has realized who the other one really is, he tries to build a connection with him by means of the gift, but those are terribly ambivalent objects and cannot achieve the desired results since accepting them would rob Hadubrand of all his military honor. Hence, fight is the only option open to the two men, as much as Hildebrand would like to avoid it. He has to hear the insult by Hadubrand that he is old, hence no longer a worthy fighter who must resort to bribery to achieve the triumph in this deadly match.

Hildebrand retorts with a sort of insult of his own kind, mocking the young man whose armor indicates that he has a mighty lord who never forced him to go into exile, as had been his own destiny, meaning that he has not yet faced the real challenge on the battlefield. Thus, he upholds his own destiny as Theoderic’s liegeman as a mark of honor which the young man is still missing. Subsequently, he also readies himself for the fight, identifying it as the result of their destiny. However, it is a matter worse for him than for Hadubrand who firmly believes that his father has died in battle long ago, whereas

Hildebrand knows only too well that he has to confront his own son and possibly kill him. Adding bitter sarcasm, Hildebrand emphasizes that he has fought for thirty years without having ever been defeated, whereas this could be the case now in the fight against the young man. Commenting on the general situation, the old man underscores that the person who would refuse to engage in this fight would be one of the worst cowards who had to accompany their lord on his journey to the East.

The father is extremely frustrated about this development, whereas his son is completely insulted by the opponent's suggestion that he would be his father. Hence, nothing can hold these two men back from attacking each other, but we do not know what the outcome of this battle might be. There are virtually only three options, a. that the father, being the most experienced and strongest of them all, like Beowulf, might kill his own son; b. that the son, being younger and stronger than the old and exhausted warrior, might kill his own father; or c., considering that they are so closely related to each other and are equally qualified, that they kill each other [36]. Undoubtedly, the "Hildebrandslied" represents one of the most ominous tragic poems from the entire Middle Ages; in virtually all other heroic poems, there is at least some form of a happy outcome, apart from the *Nibelungenlied*, where, however, old age does not matter specifically but where at the end all the heroes have died.

The first victim in this poem is human communication, and so is the sense of family and community. Considering that two monks in the monastery of Fulda copied down this curious but deeply daunting poem in the margins of a liturgical manuscript and did not complete it, maybe deliberately, it makes good sense to argue that the purpose was to expose to the pagan audience the catastrophic outcome of their heroic traditions, whereas Christian values would offer new perspectives of hope and happiness [37]. In terms of age, however, the poem remains inconclusive because both the younger and the older man hold their own, are most eager to enter into a fight, and do not display any sign of fear or cowardice. We are invited to admire the young warrior and also to feel great respect for the old man. Both are desperately trying to hold on to their honor, and this at the risk of their own lives [38].

3.3. The Old Warrior Wate in Kudrun

While the concept of heroism continued to be a highly attractive aspect in high and late medieval literature, we can also detect critical voices. The "Hildebrandslied" was apparently not well received in the following centuries; at least, there are no other manuscript copies. However, a new version appeared in 1462 when Kaspar von Rhön recorded the "Jüngerer Hildebrandslied" in his collection today known as the *Dresdner Heldenbuch* [39]. Again, father and son confront each other, i.e., old versus young, and in the fight, Hildebrand defeats his son and yet does not kill him; instead, he reveals his identity, both embrace each other and return to the son's home where they first pretend that Hadubrand had won the battle, until the truth comes through, to Hildebrand's old wife's delight [40].

Old men as warriors tend to be described as most awesome individuals, and we come across one of them, Wate, in the late thirteenth-century heroic epic *Kudrun* (ca. 1270) [41,42]. I cannot do justice to the whole poem in the present context because there are three parts, each one determined by a complex bridal quest in a very traditional fashion. However, in the third part, the princess Kudrun is wooed by three kings, and when one of them, Herwig, is given the price, her hand, another one, Hartmuot kidnaps the young woman and kills her father, Hetel, in a battle on an island when the latter tried to liberate his daughter. Kudrun has then to suffer thirteen years in captivity because she refuses to give in to Hartmuot's pressure to marry him, which is even intensified by his mother Gêrlint, who badly mistreats the foreign woman [43].

Kudrun's mother Hilde is helpless for the time being because too many of her warriors, apart from her husband, have died, so she has to wait for the next generation to grow up. Eventually, a new army is ready, which then takes terrible revenge, killing Hartmuot's parents and scores of his men. Kudrun is then liberated and she forces Wate and the other men to let go of their killing spree. Ultimately, she is even able to convince her mother to forgive Hartmuot and to allow him to marry into the family, which results in wide ranging peace and harmony, ending a long sequence of bridal quests with often fatal outcomes for the victims [44].

The focus here needs to rest on Wate who emerges as an awesome, if not terrifying warrior who is old but incredibly powerful against whom no one can set up resistance. Even though he cannot achieve the desired victory on the island against Hartmuot because darkness sets in which allows the enemies to escape, taking Kudrun with them, he proves to be the leading hero in the battle to free the princess from her captivity, operating as a ferocious fighter who slaughters everyone in his way. It takes Kudrun all her diplomatic and political skills to intervene and to bring the battle to an end because Wate is in an orgy of blood and would have liked to kill every member of the hostile kingdom.

Although the narrator does not linger particularly on Wate's age, it is clear that he is older than all the others, and yet also stronger and more powerful than them. Hetel treats him very warmly as his old friend (21), and the narrator describes the two men as follows: "The king was powerful, and Wate was mighty and proud in all his undertakings" (21). As the host indicates, Wate would be the best qualified wooer on his behalf, appealing to "wild Hagen" to let go of his daughter, Hilde. But he refused to be taken as a tricky negotiator and insists: "My possessions have never been lying around idle. I have always shared them with warriors, and I still hope to do that. I'm not very good at bringing trinkets to lovely ladies" (22). Instead, he claims the role of warrior and leader of his people, offering advice to King Hetel (24), he displays enormous generosity (28), and can thus achieve the goal early on to bring about the marriage between Hetel and Hilde (Queen Hilde's daughter). The poet makes specific attempts to describe him in his old age still being a most terrifying warrior, and yet skilled in courtly manners. We learn that "he was gray" (29), prefers to be involved in fighting than to sit among beautiful ladies (29), and that he had been a bold warrior throughout his life (29). Most importantly: "He risks his life and property for the sake of honor. He has often demonstrated that. All his life he has been a bold fighter" (29). Despite his old age, Wate is the one warrior his lord can always rely on "for knightly prowess" (30). Even in playful jousting, pitting Wate against the old and mighty King Hagen, the former proves to be superior, but there is no bloodshed, only mutual respect, and both men part peacefully, joking about the situation (30–31).

Although the narrator consistently uses the epithet of 'old' to characterize Wate, there is nothing 'old' about him; instead, he proves to be the most superior warrior in any situation, enjoys the highest respect among the various kings and knights, and commands enormous wealth as well (36–37). Intriguingly, he is also a magical medical doctor having received "medicinal powers" from a "wild woman" with which he had been able to heal "many people" (45). Treating the badly wounded King Hagen, for instance, he only needs his "medicine, roots, and herbs" (46) to bring about the miracle. He is so generous that he turns also to all the other injured people and can protect many from almost certain death (46). We recognize, hence, in Wate one of the most amazing old people ever portrayed in medieval literature since he is enormously powerful as a warrior, infinitely wealthy as a lord, and stunningly capable of recovering people from even their worst wounds.

The narrator never tires of giving Wate the highest praise, such as "that very sage old man" (48), and he lauds him as a famous teacher of young squires: "Hetel entrusted him to Old Wate, who raised the child to apply himself to the highest standards of behavior" (48).

And he has a huge force of retainers under his command whenever he is called in to help in a military crisis (61). Naturally, he is identified as the bravest and boldest of all men when fighting erupts: “he and his heroes were always to be seen amongst the bravest” (62). Kudrun’s kidnapping by Hartmuot would have never happened “if fierce Wate had seen Hartmuot’s men come striding through the hall with Ludewic to capture Lovely Kudrun”, or, “Wate and Hetel would have prevented it by smiting helmets with their good swords” (70).

Of course, Wate cannot be everywhere at the same time, which thus moves the narrative of the heroic poem forward, but this does not diminish at all the great respect we are to feel for this old and mighty warrior. Instead, since the kidnapping then takes place, Wate steps in to offer her mother valuable advice on how to strategize the counter-offensive (73). And he always knows about opportunities, materials, and other resources, regularly surprising the other warriors (74), even though he can thus also bring major harm to innocent pilgrims. Tragically, however, he is not able to prevent the slaying of King Hetel, hence Kudrun’s kidnapping because the circumstances prevented him from doing so, which thus moves the narrative plot along, taking us to Kudrun’s destiny in Hartmuot’s captivity. To make sense out of the complex account, isolating the theme of old age, a bit of paraphrase will be necessary.

It is worth noting, above all, that it is Wate’s task to deliver the terrible news to Queen Hilde that her husband and scores of his men have been slain and that her daughter has been abducted without them having been able to free her from her kidnappers (83). No one else would have dared to do so, and even he is “not sure that he would quickly win back Hilde’s favor” (83). But he has a plan for the future and advises the queen that they have to wait years until the new generation is old enough to wield swords (84). This remark underscores once more Wate’s old age, though this has no bearing at all on his military might; on the contrary, he proves to be the fiercest, most intelligent, and hence most competent warrior of them all, a person who is admired by his friends and greatly feared by his opponents.

When he and the army aim to liberate Kudrun years later, they get too close to the Magnetic Mountain, about which only Wate knows some details since his childhood, who is here characterized as “the wise old man” (100). He is more optimistic about the situation there, recommending they release the anchors into the waters, and then take advantage of the mysterious world they have entered. They should collect some of the jewels on the summit, but others are adamantly opposed, so, not being able to agree on any move, they simply linger there for four days when the weather finally changes and the westerly winds blow them onto their way (101). This again scares the men fearing their imminent disaster, but once the hero Horant has figured out their position, Wate “urged his men to head in that direction from then on” (101).

In all situations, Wate keeps a cool head, proves to be highly circumspect, commands his people to be war-ready when necessary, and demonstrates consistently that despite, or just because of, his old age, he is the true leader of his people, being the most experienced and the one with the best foresight. This does not mean that he can always enforce his wishes, such as when they debate who should explore the enemy territory of Normandie where Kudrun is kept a prisoner, but he is reasonable enough even then to give in to the advice proffered by others, which quickly calms the tensions among them (103). And once the army is preparing itself for the siege and onslaught, Wate provides the detailed instructions to all warriors, warns them about challenges, urges them to be ready when he would blow his horn, especially the third time: “dear friends, you should be fully armed and on your horses, but even then you warriors are to wait for me until you see me riding in my armor behind Queen Hilde’s standard” (120).

We are never fully told Wate's true age; instead, the poet only emphasizes consistently that he is old, which is his decisive attribute, irrespective of the number of years he has actually lived. This is the same as in all previous cases, so old age only signifies respect, admiration, awe of, and submission under this major leader in all military affairs. Intriguingly, however, when Wate gets involved in a fight, such as during the struggle to liberate Kudrun and to defeat her captors, he becomes so furious and berserk like that there is hardly any way of stopping him. In his fight with Hartmuot, for instance, he became "so savage a warrior" (130). Kudrun appeals to her betrothed, Herwic, to intervene and rescue Hartmuot from vicious Wate, but the latter is deeply insulted and strikes even at his friend, or ally. Only when the latter's retainers quickly intervene can they rescue his life, and this comes along with Hartmuot being taken captive (132). As the narrator highlights, however, "Wate was in a tremendous rage" (133), and he is fully prepared not only to kill the enemy men and women, but also the children, as he replies to Irolt's appeal to show some mercy: "Do you think it a good idea that I should let these children who are crying now in their cradles live? If they were to grow up, I wouldn't trust them any more than I would a savage Saxon" (133). Even though Kudrun then steps in to prevent Wate from further killing, he rages on, slays Hartmuot's mother Gerlint and another lady who had compromised her loyalty to Kudrun by accepting the love of one of Hartmuot's men. Despite all pleading by the women, he laconically states: "I'm the chamberlain, and this is how I train ladies" (133). The slaughter continues for a while, but even Wate finally calms down, which then settles the war.

The outcome of *Kudrun* is one of peacemaking, performed primarily by the female protagonist, although she faces many difficulties back home since her mother resists her diplomatic efforts for some time. But the heroic poem concludes with peace among all the individuals involved, and Kudrun and Wate perform extraordinary generosity in handing out a wealth of gifts. The age difference between does not matter for the narrator, whereas the value of the objects shines through, which glorifies the old man once again: "All who had seen this had to declare that the warrior Wate's gift surpassed that of any king, and he who received it was lord of much wealth for a long time to come" (149).

This old man thus rises to the top of universal respect and admiration; he shines forth with his military might, he leadership skills, his medical powers, his intelligence as the king's or the queen's advisor, and his incredible wealth that he freely shares with all his retainers and others.

3.4. *The Stricker's Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*

One of the most mysterious old men within medieval literature might well be the Old Man from the Mountain in the Stricker's *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, a late medieval Arthurian romance in which the protagonist proves to be, from the beginning, a virtually perfect knight who shines forth through his strength and intelligence, capable of operating in many challenging situations, regularly making rational decisions, and thus solving basically impossible tasks. He is, of course, of the same age as most other Arthurian characters, whereas in the background of the story, the Old Man from the Mountain operates, who creates the greatest challenges for King Arthur. In the service of King Matur, the Old Man has created two robots (automatons) which no human being can defeat. One arrives at Arthur's court and threatens him with complete defeat and humiliating submission, while the other one guards the entrance to Matur's kingdom [45].

As much as Daniel would have liked to accomplish the goal of destroying those robots, he could not do it with his traditional weapons. Before he can engage in the joust, however, he is asked by a miserable lady to help her in her need and then by several others as well, who are all in danger of being abused by magic-wielding creatures. With the help of his

smartness, Daniel can overcome them and gain their magical tools, such as a mysterious mirror or an all-powerful net. Those he can then utilize to defeat the giants, which opens the passage for King Arthur to enter Matur's kingdom, and both he and Daniel, along with the members of the round table, achieve the decisive victory.

During their festivities, however, this old man appears, and pretending to show them an acrobatic act, he uses the empty space to capture Arthur, to run up to the mountains, and place him on a peak from which no one can rescue him. Later, he does the same with Parzival, whom we know from Wolfram von Eschenbach's eponymous romance (ca. 1205), and everyone is completely at a loss for what to do in this situation. Again, Daniel finds the solution, bringing the magical net with which they can finally catch the Old Man. Only then are they able to explain to him the reasons why the protagonist had to destroy the robots, whom the Old Man regarded as his own 'children', i.e., his mechanical creations [46,47].

There are good reasons, as I have argued elsewhere, to associate this Old Man with the mythical figure in Persia who had founded the order of the Assassins who operated fiercely and secretly during the Crusades [48]. Once the Old Man in the Stricker's romance has understood what the robots had tried to do against King Arthur, in a clear breach of all courtly norms and standards, he realizes that Daniel could not have helped it but to overcome them. He himself feels ashamed of their evil actions (7734–7782), becomes deeply rueful, returns Arthur and Parzival from their perches, and begs to be accepted as a friend among the courtly company. When the king rewards all his knights for their accomplishments, the Old Man also asks for his favor, requesting nothing but the rulership over a country behind mountains where only he would be able to rule. No one would have the slightest chance to enter, only he would know how to do that. Arthur realizes quickly that he himself would not have any use for that nebulous country and happily entrusts it to the Old Man because no one except for him would be able to enter that small kingdom or to leave it again (8385–8400).

Once again, we encounter here an individual who, despite his old age, performs exceedingly well, is stronger and faster than anyone at Arthur's court, and if Daniel had not intervened with the help of the magical net, the Old Man would have transported them all to the mountain peaks from where there is no safe return. This protagonist excels through his physical abilities and also his ingenious mind, being the creator of those monstrous giants that are virtually invincible until they are defeated by magical objects. Of course, Daniel is the one who manages to defeat the Old Man because he resorts to magical means, but in terms of old age, this mysterious figure proves to be superior to all of them. Ironically, it seems, the older medieval heroes appear to be, the more powerful they are and can control the rest of their society. Not by accident do we regularly encounter literary reports about the mighty Carolingian Emperor Charlemagne who, despite his old age, is the most impressive military leader one can imagine and the strongest ruler of his time, as we learn, for instance, in the Old French *Chanson de Roland* (ca. 1150) throughout, although age is not specifically addressed as such, whereas military prowess, treason, jealousy, justice, loyalty, and the Christian faith assume central importance [49].

4. Care for the Elderly

Old age was apparently a marker of distinction in heroic literature. But in many other cases, old people needed help; they had become frail, and they could not live by themselves any longer. Sickness badly affected old people both in the pre-modern and the modern world. So, we need to consider this aspect as well, even at the risk of widening our topic too much. For instance, many monasteries served as critically important resources for old people who promised their lands or estates to such an institution in return for elder care until death (corrody) [50]. Or monasteries were established for the purpose of

providing a retirement community for widows, such as Marie de France reports in her *lai* “Eliduc” (ca. 1190) [51]. Already in the Middle Ages, the Church taught its followers the principles behind the Ten Commandments. The fifth one urges people to pay respect to parents, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother—which is the first commandment with a promise—so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth” (Ephesians 6:2) [52,53]. There are, of course, countless literary or theological responses to that commandment. One of those, underscoring the aspect of old age, can be found among the verse narratives (*mæren*) by the Swabian poet Heinrich Kaufringer (near Augsburg), who offers in one of his stories (ca. 1400) the intriguing account of a rich peasant who is hated both by the local priest and judge. Both try to slander him to the bishop, especially because he had claimed at one point that a devastating thunderstorm is actually good, that he harbors both heaven and hell in his house taking care of his sick mother [54], and that his own horse would be smarter than the priest [55].

The complexity of this narrative makes it impossible to discuss it here in detail, but we can focus on the second claim since it takes us directly to the issue of old age. The peasant takes the bishop and his people to the back part of his house where his old mother rests in her bed, and this already for thirty-two years. “A very foul smell was in that room and could be noticed both day and night without end” (16). For the accused peasant, this constitutes both heaven and hell because “if I treat my mother well I will have guaranteed access to heaven. If I were not doing that, I would become part of the hellish throng” (17). We can easily understand what the situation entails. The old woman was most likely incontinent, but her son took good care of her anyway, closely observing the fifth commandment. So, even on that level, the smelly room was already an anticipation of hell, whereas her gratitude to her son and God’s pleasure with this good man guaranteed him a place in heaven. The bishop honors him publicly: “It seems to me that the peasant is a truly just person” (17), and one of his clerks then cite the fifth commandment in support of his statement: “the person who treats his father and mother badly wastes all his good deeds and will end up in the fire of hell” (17).

Kaufringer also refers to the happiness of an old couple that has enjoyed a long and good life together in his verse narrative “The Innocent Murderess” (no. 14) where the female protagonist would have almost lost all her honor and social status right at her wedding because she was raped by a knight and then killed him. To hide the corpse, she needed the help of her guardsman, but he agrees to assist her only if she lets him sleep with her, another form of rape. However, she manages to lift him up and then over the wall of the well into which he is throwing the body of the dead knight, so she drowns him. Finally, in her desperation, she convinces her most loyal maid to sleep with her husband to hide that she had lost her virginity. But subsequently, the maid betrays her after all and stays in the bed, which forces the lady to set fire to the room, to ‘rescue’ her husband, and to lock the room, making the evil maid burn to death.

Moving fast forward, one day, in their old age, after thirty-two years of marriage, she suddenly breaks down and reveals what she had done to those three people who had acted so evilly against her. Nevertheless, deep guilt fills her heart, which made her cry now after such a long time. But the king reacts very unexpectedly: he “tenderly embraced his wife and pulled her toward him, full of love. ‘You had to pay dearly for me’, he said to the lady. ‘I want to live with you forever as your loyal servant because you suffered much on my behalf, no doubt about it’” (81–82). There might be many reasons to argue differently, even to condemn this murderess for her acts, but here we only need to pay attention to the fact that the poet presents an old married couple, both of whom love each other, especially after such a long time. Her husband is filled with great pity for his wife, and he basically

acknowledges her innocence despite her guilt: “Neither your honor nor my appreciation of you will ever be diminished through any punishment, either secretly or publicly, because of this story” (82).

5. The Old Person as a Ruler in Medieval Courtly Narratives

There would be many opportunities to engage with other literary texts for the purpose of this paper, simply because old people populate many fictional works, just as they exist in reality, whether we think of Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (ca. 1205) and *Titarel* (ca. 1220) or Heinrich Kaufringer (ca. 1400), Margery Kempe’s *The Book* (ca. 1420s) or Christine de Pizan’s *Le Livre du duc des vrais amants* (ca. 1405). To wrap up our investigation, I have selected just one of the stories told by Boccaccio in his *Decameron* (ca. 1350), which is one of the most famous pieces of Italian literature, curiously perched between the Middle Ages and the early modern age (Renaissance) [56]. In the sixth story told on the tenth day, Fiammetta relates an account of the old king Charles, or Charles I, ruler of Sicily and Naples from 1266 to 1285. A rich merchant from Florence, where the king’s actions have led to the expulsion of the Ghibellines, Messer Neri degli Uberti, settles near the king’s estate, although he is his political opponent. Neri creates a most delightful garden, which the king wants to visit one day. The host makes every effort to welcome him and to indulge him with a fabulous dinner, which is accompanied by a delightful performance by his two young daughters. The king, despite his old age, is completely smitten by the girls and intends to kidnap them because he wants to ‘possess’ them with all his might.

Yet, not being so sure about the idea behind this plan, he reveals his intention to one of his advisors, Count Guy. The latter had been his tutor since his childhood, but both men are now old. For that reason, Guy strongly opposes the king and comments that such a passion for the girls would perhaps be understandable for a young man, whereas the king is truly beyond that age. First, Charles would still face many enemies and should not get sidetracked by this new love. Second, “[t]his is not the action of a magnanimous king, but rather of a weak-willed youth” (736). Third, Neri had demonstrated to him his full trust and confidence, “he firmly believes you to be no ravaging wolf, but a king” (736). Fourth, one of the reasons why Charles had been able to defeat his predecessor, the Staufer ruler Manfred, was that the latter had been hated by people for his sexual transgressions and mistreatment of his subjects. Altogether, Guy concludes with this monumental statement:

But it is far more glorious to conquer oneself. And therefore, as you have to govern others, conquer these feelings of yours, curb this wanton desire, and do not allow the splendour of your achievements to be dimmed by any such deed as this. (736).

The king is deeply moved, admits his wrong ideas, and pledges to overcome his evil instinct because he wants to display exactly what Guy had pointed out that a ruler like him who has conquered a people must demonstrate his inner strength and discipline to conquer himself first. He provides the two girls with a rich dowry each and marries them off to worthy barons, as much as it hurts him deeply to see them lost for his own desire.

As Count Guy states unequivocally, the old king would have harmed himself badly in destroying the father’s happiness by abducting his daughters. This behavior would not behoove him at all as a king and particularly in his old age. We are not given more details about that advice, but it is clear that Boccaccio had a strong opinion about the foolishness of old and mighty men who might desire to conquer young and beautiful women for themselves [57]. An old and highly respected female advisor appears in Christine de Pizan’s *Le Livre du Duc des vrais amans* (1403–1405), named Seville de Monthault, who seriously warns the female protagonist against the illicit love affair because it could terribly damage her social position, her honor, and her status [58].

6. Conclusions

By applying a different perspective, this entry could have easily exposed another approach to old age in the pre-modern period, one determined by satire, ridicule, sarcasm, and even outright contempt. Both old and young people populated the literature and the arts of that time, much more than we might have assumed. Naturally, conflicts commonly emerged, but the focus on the heroic and other figures has revealed how much the trope of the wise, powerful, and respected old man (at times woman) mattered critically. What concerned the poet was not the number of years, but the individual abilities and skills of their literary figures. In many cases, old age even proves to be of great advantage, granting the individual extraordinary authority and influence. To widen our text base to confirm this observation, we could also include references to some of the major Icelandic sagas, such as *Njál's Saga* or *Egil's Saga*, where we regularly confront old, wise, learned, and also powerful old people. However, neither here nor there can we claim that old age was a guarantee for wisdom, respect, dignity, and honor, as much as Njál, for instance, receives the highest possible praise:

He was so well versed in the law that he had no equal, and he was wise and prophetic, sound of advice and well-intentioned, and whatever course he counselled turned out well. He was modest and noble-spirited, able to see far into the future and remember far into the past, and he solved the problems of whoever turned to him [59].

His old age is not specifically addressed, but he has a number of grown-up sons, he never gets involved in concrete fighting, he determines all law-making in Iceland, people far and wide acknowledge him in his wisdom and knowledge, and he tries with more or less success to watch out for his people and the land overall. Njál consistently endeavors to maintain or to set up peace, and he urges his friends and relatives to follow his model of learnedness and wisdom. Tragically, however, the circumstances finally turn against him, and without his own fault, he, his wife, and their grandson are burned to death in their own house as a result of a military conflict. He would have had a chance to get out of the fire, but he refuses to die a dishonorable death: "I will not leave, for I'm an old man and hardly fit to avenge my sons, and I do not want to live in shame" (221). Similarly, his old wife Bergthora joins him in the flames, along with their grandson Thord. These people, old and young, live and die by the principle of honor, and their fame lives on through this narrative.

Altogether, we can conclude that old age, just like childhood, or any other stage in human life, proves to be subject to many diverse discourses (satire: laughing about old people; ethics: admiring them; politics: military and political leaders), and those we can identify particularly well in pre-modern literary works. They serve well as sources reflecting these discourses because each age mattered critically, all depending on the narrative circumstances and the poet's respective intentions. We could also add art-historical evidence to support our conclusions, and chronicles and other historical documents could flesh out our analysis (cf. [3]). Although old protagonists can normally not act the same way as young heroes, the examples chosen here clearly demonstrate that old age had apparently very little impact on the heroic protagonists or was actually the key factor to profile these individuals as their society's heroes. Indeed, old age provided them either with wisdom, intelligence, or, surprisingly, additional strength and power. However, old age did not prevent some individuals from committing foolish acts, as Boccaccio underscored.

While it does not come as a surprise that in ordinary circumstances, as mirrored in autobiographical, mystical, satirical, or didactic contexts, old people were truly at the end of their lives and needed succor and assistance, old people in the heroic genre regularly prove to be extraordinary individuals who enjoy the highest respect, are majorly feared because of their physical abilities, and assume the central responsibilities for their people in political,

legal, and moral terms. Intriguingly, we observe this phenomenon across medieval Europe, whether we consider Old English, Old High German, Medieval Icelandic, Old Spanish, or Old French literature.

In other literary genres, old age was viewed rather as an expression of physical decline and political and economic weakness. When the sheen of the heroic was not present, then the everyday situation of old age suddenly came through, accompanied by illness, weakness, mental decline, cantankerousness, jealousy, or simply physical failure, with the individual approaching his/her death. Life consists of the various stages of growing up and growing old, and this both in the Middle Ages and today. Undoubtedly, if we want to gain a good understanding of pre-modern culture, we can easily and efficiently draw on the topic of ‘old age’ (just as much as on the topic of ‘childhood’) to gain deeper insights into the mental, cultural, and ethical values determining that world. Old age is a fascinating, valuable, and meaningful topic for cultural history at large, and this especially in the early Middle Ages.

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