

Age and History as Categories of Analysis: Refiguring Old Age.¹

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I want to take a stand, stake a claim, stir the pot, and most certainly issue a “call to arms.” I want to argue that we need to make age, and particularly old age, a category of analysis in the study of history. In the process, I also want to argue for the need to place modern aging in its historical context. Finally, I want to explain why *Age, Culture, Humanities* is the place to do it. The best way for me, as a student of gender and an historian of early modern England and Europe, to illustrate what I mean is to draw upon the world of women, old age, and the pre-modern past.

My Lady. Goodwife. Mother. Old Dear. Bawd. Hag. Witch. Ranging from aristocratic to criminal, these are just some of the ways elderly women were addressed in early modern Europe. These terms also reflect the ways in which old women were viewed by their friends and neighbors, from titled and respected members of the community to objects of questionable morals and outright horror. The act of reaching old age, clearly, did not render all women the same or equal. But why should it? Women of all types, nationalities, religions, and dispositions grew older, with a significant proportion of those reaching old age. These women’s final years reflected the full range of their life experiences, shaped by the cultural norms and expectations of their communities, great and small. In short, there were as many types of old women as there were women. Still, our historical understanding of elderly women does not yet reflect either the complexities of old age or the complexities of being a woman.

Little, in fact, has been written specifically about the lives of aged women. Children are studied and so are physically-matured women. But age mattered deeply to the life experience of women. What it meant to be a woman, indeed what it meant to be a biological female, changed as she aged. While over the past several decades scholars have revealed much of the richness of the female experience in pre-modern

Europe, we know little of the texture of life past middle age. By leaving old women and the aging process out of much of the discussion of sex and gender, we offer a truncated understanding of early modern woman.

As scholars of women and students of gender, we have been quite good at looking for and acknowledging difference based on race, class, and a whole host of other variables, such as childhood and youth, which go into the construction of “woman.” Yet in many cases, the woman we look at—whatever her color or her caste—tends to be vaguely reproductive. She is neither too young, nor too old. In early modern Europe, she—this “every woman”—tends to be healthy and maternal, producing children, raising children, and sometimes burying children. Even the poor, who were certainly not terribly healthy, were still portrayed as (1) reproductive and reproducing, and (2) maternal: willing to beg, borrow, and steal to keep food in their children’s bellies and the whole lot of them together as a family and out of the workhouse.

Younger women, even without children, were still fertile women, and were typically working hard to have children only when those babies could receive the full force of their maternal care—that is, once these young women were married. Even widows, who may well have been old, but usually were not, found their lives and futures caught up in the issues of children, reproduction, and remarriage. How to provide for the first set of offspring in order to allow for a successful remarriage and the presumably second (or even third) set of children? For never-married women, a surprising 20% in some parts of the early-modern population, it was once again only their position vis-a-vis the formation of nuclear households or long-term reproductive units that defined them in the eyes of many historians, as well as within their own societies and in their laws.² Even less wholesome characters, such as the procuress, the professional prostitute, and the occasional ‘working girl’ are studied because of this distinctive use of their reproductive bodies.

To be “old” and past the possibility of reproduction fundamentally changed things for women. In the early modern period, the aging process changed the very biological construction of females. According to

Hippocrates, who remained at the core of early modern teaching, the very process of aging and the experience of menopause dried females out, turning old women into old men. The aging patterns of elderly women and men converged in old age and thereafter they shared the same physical characteristics and ailments. “Menopause,” Hippocrates wrote, “signalled the reassimilation of the female body to the male (and hence more tractable) body” (Dean-Jones 107; Mendelson and Crawford 23; Shafer 164). In old age, there was but one “sex”—and that sex was male. Scholarship on university-based medicine in early modern Europe

confirms the educated elite’s adherence to Hippocrates. “There is a clear tendency in the early modern period,” writes Daniel Shafer, “as well as the beginning of the eighteenth century, to see menopause as the end of a woman’s female life and “the beginning of a strangely neutralized or masculine existence” (168). Later, Shafer states it most bluntly: “Old women do not exist, they are completely absorbed in the male principle of ageing” (172). It stands to reason, therefore, that if being biologically female changed as a result of age, what it meant to be a woman changed as well.

We know some of the ways that old age altered the meaning of womanhood. And it will surprise no student of gender to find that what an old woman was, or was supposed to be, followed widely divergent and often contradictory paths. For



HANS BALDUNG GRIEN, THE AGES OF LIFE AND DEATH, 1541-44, 151 X 61 CM. MUSEO DEL PRADO, MADRID, COLLECTION DAGLI ORTI (PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY THE ART ARCHIVE AT ART RESOURCE, NY)

example, younger women were thought to be naturally chaste and sexually uninterested, while old women were sexually vigorous, if not vicious (Magnan). Furthermore, in a gendered twist from the usual riff that the elderly (and by that I mean older men) were the source of wisdom, knowledge, and therefore a trusty guide for the young, old women too were knowledgeable, willing guides to younger women, but in the realm of sexual behavior and procuring sex for sale (Herrero; Scarborough). How well, then, does the early modern truism that women were “Silent, Obedient, and Chaste” fit a female past fifty, possibly a widow, probably without male headship, and potentially one with wealth and a degree of power?

In addition to changes in the cultural construction of woman provoked by increased age, older women faced very real and pronounced modifications in their lived experience. For older women in Northern Europe, adjustments took place at the most fundamental level of their existence—where and with whom they lived. For young widows, remarriage was frequent and frequently swift. For women widowed late in life, remarriage was doubtful.³ For most women (and unlike men), old age was spent alone and not as part of a couple. Nor did they typically reside with their adult children (Ottaway, “Old Woman’s Home” 131; Schmidt). In fact, a full 40% of all widows lived alone (Botelho, “Old Age in the Seventeenth Century” 151). Others took alternative routes to domestic stability and continued survival. Some older women formed female-only households, known as “widow clusters,” while yet others joined ranks with much younger children (who might or might not be related to them). For a poor woman, such composite households provided a place for a poor child to live and a helper, plus companionship, for an old woman (Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law*; Ottaway, *The Decline of Life* 14). Still, regardless of living arrangements and cultural constructions of sexuality, elderly women were typically unmarried and expected to be celibate.

While we are beginning to make important inroads into the historical understanding of old age, we do not yet fully understand what womanhood in old age looked like from the outside or how it was experienced

from the inside. But based on what we are learning, it is clear that being old changed what it meant to be “woman.” Consequently, and I say this in the strongest of terms: to the trinity and the litany of all good historians—that of gender, race, and class—we must add a fourth member: age, particularly old age.

The subject of “old age” was late to the table of historical inquiry, despite early invitations from prominent social and cultural historians, such as Peter Laslett, Richard Wall, and Keith Thomas in the 1970s. Perhaps it is because aging was considered timeless and beneath notice. Indeed, this might be the very reason why the Riddle of the Sphinx continues to vex the unwary. Or perhaps it is because the idea of growing old has inherent in it a degree of self-dread that makes the topic less appealing than others. The Greek myth of Tithonus speaks to the longevity of this fear, as well as the consequences of immortality without external youth. Whatever the reason, whatever the cause, it was only during the 1990s that old age as a distinct subject of enquiry began to gain traction in the historical world. It was during this decade that the tentative trends and shapes of old age emerged to shape our current historiography, as well as to highlight surprising areas of neglect.

What is absolutely clear is that there is no Grand Narrative of Old Age, be it underwritten by the concepts of religion, modernization, and retirement or the mutually exclusive claims of degradation or an earlier “golden age” of aging. Aging and old age are now unquestionably considered by their students as complex and nuanced life phases, as individual as the person experiencing them.⁴

Two points, however, have emerged with clarity about the elderly in the past that contradict common beliefs. These have meaningful implications for the modern world, and argue for modern scholars taking a long view of “history” to contextualize aging in terms of centuries and not just decades. First, and perhaps most importantly for our concerns, there was no rarity value in being old.⁵ Over the course of the seventeenth century, the number and proportion of people living into old age grew. For example, in 1632 Austria, 5.5% of the population was over sixty

years of age. In 1671, it was 6.9%, and later in 1779 it was 8.6% (Mitterauer and Sieder 146). Northern Europe, specifically the Low Countries and England, experienced earlier and even more robust growth in their elderly populations. In 1581 roughly 7% of the population of England was over sixty years of age and by 1671 it was nearly 9% (Wrigley et al. 614-15). Early modern England, in other words, had an age structure that resembled closely the demographic picture of 1960s Britain.

Elderly people lived in every community in Europe, and everyone knew an older person. And while respect was accorded to the elderly by tradition and religious instruction, it was not a result of the scarcity of their existence. Neither did the elderly in the past usually live with their adult children. Particularly in Northern Europe, as we have seen, there was a strong and commanding cultural code that dictated that older people live in their own households and be financially independent from their adult children and families. The modern world is not alone in having to engage with issues surrounding housing, feeding, and caring for sizable numbers of elderly individuals. And the desire for independence in old age is not a product of the modern world.

Second, and also contrary to modern assumptions, women predominated amongst the old. Since demographers have been able to work out such details, it is clear that more women than men lived into old age, and once there lived farther into advanced age. (Botelho, "Old Age in the Seventeenth Century" 150).⁶ They were, it seems, often happier too. Yet until relatively recently this fact had been "lost," as generations of commentators appear to have accepted at face value the claims of Aristotle: women aged faster and died sooner than men (Shafer 164-5). This wasn't true then, and it isn't true now.

Today, a quick look around any place where the elderly gather, in churches, temples, synagogues, social halls, gyms, and golf courses, as well as assisted living communities and nursing homes, quickly puts female faces to the bulk of the aging population. Yet, given the still relatively underpaid nature of women's employment, how do women finance an old age that is typically longer than that of men's and with funds typically not

as great? And, how did they do so with relatively better mental outlooks? “History,” understood in terms of centuries and not decades, may offer some guidance. The nature of early modern female social networks (her “gossips”), her life-time employment (established in her youth and from which she never retired, and consequently from which she never suffered an identity-changing retirement), and her diverse housing arrangements (from “widow clusters” to multi-generational, female-only households) offer some sense of the logistics of female survival into old age in the past that perhaps remain equally important today, yet go unrecognized.

From my perspective as an historian of old age, there are two particularly important areas about which we know far from enough. First, we need to know much more about the nature of intergenerational relationships. How did the old interact with the young? The middle-aged with the aging? What exactly was a “grandmother?” In fact, the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians meeting in 2011 was focused on the issue of “generation,” including the intergenerational relationships of women. This was certainly a start in “the right direction,” but even here, and at a roundtable dedicated to “Age and Generation as a category of analysis in women’s and gender history,” the emphasis was on generational relationships between younger females, but attempts to broaden the discussion to include old age and generation were met with a collective silence.⁷

Second, we also need to understand more about old men in order to understand old women. Ironically, given that historical scholarship typically first learns about men and male activities before turning to the study of women and female cultures, we know more about old women than we do about old men. In part, this has much to do with the cadre of scholars who, in an early agenda-setting collection of essays on female old age (Botelho and Thane), were amongst the first to respond to the historiographical challenge of Laslett and others. Trained to counterbalance the gendered nature of an historical record that assumed “male” as normal and “female” as unworthy of comment, it is only in the discipline’s later work that a more gender-balanced narrative has begun to emerge. Still, we do not know enough about male old age, and without a better

understanding of male old age we cannot have a full understanding of what it means to be an old woman.

So I am challenging you to rewrite and expand what we know about being old. *Age, Culture, Humanities* is an important, new vehicle to do just that. To researchers in gerontology, literary criticism, cultural studies, medical humanities, and art history, to historians like myself and everyone in between, this journal, with its print and on-line presence, offers all scholars of aging a much needed mechanism to engage critically with what it means to age, to be old, and to watch others become so. By placing our current understanding of old age in an historical context that looks at centuries, instead of decades, we can take advantage of what history tells us about fundamental aspects of human nature as we seek potential ways forward, as well as avenues to avoid. By rethinking how old age changes the very nature of femininities and masculinities, we better understand what it means to be a “successful” woman and man in late life. New venues such as *Age, Culture, Humanities* give us the chance to rethink these and other issues, to re-evaluate critically our assumptions and our approaches to the study of aging, and to do so in an explicitly cross-disciplinary way. In so doing, we will refigure in meaningful and powerful ways our understanding of what it means to age, to grow old, and to live long.

NOTES

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² A notable exception to this historiographical position is Amy Froid’s work on single women.

³ See Botelho, “Old Age in the Seventeenth Century” (151); Fauve-Chamoux (243-4); Pelling, “Old Age, Poverty, and Disability”; Pelling, “Who.” Widowers remarried faster and at much later ages than women, and remarriage for women past age fifty was rare except amongst the very poorest. Fascinatingly, amongst the very poorest members of sixteenth-century Norwich, England, old women found themselves marrying men that were decades younger in what Pelling calls “unequal marriages.” This was a survival strategy that brought together a little wealth or tools of a trade inherited from a deceased husband with the strength and appropriate gender of a younger man necessary to continue a business or establish a new one.

- ⁴ General historiographical surveys of old age include: Classen 1-84; Thane, "Social Histories" 93-111; Troyansky, "History" 233-43.
- ⁵ Textbooks still teach undergraduates that while there were some old people in the past, "they were far more rare in this society than in our own" (Bucholz and Key 16).
- ⁶ The opposite was true in Quattrocento Venice, however, with men living longer than women (Grubb 21-3). For the eighteenth century, see Ottaway 21-3; Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime* 8-26.
- ⁷ Berkshire Conference on Women Historians, "Generations: Exploring Race, Sexuality, and Labor across Time and Space," 9-12 June 2011, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In the spirit of full disclosure, I was a member of this roundtable and my interpretation of the event may differ from that of others present.

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