

*The Coils of Aging: Positioning Older Adults in Post-Plague English Literature*

Dissertation Abstract

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Age and the decaying world are on everyone's mind. Scholars devote intense attention to the end of days as caused by the wrongs of man, manifested through traumatic political upheaval, temperamental leadership, contagious diseases spread by blood-sucking insects, climate change, and extreme weather. Conflict between the young and the old pushes the elderly to the margins of society. My dissertation, *The Coils of Aging: Positioning Older Adults in Post-Plague English Literature*, looks at the precarious place of old age in the literature of this polarized culture: England in the latter half of the fourteenth century. By eschewing the biological essentialism of age studies and its common relegation to a subset of disability studies, I argue that later Middle English poetry and narratives presented a construct of old age that promised the future. Aging symbolism during this period envisioned motion towards eternal youth in the renewed world of the Heavenly Jerusalem, contrary to the evident and well-studied narratives of aging as decline. Readings of unmitigated decline, a broad trend bemoaned but rarely challenged by age studies scholars like Margaret Morganroth Gullette, impose ahistorical assumptions on the resolutions of Middle English texts. My project upsets our normalization of narrative arcs by demonstrating the past pervasiveness of narrative circles and coils. Futurity did not reflect the promise and potential of the young. Paradoxically, late fourteenth-century literature represented the old as closest to the future, creating a discomfort that then, just as now, manifested as the antagonistic rhetoric of a generational gap.

Abrupt and violent life-stage transitions represented in literature thus mark not finality but anticipatory preparation, in parallel with the violence expected in the final age of the world; the old have, if not full access to the coming eternity, at least access to more dim glimmers of it—following Gregory the Great's metaphor of a coming sunrise—than the young do. Ultimately, late fourteenth-century literature is not merely concerned with a circular narrative we no longer read for, but also utilizes a host of now-foreign conventions about the possibilities and roles of aging. Age created paradoxes: it bound the bodies of its victims, as if with coiled ropes, while encouraging the same renewal as that experienced by snakes shedding their constrictive old skins; it could be mitigated and slowed with the same toxic elements of snake venom that old age itself purportedly produced, even as that toxicity was held to be antithetical to the young; it invited respectful attention and mocking snubs; its regressive senility could simultaneously signal preparatory growth. Reading with sensitivity to age culture (and to a longer and more circular life-course than we presume) reveals that late fourteenth-century authors strongly censured attempts at rejuvenation, understood aging as a community-policed process, and celebrated *senex* writers as conservators and pioneers of the future, rather than solely as representatives of the past.

I begin by situating my texts within the age culture of fourteenth-century England and its own scholastic tradition. Chapter 1, "The Ages in the Middle Ages," traces the development of the medieval ages-of-man schemata from Late Antiquity onwards. I follow Augustine of Hippo's *On Genesis against the Manicheans* and *The 83 Different Questions* to introduce the core links between the days of creation, the ages of the world, and the ages of man. By matching old age to the sixth day of creation, the decline of the world after Christ, and the renewal of the "inner man," Augustine opens possibilities for the Sabbath day, the future of the world, and postmortem ages. Isidore of Seville, explicitly using the same word for both ages of man and ages of the world, strengthens this *homo/mundus* correlation in his *Etymologies* and insists that the world will end in the sixth age. The Venerable Bede then clarifies in *On the Reckoning of Time* that the seventh age of man and world (correlating with the Sabbath) flow together as the age of death, necessitating disunion from physical bodies, while the eighth age returns those bodies/the world in renewed glory and youth. I explore how these three authors' models proved seminal for the fourteenth century, when literary representations relied upon these models of the extended life-course (a demonstrably problematic term for covering a system that includes prenatal and/or postmortem aging) above all others. I also find instances where the genderqueering model of old age pioneered by Isidore's creative etymologies, careful syntax, and macaronic wordplay colored aged characters. Even as the models of ages excluded all but men, they feminized the old age of men, rendered the old age of others less constrained by gender, and made the gender of death nonbinary.

Chapter 2, “It’s the End of the World As We Know It,” supplies evidence of how the extended life-course narratives permeated English art and poetry. By examining the interrelations between church decorations, books of hours (in particular the *De Lisle Psalter* and *De Lisle Hours*), and brief lyrics on the ages of man, I argue for a cohesive genre of pictorial, poetic, and multimedia Ages of Man *rotae*. These *rotae* insist upon death and rebirth as ages, an insistence painstakingly mirrored in the vernacular, belabored and intentionally accessible *Stanzaic Life of Christ*. I argue that the *rotae*’s vision of an extended life-course shaped poetry from the second half of the fourteenth century. *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Piers Plowman*, when read through the lens of a more circular narrative in which death and renewal follow old age, reveal a predictable progression through the ages. My reading exposes a difficulty in this broad poetic model: that of echoing in conclusions, as a pre-mortem narrator, the renewed man/world of unknowable, heavenly eternity.

Chapter 3, “Poison and the Pardoner,” turns to the disruption of normative aging. I draw upon medieval medicine pertaining to aging, plague, snakes, poison, earth, and the East to propose that not only did schemata of aging group such topics together, but that these associations were frequently at play in literature. I pinpoint examples of prolonged or artificially reclaimed stages of life in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, early precursors to the Wandering Jew legend, and John Gower’s representation of Medea. These texts illustrate a divide between divine, sanctioned experiences of arrested aging and a poisonous, serpentine, plague-carrying or cursed promise of rejuvenation, implying consequences of social and spatial exclusion (justified through recurrent imagery of contagion and toxicity) for the latter. Because of this framework, the elements of contamination, perversion, gold, and exclusion within Chaucer’s Pardoner’s *Prologue* and *Tale* carry ramifications for the supposed salvation the Pardoner offers, ramifications illuminated by the age sequences in the text. I show that the disjointed renewal available stymies spiritual renewal and erases Christ-like prime age. Although the Pardoner presents himself as youthful, pieces of his descriptions suggest that his age is as complicated as his sexual identity and orientation, resonant with the Old Man of his tale (and the spiritually old man of Ephesians 4) rather than with the young churls. The Pardoner’s offer of his tale as a treacle or theriac for the Host—a curative, snake-based remedy for old age, plague, and poison—casts the tale as a medical intervention against the natural life-course. The age sequence of both frame and tale further upends the normative aging process, confirming that instead of offering eternal life, the Pardoner’s repeated inversions of the life-course and fear-mongering citations of death and old age foreclose access to heavenly youth. Hostility towards and avoidance of old age become self-sabotage.

In closing, I return to normative Ricardian representations of the life-course with Chapter 4, “Old Morals, Old Gower.” This chapter weaves in the unresolved gender complications raised by Chapter 1 to grapple with a paradox of writing: following the *Elegies* of Maximianus, male fourteenth-century English poets profess, in their poetry, an inability to write on account of their old age and sexual impotence. John Gower cites this trope in *Confessio Amantis*, inflicting upon his narrator’s persona an ostensibly isolated, abrupt old age in which he is rebuked by Venus, hindered from composing poetry, and excluded from communities of lovers. Yet Gower does so within the overarching frame of a commission from the youthful king after they encounter one another on the Thames. This frame alludes to an incident on the Thames when Richard II rashly instigated a fistfight against an archbishop; it implicitly argues for the importance of old advisors to the young. Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* counters Venus’s chidings and presents not only the poetry, but the love poetry of the old. He inoculates his poem against the moral hazards of toxic age by limiting his aged persona to the frame as an elicitor of moral commentary from Cupid. After old age has struck, Gower’s narrator proceeds rapidly towards the subsequent ages I have outlined above/earlier in the dissertation, citing the days of creation (and hence their parallel to ages of man), observing the end of worldly joys, and anticipating the perfection of heaven. It is at this point that he resolves questions raised by his narrator: the stage of clarity and aged wisdom allows the narrator to now speak from experience, present the divine advice he has accumulated throughout the frame as his own, and offer counsel regarding Richard, England, kingship, and earthly love. This representation of the aging process thus looks ahead to the transition into death, while enabling individual disengagement from worldly desires. Despite their complex protestations of exclusion from writing, literature from *senex personae* is not only validated but, additionally, it encapsulates futurity. Gower argues that old people are crucial guides for a functioning, if declining, community—even as they prepare to leave it.