

# The Seventh Age of Man



# The Seventh Age of Man:

*Issues, Challenges,  
and Paradoxes*

Edited by

Muriel Cassel-Piccot  
and Geneviève Lheureux

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
--------------------	---

## **Part I. Old Age in Contemporary Western Societies**

Chapter One.....	13
------------------	----

Varieties of Experience in the “Seventh Age”

Patricia Thane

Chapter Two .....	23
-------------------	----

“Semi-collective Housing” and Self-managed Co-housing, between  
the Empowerment of the Aged and the Denial of the Fragility

Associated with Age

Cécile Rosenfelder

## **Part II. Old Age in the Renaissance, in England and Spain**

Chapter Three .....	37
---------------------	----

Old Age in Thomas More’s Works: From a Poetical to a Spiritual

Interpretation

Isabelle Bore

Chapter Four.....	55
-------------------	----

Old Age in the Works of Quevedo

Paloma Otaola Gonzalez

Chapter Five .....	65
--------------------	----

Old Age in Spanish Doctrinal Texts, from the Late Middle-Ages  
to the Seventeenth Century

Christine Orbitg

## **Part III. The Representation of Old Age on Screen and in the Media**

Chapter Six .....	85
-------------------	----

The Mother-in-law and the Wise Old Man: Representing Old Age,  
Figuring Social Harmony in Contemporary Chinese TV Drama

Justine Rochot

Chapter Seven.....	103
Ageing Popular Music Artists: French Newspaper Coverage of the <i>Âge Tendre et Têtes de Bois</i> Nostalgia Tour Christopher Tinker	
Chapter Eight.....	115
Dracula: The Horror of Old Age, the Nightmare of Eternal Life Gaëtane Plottier	
<b>Part IV: The Experience of Old Age in Auto(fiction)</b>	
Chapter Nine.....	129
Female Ageing and the Fantastic in A.S. Byatt’s Short Stories Emilie Walezak	
Chapter Ten .....	145
The “Old Ox”, the Old Queen”, and the “Whale in a Pail of Water”: Postcolonial Portraits of Old Age Florence Labaune-Demeule	
Chapter Eleven .....	173
Two Irish Mature Voices on a Quest for Equanimity Vanina Jobert-Martini	
Chapter Twelve.....	185
Winter Journal: The Chronicles of an Author and his Characters’ Ageing Foretold Marie Thévenon	
Contributors.....	197

## INTRODUCTION

Old age can be interpreted as a transitional period during which individuals have to face specific issues, challenges, and paradoxes that may vary from one culture to another. In one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches, the character of Jaques elaborates on the Elizabethan theory of the Seven Ages of Man, whose "last scene of all" is described as a hopeless physical and mental decline:

[...] Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.  
*As You Like It*. II. vii. 163-166

The lines of "the melancholy Jaques" are based on a commonly held vision of old age in the Western world evidenced by the *Encyclopedia Universalis* definition: "final stage in the human life characterised by the slowing down of all activities". The French dictionary, *Le Grand Robert*, is more specific: "last stage in the human life, following midlife, characterised by a general weakening of bodily functions and mental faculties as well as a gradual atrophy of tissues and organs". Both preliminary definitions suggest that life is a linear, continuous process which leads to an unavoidable fall and precludes any hope of ever reaching self-fulfilment.

Nevertheless, this portrayal of elderliness oversimplifies a more complex evolution. Whilst it is commonly agreed that old age is the ultimate phase in one's life (providing the subject dies at an age that corresponds to the average life expectancy in his or her country) and marks its termination, it nevertheless proves much more difficult to establish its beginning and describe its unfolding. Indeed, distinguishing between maturity—a period of life when the passing of time is highly valued since it allows one's intellectual capacities to reach their peak and one's life to benefit from accumulated experience—and oldness results from a constantly changing social construct. Might old age simply be seen as the ultimate phase in a succession of chapters, during which individuals, benefiting from past experience, are free to pass judgement and express

criticism, sometimes to the point of derision? Or might the concept of maturity disappear altogether and be replaced by the myth of eternal youth? To what extent might the constant increase in life expectancy influence society as most people, who now live well into their eighties or nineties, must face health problems which in turn need to be addressed?

If employees aged fifty and over are automatically considered as old, the notion of seniority clearly depends on ideological, scientific and socio-political representations, and implies making choices, which often result in paradoxical situations. For example, an unemployed man or woman over a certain age will be deemed unfit for work in industrialised societies, while in the meantime people are expected to work longer before they can retire with a full pension. Besides, the 65s are part of a complex web of intergenerational relationships, which keep changing as social structures and family ties evolve. Since the 1960s, the nuclear family, which excludes the older generation, has been the norm. However, pensioners are now increasingly required to fulfil new roles and adapt to new demographic transitions, economic developments and social patterns. Faced with an ever-increasing ageing population and in order to handle this unprecedented situation, societies are bound to find solutions, imagine innovative policies and respond to new ways of life. This book aims to analyse these evolutions through the confrontation of different humanities perspectives.

Part I presents old age and examines the situation of old age in contemporary Western societies from a civilisational and circumstantial point-of-view. With distance and hindsight, Professor Patricia Thane questions the interpretation of what old age has been and has meant throughout history and, according to facts, proposes a reinterpretation of elderliness while Doctor Cécile Rosenfeld focuses on a concrete sociological example, the empowerment of the aged thanks to self-managed housing in France and Belgium.

In Chapter One, entitled *Varieties of Experience in the Seventh Age*, Professor Thane concentrates on demographic data in order to challenge the beliefs, stereotypes and assumptions associated with old age and debunk the dominant ideology. In comparing what is often vaguely referred to as “the past” by contemporary commentators to the present, in going as far back as the Roman Empire through the Middle-Ages, the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, she reflects on the meaning of the phrase “old age”, which since Plato has meant a period in man’s life starting around 60, and questions contemporary interpretations of some of the issues connected with this particular phase. She shows that there never



was a golden age for elderly people and that at all times many of them had to face loneliness and isolation because their children were dead, or too poor to support them, or because they had lost touch with their families. Women were particularly vulnerable, although their status was quite ambivalent. While postmenopausal women sometimes became trusted members of the community, they were also suspected of being sexual predators. Nevertheless, Professor Thane's analysis of *As You Like It* shows that the representation of old age in Shakespeare's time was as complex as it is today. Indeed, although the elderly are often described as a burden to younger generations, she proves that they can and do remain active (although their physical fitness partly depends on their social and professional backgrounds) and significantly contribute to society and the economy. Patricia Thane therefore proposes a much more qualified interpretation of the current situation of the generation of 68, many of whom still consider themselves as militants.

Being a militant is how Thérèse Clerc, a prominent feminist activist and co-founder of the Babayagas' House, named after the witch-like character from Russian folklore, saw herself. In transforming council flats into self-managed cohousing accommodations, she and her co-residents wanted to remain independent. Her pioneering approach has caught Doctor Rosenfelder's attention. In Chapter Two entitled "***Semi-collective Housing and Self-managed Cohousing, between the Empowerment of the Aged and the Denial of the Fragility Associated with Age***", the sociologist shows how older people, who belong to a generation that fought for civil liberties as well as personal freedom, are now experimenting with new types of housing, as part of a range of strategies to allow them to keep on playing a part in society, making decisions about themselves, and imagining alternative ways of dealing with various forms of dependence. She uses field research methods to examine the "semi-collective housing" movement both in France and in Belgium and shows that this type of housing tends to represent a process of *empowerment* for old people in society. However, she also wonders whether it does not amount to a denial of the vulnerability and frailty associated with ageing at the same time.

After a factual presentation of old age through time and in the present, the following parts of the book concentrate on the representation of old age. First, Part II goes back to the Renaissance and studies the portrayals of old age in England and then in Spain. The three papers at issue do not only deal with the decrepitude of the body, but also show how old age can be a means to criticize man's condition, to promote moral values and to insist on the ambivalence of ageing.

In *Old Age in Thomas More's Works: from a Poetical Perception to a Spiritual Interpretation*, Doctor Isabelle Bore concentrates on Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (1534) in which he challenges contemporaneous representations of older people as feeble dotards and argues that they should be honoured as experienced citizens who might usefully temper the reckless enthusiasm of youth. Doctor Bore first analyzes a poem from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, in which More, writing in a tradition inherited from the classics, refers to the main stages in a man's life from the time of his birth to the time of his death, dedicating a stanza to each separate age. She shows that for More, old age is an ambiguous state: older people play an important part in society, they participate in public affairs but they are also faced with their impending deaths and possible oblivion. More shifts perspectives in *Utopia* and addresses the question of old age from a sociological point of view. In the first part of the book, he exposes the contempt that old people, seen as parasites, are subjected to, then tries to rehabilitate them in the second part. As opposed to his friend Erasmus, for whom old age is a sort of second childhood, More grants the elderly a central place. Old age equates wisdom in *A Dialogue of Comfort* and More once more leaves the field of sociology to adopt a philosophical approach. The dialogue stages Anthony (a personification of old age) and his nephew Vincent (who embodies youth) in Budapest at the time of the Turkish invasion. Knowing his end is near, Anthony reveals to his nephew the secret of a happy life: any tribulation will lead to a greater consolation. Anthony's testament seems to reflect More's own thoughts.

In *Old Age in the Works of Quevedo*, Professor Paloma Otaola Gonzalez explores Francisco de Quevedo's ambivalent portraits of old age particularly in his satirical writings *El Buscon* (1626) and *Dreams and Discourses* (1627). Within the tradition of classical literature, the writer of the Baroque era, famous for his poetic, moral, and theological works, often deals with old age insisting on bodily decay to the point of caricature. On the one hand, ageing might be interpreted as the physical manifestation of moral decay. Associating specific trades with old age allows Quevedo to criticise these very trades. But he also disapproves of the elderly who desperately try to look young. They provide him with an opportunity to elaborate on the gap between reality and appearances in more general terms. On the other hand, he also describes ageing in a positive light in the tradition of 17<sup>th</sup> century Christian Neo-stoicism. Old age becomes the cloak of wisdom when truth is more important than looks. He even claims that diseases sometimes cause sufferers to develop inner strength and aspire to moral strength. Throughout her analysis, Professor Otaola

Gonzalez portrays the features of old age and captures the values attached to it as interpreted by Quevedo.

Professor Christine Orobítg examines the representations of old age in Spain as well, although her corpus is not based on works of literature, but on a collection of doctrinal texts, ranging from medical essays to articles from encyclopaedias through astrological handbooks. Her contribution, entitled *Old Age in Spanish Doctrinal Texts, from the Late Middle-Ages to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, examines the physical consequences of old age for the proponents of the theory of humours which prevailed in Europe at the time. The human body was believed to undergo a cooling and drying process that inexorably led to death, since heat and moisture were necessary to the preservation of life. Although this evolution was seen as gradual, many doctrinal texts try to determine when maturity turns to old age. Following earlier traditions inherited from Greek and Roman authors, Spanish physicians and philosophers divide man's life into a succession of ages (like Thomas More in his poem) that are sometimes subdivided into stages: old age often includes two phases—senescence, then decrepitude. Ageing is therefore seen as a form of progressive degradation, which might nevertheless encourage elderly people to seek the truth and render them wiser. However, old age corresponds to a phase in man's life when black bile predominates over other humours, and when Saturn, the melancholy planet, prevails over his fate. But paradoxically, melancholy is associated both with fear, miserliness, or malevolence and with clear-sightedness, intelligence, even transcendence, which in turn causes old age to be interpreted positively as a period when man is no longer influenced by passion or desire, or negatively when he yields to misanthropy. That is why many texts are devoted to ways of preserving youth and slowing down the ageing process, which prompts Professor Orobítg to conclude that the quest for eternal youth in Renaissance Spain was as relevant then as it is today.

Part III furthers the analysis with more recent representations of old age as it is shown in the mass media, on television, in pop music, and in the cinema. In these particular cases, old age can act as a revealer of social tensions and problems, as a demonstrator of intergenerational cohesion, and as a developer of a new identity.

In China, a country that has only recently been facing an ageing population, alarmist claims and moral discourses have proliferated in the media. These preoccupations which reflect the social and demographic trends that are emerging in Chinese society and the problems that derive from them find expression in various representations of old age in

literature and on television. One noteworthy development is the large number of TV programmes which deal with the relationships between elderly parents and their children. These ties are closely examined and delved into by Justine Rochot in *The Mother-in-law and the Wise Old Man: Representing Old Age, Figuring Social Harmony in Contemporary Chinese Family TV Drama*. Studying several famous Chinese series released between 2005 and 2013, the researcher attempts to show that new figures of old age are being forged as they mirror new social models and evolutions which both conform to and disrupt traditional representations of old age inherited from Confucianism and Maoism. That is the very paradox that Justine Rochot studies, bringing into relief both tragic and comic archetypes. She then shows how gender plays a key-role in these representations regardless of the characters' ages. Old men are often depicted as lonely figures, incapable of adapting to modern society, whereas old women relentlessly bully their daughters-in-law. She concludes that the models shown in TV series are reflections of contemporary tensions and difficulties that affect Chinese society at large.

Doctor Christopher Tinker's paper, entitled "*Young and Headstrong*": *Nostalgia, Ageing and Later Life in French Press Coverage of Âge Tendre et Tête de Bois* considers the range of approaches to nostalgia during later life in French press coverage of the successful *Âge Tendre et Tête de Bois* ("Young and Headstrong") phenomenon—an annual concert tour of France, Belgium, and Switzerland, launched in 2006, and a Mediterranean cruise, which followed in 2008, featuring pop singers who originally came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. The tour and cruise take their name from *Âge Tendre et Tête de Bois* (1961-64), a youth-oriented television programme presented monthly by the entertainer Albert Raisner, which gave its name to a short-lived youth magazine (1963-64). The notion of a distinct, cohesive and active generation of older people is promoted, for example, through representations of artists and audiences interacting at autograph-signing sessions following concerts or onboard the cruise ship. Coverage also represents the "social connectedness" of older people sharing a collective musical memory. Indeed, there are many reports of clubs and associations of older people in France organising excursions to the *Âge Tendre et Têtes de Bois* concerts. Musicians are also represented in terms of a strong work ethic and quality performances. Although generational differences are recognised, ageism is opposed and intergenerational cohesion is effectively promoted. Coverage includes reference to the nostalgia experienced second-hand by young concert goers via the recollections and reminiscences of their elders—what may be termed "simulated" or "vicarious" nostalgia. While coverage broaches the

subjects of age-related illness and death, the *Âge Tendre et Tête de Bois* concerts/cruises are viewed as an opportunity to indulge in an imagined return to youth as older musicians and audiences “live out ‘retro’ fantasies, of ‘being young again’”. Concerts are also viewed as particularly joyful experiences for performers and audiences, rather than in terms of “bittersweetness”, often associated with nostalgia. In sum, the paper emphasises the discursive potential of mediated popular-music-related nostalgia to define ageing and later life in personal, social, physical and emotional terms.

Doctor Gaëtane Plottier approaches the question of old age through the emblematic figure of the vampire. In *Dracula: The Horror of Old Age, the Nightmare of Eternal Life*, she compares Bram Stoker’s famous novel, published in 1897, to three major cinematographic adaptations, released over a period of seventy years: *Nosferatu*, by Friedrich-Wilhelm Murnau, shot in 1922, and two films entitled *Dracula*—the first directed by Tod Browning in 1939, and the second by Francis Ford Coppola in 1992. Her analysis is based on one of the main characteristics of the vampire, as described by Stoker: his ability to look like an old man or a young man by turns, or to rejuvenate at will. Over the years, filmmakers have variously interpreted this particular feature. If Murnau’s *Nosferatu* is consistently depicted as a repulsive old man, Coppola’s *Dracula* often appears as a younger, more glamorous creature. In fact, what makes him repulsive (as in Stoker’s novel) is not a form of ugliness specifically associated with ageing, but a combination of attributes commonly linked either to youth or to old age—ruby lips and a receding hairline, for instance. But that is not the only paradox exhibited by vampires. *Dracula* may grow old but he remains masterful. He manages to overpower younger people by preying on them, by literally sucking their youth away, and therefore embodies a threat that needs to be eradicated. However, death might also set the vampire free. As Doctor Plottier writes: “There is relief in relinquishing a carnal envelope that with time has come to constitute a prison for the mind”. The figure of *Dracula* and his avatars reveal the fear generated by old age in modern societies, which try to ignore physical and mental decay in condemning older generations to indifference and oblivion, a fate that is not so dissimilar to the vampire’s, who is meant to remain hidden in far-away castles.

The final part of the book is entirely dedicated to old age in works of fiction. The four contributors examine ageing from different perspectives that are sometimes combined: literary genres, gender, post-colonialism, interculturality, identity, autofiction, and narration.

In *Female Ageing and the Fantastic in A.S. Byatt's Short Stories*, Doctor Emilie Walezak discusses old age in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” (1994), “A Stone Woman” (2003), and “The Pink Ribbon” (2005), whose main protagonists are female characters. She shows how A.S. Byatt speculates on ageing in terms of biology, social repercussions and representations. Doctor Walezak first scrutinizes how the writer deals with physical decrepitude in relation to sex, menopause, dementia, and disablements, and questions the issue of dependence, euthanasia, and the myth of eternal beauty. She proceeds to show how the fantastic elements, including not only djinns and jinxes but also magic transformations of ageing bodies that are gradually grafted upon realistic portrayals, come to the rescue of the female protagonists. The latter are offered new liberating opportunities which blur traditional standards, the distinctions between “beginning” and “end”, producing an indecisiveness which is characteristic not only of the fantastic as a genre but also of the typical short story. These findings lead Doctor Walezak to demonstrate how Byatt interrogates the origins and statuses of women and builds a new female identity.

Professor Florence Labaune-Demeule focuses on the ambiguous status of elderliness in postcolonial literature in her paper entitled *The “Old Ox”, the “Old Queen”, and “the Whale in a Pail of Water”: Postcolonial Portraits of Old Age*. The metaphors are nicknames given to aged characters in three separate novels. Whitechapel is an old slave who lives on a plantation in Virginia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in *The Longest Memory* by Fred d’Aguiar (1994). The phrase evokes the strength and the resilience of the beast of burden but also the yoke of slavery in a novel that deprives the old protagonist of any form of comfort or serenity in his final years. The “Old Queen” is the name used by Mr. Biswas to refer to his mother-in-law, Mrs. Tulsi, in the eponymous novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, by V.S. Naipaul (1961). If the “Old Queen” first appears as a tyrannical matriarch, she gradually loses power as she ages and becomes physically weaker, which allows Mr. Biswas to break free from her family and buy a house of his own. The portraits of individual characters may be interpreted as allegories of the decline and fall of the British Empire. In Anita Desai’s *In Custody* (1984), Nur Shahjehanabadi is a fictional Urdu poet whose language and culture are threatened with extinction. Young Deven Sharma is sent to interview him and discovers that the god-like figure has turned into “a Whale in a Pail of Water”, an obese, impotent old man who has been deserted by creativity. In the final part of her paper, Professor Labaune-Demeule analyses the structural roles played by old people in postcolonial fiction: they stand for the persistence of a culture inherited

from the past and it is the postcolonial writers' responsibility to act as custodians of such invaluable artistic heritage.

Doctor Vanina Jobert-Martini explores the genre of autofiction through the study of the memoirs of John McGahern (*Memoir*, 2005) and Edna O'Brien (*Country Girl—A Memoir*, 2012), two Irish writers who published their autobiographies late in life. For both, old age is seen as a starting point as it brings back childhood memories with a peculiar intensity and allows for a resolution of conflicts, from a personal as well as a national point of view. However, Doctor Jobert-Martini shows, in *Two Irish Mature Voices on a Quest for Equanimity*, that each author deals with the genre in their own ways, sometimes conforming to its rules, sometimes diverging from them. Although the troubled history of modern Ireland serves as a background to their narratives, they had to overcome personal crises that often put their resilience to the test. For McGahern as for O'Brien, writing is a necessity because it enables them to gain control over their own existences. Resorting to autobiography at the end of a life dedicated to literature appears as an attempt to achieve a form of reconciliation with their own selves and with the world. Old age therefore functions as a point of departure for a retrospective account, and as an endpoint. They could claim, with T.S. Eliot, "In my end is my beginning".

*Winter Journal: the Chronicles of an Author and his Characters' Ageing Foretold* written by Doctor Marie Thévenon closes this book on old age and ageing. In all the issues she tackles, the researcher regularly and meticulously puts the two novels she has chosen to study, Paul Auster's *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) and *Men in the Dark* (2008) in perspective with the author's other works. After explaining that the writer ages with his characters, she examines how the two main protagonists compare and differ. For Paul Auster, old age is synonymous with illness and disability, which can be physical or mental or both, and as a consequence with confinement. The two heroes are locked in their bodies and in their rooms. Once their despairing, solitary, and secluded conditions are analysed, Doctor Thévenon proceeds to demonstrate the role and function of the settings which help the two heroes to be reborn as they excite their imagination, exert their intellectual activity and encourage their vivacity. Through the image of the womb, the two main characters find a means to overcome the difficult period of life that inexorably leads to death. Mental agility comes to the rescue of physical decrepitude, which allows us to conclude on an optimistic note.

Although contributors to this book come from widely different backgrounds and address the question of old age from various points of

view, their papers exhibit recurrent features and often come to similar conclusions. This accounts for the originality of the present publication and calls for further research related to an even wider variety of fields.

**MURIEL CASSEL-PICCOT & GENEVIEVE LHEUREUX**



**PART I**

**OLD AGE IN CONTEMPORARY  
WESTERN SOCIETIES**



# CHAPTER ONE

## VARIETIES OF EXPERIENCE IN THE “SEVENTH AGE”

PATRICIA THANE  
KING’S COLLEGE, LONDON, UK

This chapter surveys, all too briefly, aspects of the diversity of experience in later life and the diversity of representations of old age, historically and in the present. The aim is to counter popular, mostly negative, stereotypes which suggest that, past a certain age, people are very similar and have very similar, generally depressing, lives.

The phase of life commonly defined as “old age”, beginning around age 60 and continuing past 100, until as long as people survive, is and always has been very diverse. It now includes some very fit people—marathon runners in their 80s and even 90s, and the very frail; the very rich and the very poor; people actively engaged with their families and communities, some of them highly creative, and severely isolated people. It has always been a highly diverse age category, on all dimensions.

We are very aware of old age now, because in so many societies, more people are living longer than ever before, but it is often underestimated how many older people there were in all past societies, societies often much poorer than ours and less able to cope with helpless people. Tim Parkin has estimated that even in the Roman Empire in the 1st century AD perhaps 6-8 per cent of the population was aged 60 or above (Parkin 2005, 41). By the 18<sup>th</sup> century it is calculated that at least ten per cent of the populations of England, France and Spain were aged over 60. It is true that at any time before the twentieth century, in most places, average life expectancy at birth was only around 40 to 45, or sometimes lower. But this does not mean, as is often believed, that most people died in middle age. Average life expectancy at birth was influenced by very high infant and child death rates, which were normal in most European societies until at least the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century. Those who survived the hazardous early years

of life at any time in the pre-industrial past had a good chance of survival to 60 or beyond (Vassberg 2002, 145-166).

And most survivors in most places, in the past as now, were female. It is often forgotten that old age has so often been, and is, a female condition, or it has been cause for surprise or consternation. A certain discrimination against older women has a very long history. This gender difference must be taken into account when considering representations and experiences of old age at any time: among other things older women have long been more likely than men to be poor, due to their greater difficulty in accumulating assets; also, to be closer to their families than men.

Something that has not changed over the centuries is the natural lifespan, the maximum time that anyone can expect to live. At all times, even in ancient Rome (Parkin 2005, 39-41), some people survived to 100 or a little beyond but not many. The numbers living to what is defined as old age grew dramatically from the second half of the twentieth century, to 20 per cent and more living past 60 in Britain and other high-income countries by the end of the century. And more people lived to later ages: in Britain at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century an average of 74 people per year reached age 100; by the end of the century it was 3000. In Japan, where more people are living longer than anywhere else, the number was 8,500 and is still growing. But it still rare to live to much later ages, though there are occasional examples in Europe of survival to around 120 (Vaupel 1997, 1794-1804).

At the same time, more people have remained fit and active to later ages—though not all. In particular there are clear inequalities between rich and poor—the better off living and remaining fit for longer. In Britain at present there is an average 7-year gap in average life expectancy between the richest and the poorest people; and a 17-year gap between them in “disease-free life expectancy”, the length of time they remain physically fit. Levels of personal fitness obviously influence the meanings of old age for individuals and great diversity remains.

In some past communities the proportion of older people could be very high when young people moved away in search of work, as they very often did, even in pre-industrial Europe, leaving the older generation behind. The separation of families because of movement around the country, or the world, is not, as is often thought, a new fact of modern life. In the distant past people did not always live out their lives in one place but, especially when they were young, moved in search of work and a better life. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century they migrated even further: to Australia, to North and South America. When they left, in the days before mass communications, fast

transport and mass literacy, links with home and family might be difficult to maintain or lost forever.

So, very many older people were not cared for by their families in the past because they had no surviving children living close by. Or children might no longer be alive when their parents reached old age. Given the higher rates of death at all ages at all times before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, even in higher income countries, older people could not be sure that their children would outlive them. And more people did not marry or had no children. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century just one third of people in England had a surviving child when they reached their sixtieth birthday, and no-one could rely on this anywhere else in Europe, or in the world (Wrigley 1979, 255-256). Or if their children survived they might themselves be too poor to give much help to the older generation.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, older people in higher income countries, such as most of those in Europe, have fewer children than in the past, but it is rare and tragic for them to die in infancy or even in middle age and for an older person not to have, and not to be in touch with, at least one living child (Wolf and Ballal 2006). Even when the generations live at a distance from one another, they can, and do, get together at unprecedented speed by telephone, the internet, motor, rail or air travel. One of the constant tropes of the pessimistic narrative of old age stresses the increasing loneliness of older people in the modern world, with fewer, more scattered, children than in “the past”. Yet all the evidence suggests the intense loneliness especially of many poor, childless, old people in the past. This may be a less, not more, common experience in the present, though sadly of course, some older people are lonely and isolated in all societies, especially divorced or never-married men<sup>1</sup>. Again, there is an important gender difference.

More people in all age-groups live alone today, but this is not necessarily a sign of loneliness. Often it is chosen by older people because it keeps them active and independent, and more people can afford it than at any past time. And in all times, including the present, families and friends help one another even when they live in separate households. Besides, living with their adult children does not necessarily mean that older people are cared for. There is strong evidence from present-day Japan of abuse of older people living with their families. It is unlikely that this happens only in Japan or only in the modern world. Indeed, in northern Europe, even in medieval times, folk tales warned of the dangers to older people if they placed their lives under the control of their children. In one story an old

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Professor Sara Arber, University of Surrey, for this information, based upon her current research.

man living with his children is gradually demoted from a place of honour at the head of the table to a bench behind the door, where he dies in misery (Shahar 1997, 92-96). Such tales were re-worked by Shakespeare, above all in his play *King Lear*. Conflict between the generations and neglect in old age is nothing new.

Older people have often preferred to maintain their independence for as long as they could, at least until the very final, frail, dependent stage of life, which by no means everyone did, or does, experience. Until the early mid-20<sup>th</sup> century this was likely to be brief because, before the discovery of effective antibiotics in the 1930s, older people, as they weakened and suffered illness, often died quickly of pneumonia or infections. More recently, the last, dependent stage is likely to be prolonged due to the effects of advances in medicine which can sometimes uncomfortably prolong lives—a new experience and dilemma of later life.

When discussing family relationships, it is important to remember that older people have always been givers as well as receivers to their families and communities: bringing up orphaned grand-children, giving a home to a widowed or deserted daughter and her children, caring for sick or disabled children, spouses, neighbours, giving material support to their children and grandchildren when they could. Support has always flowed downwards as well as upwards between the generations in all social classes, as it still does (Grundy 2005, 233-235). In Britain in 2011, 43 per cent of children under age 5 whose mothers were in paid work were looked after by grandparents—mostly but not exclusively grandmothers. Older people are often represented as costly dependent burdens on the younger generation, soaking up resources in expensive pensions and health care<sup>2</sup>. Their very positive contributions to the economy and society—as paid workers, taxpayers, consumers, as the backbone of the voluntary sector and in supporting younger people in their families, financially and otherwise—is overlooked. It has been calculated for Britain that people over age 65 contribute £40b per year more, through tax payments, spending power, donations to charities and volunteering, than they take in the costs of pensions, health and social care. They are not the financial “burden” on the young that is often claimed.

Older people through the centuries worked as hard and long as they could. Before state pensions were introduced many of them had little choice. A census of the poor in Norwich England, in 1570 described as only “almost” past work three widows aged 74, 79 and 82, who all worked

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<sup>2</sup> Women’s Royal Voluntary Service “Gold Age Pensioners: contribution outweighs cost by £40 billion”. [www.goldagepensioners.com](http://www.goldagepensioners.com) (accessed January 2012)

as hand-spinners of cloth (Pelling 1991, 82). It was only after World War 2 that pensions were introduced which enabled a period of retirement, of rest between working life and decrepitude and death, which became normal for almost everyone in northern Europe. It may soon disappear, especially for poor people, as pensions shrink and pension ages rise, as governments wish.

However hard they worked older people in the past were not necessarily respected more than they are now simply because they were old, as is often thought. This belief is itself very old. In the opening pages of Plato’s *Republic*, written in the fourth century BC, there is a discussion of a group of old men some of them complaining “that their families show no respect for their age”. But the commentator, himself an old man, says that this is not his experience or that of many older men he has met and that if old men are not respected by their families, it is due to their own behaviour and therefore their own fault, not the common experience of all older people. Even then the belief was raised, then challenged.

It has been rare in North European culture for people to be respected, or not, for their age alone. People of any age earned respect by their actions or because their wealth and power enforced deference. Rich old people might be venerated, outwardly at least. Poor old people might be cared for and respected by the community, or ostracized and neglected. Special knowledge possessed by older people, for example women’s knowledge of cures for sickness, might be valued as the characteristic wisdom of the old, to be passed onto future generations, or vilified and punished at certain times as proof of witchcraft, especially if the cure failed. Europe has a long history of treating certain older people as both unworthy of respect and socially and economically worthless, and of respecting and supporting others, especially if they were male and/or rich. There is no clear pattern of universal attitudes or trajectories of change.

But how should old age be defined? How old is “old”? Until now this chapter has applied a modern definition of old age to the past, as beginning around 60 or 65. This definition was fixed during the twentieth century in most European countries as the age at which most people retired from paid work and received a pension and it became the conventional, every day, definition. Arguably, it is now outdated, as more people live to be fit and active to later ages than ever before (Kirkwood 1999). How did this age definition come about? In fact, over many centuries and places there has been remarkable continuity in how old age was defined in both popular and official discourse. In ancient Greece and Rome, throughout medieval and early modern Europe, in 19<sup>th</sup> century North America and Australasia, old age, was conventionally defined as beginning somewhere between

ages 60 and 70, as it still is (Parkin et al, 2005). But it was always widely recognized that this was not universal and some people became frail at younger ages, in their 50s or even 40s, whereas others remained fit and active into their eighties or even beyond.

Even in ancient Athens men remained eligible for military service to the age of 60 and some served to that age (Finley 1984, 391-408). The age of exemption for public office—such as jury service—even in the thirteenth century was 70 in England, Florence, Venice and Pisa. Such rules must have born some relationship to the observable reality of the capabilities of older people to have survived so long. Such expectations continued until they became institutionalized in retirement and pension rules in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Generally, these official definitions would allow the individual who was physically or mentally unfit exemption from public obligations at earlier ages, and for the fit and active to carry them on to later ages. Indeed, through most of history, in everyday perceptions and practice, old age has not been defined by chronology so much as by physical fitness. In most times and places, in everyday life, people have been judged to be “old” when they could no longer support or look after themselves, when the faculties essential for survival in adult life were failing. Through the centuries impoverished older people were granted poor relief on account of helplessness due to old age at ages varying from the 40s to the 80s.

But through time women were more likely to be judged by their physical appearance than their physical fitness and often judged to be old at earlier ages than men (Botelho 2001, 43-6; Thane 2000, 330-332). As they still are, as shown by cases in Britain of female TV presenters who are dismissed in their 50s or earlier because they are judged too wrinkled and aged for the public to want to look at them, though older, greyer and wrinklier male presenters carry on. In the 1930s, women in Britain protested at being retired at younger ages than men on account of their appearance. The gender division in the meanings of old age is deeply embedded and continues to be profound. Women were sometimes said to be old after the menopause, when they ceased to be able to carry out their main function in life, child-bearing. But not always. In medieval and early modern Europe and sometimes in ancient Greece and Rome women might gain more independence after menopause, sometimes more public responsibilities, as midwives, chaperones, or adjudicators in community conflicts about sexual or other delicate matters. Post-menopausal women were portrayed in early modern Europe as sexually predatory and dangerous once they need no longer fear pregnancy, though the sexuality



of older men was also widely satirized (Kittredge 2002, 247-264). Again, there has been variety in perceptions of older women and men.

Diversity among older people has always been represented visually and in language and literature. Since the beginning of European languages, a simple three-part division of the age-span, into youth, maturity, old age, has been common, but not adequate to express the visible diversity of reality in all age-groups. Rather the “Ages of Man” have been divided, in different times and places, into anything between four and twelve stages in literature, theological and philosophical writing and in visual imagery. Most such age schemas have acknowledged at least a primary division within old age between active, younger, old age and the last, decrepit, stage of existence and, generally, a long, gradual transition from maturity to senescence. In early modern England a distinction between stages of old age was defined as between “green”, younger old age, and later dependency. The modern form is the distinction between “young old age” and “old, old age”; or a definition originating in France, between the “third age”, which follows the “first age” of youth and the “second age” of maturity, and then the final “fourth age”.

Probably the most famous literary representation of the Ages of Man in English is that of Shakespeare in *As You Like It*, from which this conference takes its title, which was written and performed at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Jaques concludes his description of the Seven Ages of man with its final phase:

[...] second childishness and mere oblivion;  
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything  
*As You Like It*. II. vii. 165-166

This is sometimes interpreted as typical of a negative attitude to older people in Shakespeare’s time. Yet Jaques’ description of all age groups is negative. There is a satirical edge to the soliloquy which should caution us against taking it at face value. Rather, Shakespeare seems to be playing ironically with contrasting contemporary representations of ageing. Immediately as Jaques concludes his speech, Orlando’s faithful servant, Adam, enters the stage. Earlier in the play he described himself at “almost fourscore” years, as:

[...] strong and lusty  
 [...] my age is as a lusty winter,  
 Frosty but kindly. [...]  
 I’ll do the service of a younger man.  
*As You Like It*. II. iii. 48-55

When Adam reappears after Jaques' speech, he is exhausted after several days in the forest with insufficient food or drink, as anyone of any age might be, but he is not the senile creature of Jaques' description. Rather he subverts Jaques' melancholy message about the inexorable course of ageing. He embodies human difference in the experience of ageing. Shakespeare and many other writers assume each life to be distinctive, none following quite the same course. They presented competing representations of old age with an ease which suggests that these were familiar to and shared by their audiences. A similar diversity, and belief that ageing can to some degree be controlled by individuals is found in medical, philosophical and other writings over the centuries and in visual images, though there is no space to examine more of them now<sup>3</sup>.

Throughout history, real life in old age was as richly diverse as in literature and the visual arts. Over time, this diversity has increased, especially over the past century, as, for the first time in history, it has become normal for most people who are born or live in higher income countries to grow old. The past sixty years have seen more change in perceptions and experiences of later life than any other period, though still strong continuities with the past remain. More people live, and are fit, to later ages than ever before and they pursue a greater variety of lifestyles. But this is not widely recognized and general stereotypes continue of everyone past about age 65 as dependent, useless, costly burdens. But older people are resisting this. The generation of 1968 is getting older but is still militant. There are laws against age discrimination, encouraged by the EU, which was unimaginable a few decades ago, and they are sometimes—too rarely—used. In Britain and elsewhere, older people protest about being excluded from the workforce, about age discrimination in health care and more else, though there is space for more protest.

There have been positive and negative images and realities of old age throughout history. There never was a past golden age when it was better to be old than in the present. The present is probably more “golden” for more older people, at least in richer countries, than any time, though it is certainly not golden for all of them. The future is uncertain. People may continue to live longer and remain healthy to later ages, or the polluted environment and bad eating habits may reduce future expectancy of healthy life. Our knowledge of the history of old age is often shadowy and uncertain. This is at least as true of our knowledge of the future.

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<sup>3</sup>For discussion of medical and philosophical texts see Thane *Old Age*; for visual images see Thane (Ed.) *Long History*.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# “SEMI-COLLECTIVE HOUSING” AND SELF-MANAGED CO-HOUSING, BETWEEN THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE AGED AND THE DENIAL OF THE FRAGILITY ASSOCIATED WITH AGE

CECILE ROSENFELDER

UNIVERSITÉ PARIS-EST CRÉTEIL, FRANCE

In the context of an ageing population and the challenges and questions raised by it, new housing designs started appearing around the year 2000. As combinations of traditional gerontological services, opportunities to stay at home, and institutional accommodations, these heterogeneous patterns are referred to as “intermediary housing”. Self-managed co-housing is the least developed “intermediary housing” in the territory under consideration and constitutes a marginal statistical reality. Nevertheless, it represents a symbol of autonomy for the elderly. The designers of these projects and the inhabitants of the communities which were imagined and designed for and by old people, in a private setting or in a collaborative work with architects and landlords, seem to reinvent a “place for ageing” and can be considered as pioneering models of cohabitations in old age.

In this paper, the particular case of self-managed co-housing will help to enlighten us on the meaning as well as on the conditions of emergence of “intermediary housing” in order to shed light on the relationship between society in general, the ageing population, and its correlative, increased dependence. I will first attempt to define its significant traits, then show its limits and finally point out the contradictory opinions that it generates.

## Methodology

This chapter is supported by empirical observations and 16 semi-directive interviews that were conducted in 4 old people's self-managed co-housing residences in France and in Belgium. Two of these co-housing residences are located in the Paris Region, one in the northeast of France in a rural district and one in a Brussels city district in Belgium. The aim of the analysis is not to compare public policies in France and in Belgium to determine how self-managed co-housing can be built according to their national specificities. We chose instead to compare several projects mostly in France and to a lesser extent in Belgium in order to complete the empirical data and to shed light on common values, representations, and development logic in the field of self-managed co-housing. The field research was completed using desk research. Apart from the scientific reviews in the domain (Labit 2009; Argoud 2011), the study of charters about different projects, I also sourced my study from press articles, as well as documentaries and reports (Carlson 1998; Charlot and Guffens 2006; Boulmier 2009; Broussy 2013). In order to guarantee the respondents' anonymity, I used pseudonyms instead of real names. Thérèse Clerc, who initiated the "Maison des Babayagas" a very famous self-managed co-housing project in France, is the only exception since she is a public figure.

### **"Semi-collective Housing" and Self-managed Co-housing**

"Intermediary housing" is defined as an "accommodation offer" (Nowik 2014, 26) which can be likened to other forms of housing, although they are very different if we take into account its three major characteristics. It is made up of a living space that is adapted to persons with disabilities, ensures that the occupiers "feel at home" and facilitates access to services. "Intermediary housing" can therefore be defined as an individual home that is part of a collective structure, thereby creating social links between the residents which, in turn, helps the occupants to fight off loneliness as they get older. Senior Residences is the best-known and most sought-after form of "intermediary housing" but other types of accommodation designed for the over-60s are also being designed, like co-housing, participative housing, cohabitation, retirement villages, béguinages or intergenerational housing<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Dominique Argoud constructed a typology of "semi-collective housing". He has a record of 5 ideal types based on some overlapping characteristics: adapted