



Sinfulness, Sanctity and Bodily Transgressions: Representations of Ageing, Disability and Impairment in Late-Medieval Drama
Pecado, santidad y transgresión corporal: representaciones de la discapacidad física en el teatro de la Edad Media tardía
Pecado, santidade e transgressão corporal: representações de deficiências físicas no drama tardo-medieval

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Abstract: The relationship between the textual and physical representations of the disabled or impaired body and morality is an intriguing and complex area to explore in medieval literary and dramatic culture. In medieval thought, since the body and soul were seen as inextricably linked, different sins were thought to take their own physiological effects upon the body. While sexual sin, for instance, was thought to cause leprosy, the sin of avarice was thought to cause premature ageing.² Yet, physical disability or impairment, and other bodily transgressions, as cultural constructs, were not always negatively received in society. Affliction could be a means of grace rather than punishment, and there is evidence that monks even prayed for physical and mental affliction to regain a state of purity.³ In order to explore how disability, impairment and bodily transgression is represented in the context of sinfulness and the ageing body, this paper will use a moral spectrum of characters as well as historical evidence.

Resumo: A relação entre a representação física e textual do corpo com deficiência e a moralidade é uma complexa e intrigante área para se explorar na cultura literária e dramática medieval. No pensamento medieval, uma vez que o corpo e a alma eram vistos como intrinsecamente ligados, diferentes pecados

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² CUMMINS, Josephine. ‘Attitudes to Old Age and Ageing in Medieval Society’. PhD Thesis, The University of Glasgow, 2000, p. 165.

³ DOOB, Penelope. *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*. Yale: Yale University Press, 1974, p. 5.



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assumiam seus próprios efeitos fisiológicos no corpo. Enquanto o pecado sexual, por exemplo, era imaginado como o causador da lepra, o pecado da avareza era encarado como causa de envelhecimento prematuro. Ainda assim, deficiências físicas e outras transgressões corporais, enquanto construtos culturais, não foram sempre recebidas negativamente na sociedade. Tal aflição poderia ser uma forma de graça em contraste à penitencia, e existem evidencias de que monges rezavam por aflição mental e física para reconquistar um estado de pureza. De maneira a explorar como as deficiências e as transgressões corporais eram representadas num contexto de pecado e envelhecimento do corpo, este artigo irá usar um espectro moral de características, bem como evidencias históricas.

Keywords: Late-Medieval – Drama – Disability – Physiognomy – Sinfulness.

Palavras-chave: Idade Média Tardia – Drama – Deficiência – Fisionomia – Pecado.

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I. Sinfulness, Sanctity and Bodily Transgressions: Representations of Ageing, Disability and Impairment in Late-Medieval Drama

Introduction

The natural associations of older age with disability stem from the common ground that both states share as physiological deviations from the healthy body in medical and cultural thought. Later life is a stage that throughout cultural history has been associated with qualities such as wisdom and experience, but negative responses towards older people were also prevalent in the late-medieval period, especially in terms of the physiognomical judgement of the older body. Consequently, the symbol of the ageing body and what it could signify in late-medieval cultural and intellectual thought is complex, ambiguous and multivalent.

Age in the Context of Disability, Impairment and Transgression

In the medieval period, ideas about the ageing process were most popularly expressed in a scheme of seven ages, although more or less than seven stages



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in man's life were not uncommon. The Seven Ages of Man were widely recognised as consisting of Infancy (0-7); Childhood (7-14); Adolescence (14-21); Youth (21-28/35); Adulthood (28-48/50); Old Age (50-70); and Decrepitude (70+).⁴ These ages can be used as a useful framework not only to understand the representations of the body in relation to age throughout medieval drama, but also to examine the body in the context of chronological age. Another widely recognised structure representing the ages of mankind was the Wheel of Life. A depiction with ten ages can be found in the Wheel of the Ages of Man's Life from the De Lisle Psalter (fig. 1).

The associations made between medieval ideas of the ages of man and particular physical, mental, behavioural, and moral traits helps us to define how medieval perceptions of chronological age fit into ideas about impairment. For instance, if the stages of the Seven Ages of Man are used as a point of reference, not only can we determine with which ages the decline of the body is associated, but the vulnerabilities of specific age groups to sinfulness and specific sins over a lifetime. Over the Seven Ages of Man, old age was thought to be a time of moral vulnerability and physical decline; and decrepitude a time of cognitive impairment, resentment and anxiety for death.⁵

The different schemata representing the ages of man's life provide one such source where we can access depictions of the body in age, accompanied by textual information that defines each stage. Using the associations of each of the ten ages from the Wheel of the Ages of Man's Life, older age in the medieval period is represented as a time of physical and emotional changes such as declining physical mobility, moral vulnerability, and cognitive impairment. Therefore, the virtues and vices of age can be explicated according to chronological age, in addition to the physical understanding of the health and humoral characteristics of each age.

⁴ VAUCHEZ, Andre and LAPIDGE, Michael. *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.



Figure 1. The Wheel of the Ages of Man's Life. Fourteenth-century illumination from the De Lisle Psalter. The British Library Board. Shelf mark: Arundel 83 f.126v.

Medieval Characteristics of Ageing and Responses to the Ageing Body

Since medieval documentary and medical sources about ageing are particularly sparse, it is literary material that is considered to be the richest source in the study of historical gerontology. However, the problem with using artistic representations in the endeavour to understand the normative interpretation of ageing, lies in the artistic manipulation of the physical and mental ageing processes for its dramatic and rhetorical effects.



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How we define an advanced state of age chronologically is an ambiguous and complex endeavour in both modern and medieval thought, because of its subjectivity. Rosenthal uses the age of sixty as a way to define the beginning of later life within the medieval period.⁶ In primary evidence from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it is when Margery's husband is over sixty years of age that he is described as being 'a man in gret age passing thre scor yer'.⁷

This response to the age of sixty is supported in medieval literary sources such as the fifteenth century psychomachia *The Castle of Perseverance*, since in his youth Mankind associates the decrepitude of the colder body with the age of 'sexty wyntyr hold' as being 'Wanne thi nose waxit cold'.⁸ The same age is also found in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Merchant's Tale from the fourteenth century, since January, a typical *senex amans* figure and a characteristically older man, is described to be 'sixty yeer'.⁹ Outside of dramatic and literary representations of advanced age, the age of sixty also fits in with the idea of ageing in medieval cultural thought, as schemata such as the Seven Ages of Man attests.

Literature specifically concerning the ages of man's life is an essential resource in offering cultural perspectives on ageing. In its personified representations of Youthe, Medill Elde and Elde, the fourteenth century poem *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* offers a valuable insight into the stereotypical physical and moral associations with ageing. In this poem, the characteristics of Elde's advanced age include a humped back and white beard, typical attributes of the body in advanced age in medieval literature. Elde is also 'ballede and blynde and alle babirlippede, / Totheles and tenefull', and he seems to appear so advanced in his ageing that 'I helde hym be my hopynge a hundrethe yeris of age'.¹⁰ Similarly, *The Mirror of the Periods of Man's Life* is another allegorical poem

⁶ ROSENTHAL, Joel. *Old Age in Late Medieval England*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, p. 11.

⁷ STALEY, Lynn. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996, ll. 4239-40.

⁸ KLAUSNER, David. *The Castle of Perseverance*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010, ll. 417-18.

⁹ CHAUCER, Geoffrey. 'The Merchant's Tale'. In: BENSON, Larry and ROBINSON, Fred (eds.), *The Riverside Chaucer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 153-68 (l. 1248).

¹⁰ GINSBERG, Warren. 'The Parlement of the Thre Ages'. In: *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992, ll. 158-159 and 164.



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that represents the ageing of mankind over the course of the battle for his soul between good and evil forces. When Mankind is represented as being ‘wyntir in age’, he suffers from visual and hearing impairments and has a humped back, in contrast to the ‘strengþe, bewte & heele’ of his younger years.¹¹

The Ageing Body in Medieval Medical Thought

The idea of the four bodily humours: blood, phlegm, choler, and black bile, was prevalent in medieval cultural and medical constructions of human physiology. The balance of these humours was thought to define the constitution of the body, which in turn determined its character traits such as personality and temperament.¹² The vitality of the body was thought to come from its natural heat, a state associated with the healthy, youthful male. Changes in the health of the body through sickness or age were attributed to changes in the bodily humours, and the diminishing of the body’s natural moisture.¹³ Therefore, the older male body was thought to be cold and dry due to its absence of inner moisture.¹⁴

Spiritual and Moral Interpretations and Understanding of the Ageing Body

Cummins notes how the deterioration of the body through age could be ‘a convenient analogy for the corruption brought about by sin’.¹⁵ The ageing body was also perceived to signify sin through specific physiognomical features such as an arched back, which was thought to physically represent the ‘burden of sin’.¹⁶ This provides an insight into certain medieval responses to older people as being spiritually transgressive. Human mortality and the ageing process were also thought about in terms of being man’s punishment

¹¹ YORK, Ernest. *The Mirror of the Periods of Man's Life*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957, ll. 114 and 435.

¹² METZLER, Irina. ‘Disability in Medieval Europe: Theoretical Approaches to Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, c. 1100 – c. 1400’. PhD Thesis, The University of Reading, 2001, p. 78.

¹³ SHAHAR, Shulamith. *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain*. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 38; see also METZLER. ‘Disability in Medieval Europe:’, p. 114.

¹⁴ SHAHAR. *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 38.

¹⁵ CUMMINS. ‘Attitudes to Old Age and Ageing in Medieval Society’, p. 4.

¹⁶ CUMMINS. ‘Attitudes to Old Age and Ageing in Medieval Society’, p. 165.



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for original sin.¹⁷ This links the ageing body not only to individual sinfulness but the universal fate of mankind.

In the medieval period, the ageing body became increasingly associated with the deadly sin of avarice or covetousness. Despite being seen as a defining weakness of older age, avarice of itself was thought to cause premature ageing by draining the vital moistures of the body and causing the bones to dry up.¹⁸ This physiognomical idea sees the decrepitude and disability of the ageing body as reflective of an individual's moral decay.

II. Performing the Ageing Body The Morality Play and the Physically Declining Body *The Castle of Perseverance*

The Castle of Perseverance is a fifteenth-century play that dramatises the conflict between good and evil forces over the soul of Mankind. The play uses allegorical characters: personified abstractions that represent and respond to Mankind's body on physical, moral, spiritual and psychological levels as he ages. As these abstractions, archetypal good and evil characters, attempt to either preserve Mankind or tempt him with sinfulness, they reveal much about late-medieval cultural thought on the body in later life in terms of its moral and spiritual strengths and weaknesses.

The Spiritual Characteristics of Ageing

Youth and advanced age are both portrayed as specific ages of moral vulnerability in *The Castle of Perseverance*, and in schemata such as the Wheel of the Ages of Man's Life, the stage of life that comes between the Young Man and the Old Man is his perfect age. It is not until Mankind reaches perfect age (forty) that he repents the sins of his youth and temporarily gains the protection of the Castle. However, he is still susceptible to the temptation of sin across the expanse of his life, which is evident since he still interacts with the sins from inside the Castle.

¹⁷ SHAHAR. *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 38.

¹⁸ CUMMINS. 'Attitudes to Old Age and Ageing in Medieval Society', p. 165.



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Mankind is described as being of perfect age by Bad Angel, who asks him: *Woldyst drawe now to holynesse?*¹⁹ Bad Angel tries to dissuade Mankind from entering it, telling him that at '*forty wyntyr olde*' he should continue to indulge in the sins of Pleasure and the Flesh. In encouraging him to maintain the sins of his youth, Bad Angel claims that old age is the time to renounce sin:

Late men that arn on the pyttys brynde
Forberyn bothe mete and drynde
And do penaunce as hem good thynke.²⁰

Even though the sins can attack Mankind across the duration of his life, it is significant that he has the protection of the Castle in his perfect age, as the Castle symbolises Mankind's moral strength at an age in which his body is at its physical peak. It is therefore noteworthy that there is a complete absence of any language that describes Mankind's body as physically or morally vulnerable at this age.

Furthermore, in terms of the stage-plan of the play, it is significant that the personified sins are unable to enter the Castle, and that in order to tempt Mankind into sinfulness they must entice him out. It is at the age of sixty that Covetousness succeeds in doing this, suggesting that the older body is not only lacking in physical and moral strength but is more vulnerable to the seductions of sinful life:

I forsake the Castel of Perseveraunce.
In Coveytyse I wyl me hyle
For to gete sum sustynaunce.²¹

Although Covetousness features in Mankind's youth, the sin tempts him with material pleasures, to 'Cum up and se my ryche aray' which represents how the greedy desires of Mankind have a different emphasis with age, since in Mankind's older age he is tempted by Covetousness through the hoarding of wealth, to 'Let no pore man therof have' and 'Kepe sumwhat fore thiselve'.²²

¹⁹ KLAUSNER, David. *The Castle of Perseverance*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010, 1. 1573.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, ll. 1581-83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 2534-36.

²² *Ibid.*, ll. 831, 2376 and 2378.



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The popular association of older age with the sin of covetousness is a feature that is consistent throughout the play. For instance, even the Second Standard-Bearer expresses that:

Hard a man is in age and covetouse be kynde.
Whanne all oþyr synnys Man hath forsake,
Evere the more that he hath the more is in hys mynde.²³

The Spiritually and Morally Corrupt Body and Soul

Covetousness is a sin that is portrayed as increasingly corrupting and damaging to the life of Mankind in age, since:

The more he hadde, the more he cravyd,
Whyl the lyf lefte hym wythinne.²⁴

In the youth of Mankind, temptation of the sin is particularly centred on greed and luxurious pleasures. For instance, Bad Angel attempts to corrupt Mankind 'Wyth gold and sylvyr and ryche rent'.²⁵ However, wealth for its own sake is not the only temptation of covetousness or avarice that is represented. In his older age, Mankind's weakness to covetousness is for a different reason, as 'this sin is the natural consequence of the fears of the old man that his final years will be poverty-stricken and miserable'.²⁶ The sin Covetousness itself argues that:

If thou be pore and nedy in elde
Thou schalt oftyn evyl fare.²⁷

The concept that covetousness and evil overcomes Mankind with age looks to the dependency of the older body to tempt Mankind and exploit this weakness. Therefore, the physical impairments of advanced age represent and reflect the soul's vulnerability to corruption.

²³ *Ibid.*, ll. 92-94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, ll. 3266-77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 391.

²⁶ DUNLOP, Fiona. *The Late Medieval Interlude: The Drama of Youth and Aristocratic Masculinity*. Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2007, p. 27.

²⁷ KLAUSNER. *The Castle of Perseverance*, ll. 2529-30.



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One of the aspects of avarice associated with later life is hoarding, particularly the idea that mankind reaches a point where he ‘He caryth more for hys catel thanne for hys cursyd synne’.²⁸ This is also a dimension to Mankind’s character that he expresses himself through his desire to ‘hyde this gold undyr the grownde’.²⁹ The sinfulness of covetousness is not simply the pleasure of money, it is the corruption of hoarding money for its own sake.

The Dress of the Body and Soul

Clothing is an important symbol throughout *The Castle of Perseverance* in terms of how the luxury clothes Mankind desires in his youth can connote his temptation by pleasure and sinful indulgences, as well as how the poor clothes of Mankind in his later years can also represent his sinfulness through his covetousness.

Mankind is a character whose clothes change with age, and as the character describes the decrepitude of his ageing body, he makes reference to the fact that ‘I am arayed in a slopp’ which is a loose, unfashionable gown.³⁰ This contrast in clothing highlights how the body of Mankind has changed with age in addition to his moral vulnerabilities, for it is in Mankind’s youth that he expresses so much desire to be well dressed that he dismisses the threat of Doomsday:

What schulde I recknen of Domysday
So that I be ryche and of gret aray?³¹

The sinful and poorly dressed body is an idea that is repeated throughout late-medieval culture. In manuscript paintings of *The Romance of the Rose* the personified sin Avarice, for example, is represented as physically decrepit through old age and is poorly dressed, even though she is surrounded by money (Fig. 2). The same state of poor clothing despite wealth can be observed in Figure 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 2742.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, ll. 2488.

³¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 606-07.



Figure 2. Avarice personified as an older woman. Fourteenth-century illumination. Oxford Bodleian Library, MS. Douce 332. Fol. 002v.



Figure 3. Avarice personified as an older woman. Fifteenth-century illumination. Oxford Bodleian Library, MS. Douce 364. Fol. 003r.

The Mystery Play and the Devout, Ageing Body

Metaphor and the Dramatic Representation of Devout Older Age

The portrayal of older age in biblical drama can be seen to contrast with morality plays, since the characteristics of the older, devout body are used in terms of its greater potential for the strength God can show to it, rather than for its sinfulness or its physical or moral vulnerabilities, as I shall discuss.



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Therefore, morality plays are an important source in the endeavour to understand the spectrum of signification of the ageing body because they allow us to observe just how variable the signification of the ageing and declining body is within the context of devout, Christian characters.

The Purification of Mary from *The Towneley Plays* opens with a lengthy speech from Simeon about himself in his later life. In his description of his ageing body, referring to himself as ‘old Symeon’, the character lists the various ailments he is afflicted with:³²

No wonder if I go on held:
The fevrys, the flyx, make me unweld;
Myn armes, my lymmes, ar stark for eld,
And all gray is my berd.
Myn ees are woren both marke and blynd;
Myn and is short, I want wynd;
Thus has age dystroed my kynd,
And reft myghtis all.³³

These particular physical symptoms are all characteristic of advanced age, for grey hair, visual impairment, shortness of breath, sickness, and weight-loss are all considered typical traits and health problems among the ageing population even in modern medical thought. Simeon also refers to his impaired mobility as he describes that ‘I hobyll all on held’ and ‘crall I to the kyrk’.³⁴ In addition to these physical characteristics, symptoms and impairments, the Towneley Simeon also makes specific reference to the pain and suffering of his impaired body as he explains that:

sittys me downe, and grankys, and gronyss,
And lygys and restys my wery bonys,
And all nyght after grankys, and goonyss,
On slepe tyll I be broght.³⁵

Although these characteristics all fit with the representations of ageing in the schemata of the Ages of Man, (such as the Seven Ages of Man and the ten

³² ENGLAND, George. ‘The Purification of Mary’. In: *The Towneley Plays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966, l. 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, ll. 29-36.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, ll. 6 and 42.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 44-48.



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ages in the Wheel of the Ages of Man's Life, as well as other literary representations), there is a discernable absence of the vices or emotional changes which are characteristic of advanced age.

In *The Purification of the Virgin* from the *York Mystery Cycle*, the character Simeon also makes references to his ageing body, although they are not as extensive as those in *The Towneley Plays*:

For I ame wayke and all unwelde,
My welth ay wayns and passeth away
Whereso I fayre in fyrrh or feyld
I fall ay downe for febyll, in fay.³⁶

York's Simeon particularly emphasises his ailing physical strength, rather than mentioning specific physical impairments. Although York's Simeon does make a general description about his ageing physical appearance, details about the impairment or suffering of his body are not included in the representation of the character's age:

In fay I fall whereso I fayre,
In hayre and hewe and hyde I say;
Owte of this worlde I wolde I were.
Thus wax I warr and warr alway
And my myscheyf growes in all that may.³⁷

Here, Simeon describes his ageing in terms of the physical appearance of his hair and skin, and he refers to his closeness to death and his desire to die, all of which are characteristic representations of ageing and later life in the late-medieval period.

Simeon, in both the *York Mystery Cycle* and *The Towneley Plays*, expresses a sense of woe and lament about ageing, although it is never a negative aspect of his characterisation in either of the plays concerning the Purification, since devout Simeon's speech regularly emphasises his gratitude for life and his love for God. In the Towneley *Purification of Mary*, it can be observed that whenever Simeon bemoans his physical decrepitude, it is almost always immediately counterbalanced by sentiments of religious devotion or gratitude.

³⁶ DAVIDSON, Clifford. 'The Purification of the Virgin'. In: *The York Corpus Christi Plays*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011, ll. 91-94.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 95-99.



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As an example, having previously made the appeal to God to ‘thynk on me that is unweld’ and drawn attention to the fact that ‘Sythen gone many a yere’, it is shortly afterwards that Simeon then describes his age again, but uses it in the context of his gratitude for his life:³⁸

I thank the, lord, with good intent,
Of all thy sond thou has me sent,
That thus long tyme my lyfe has lent,
Now many a yere;
For all ar past now oonly bot I;
I thank the, lord god almyghty!
For so old know I none, sothly,
Now lyfying here.³⁹

Yet, the lamenting tone that Simeon adopts is curious in the context of the medieval idea that melancholy was sometimes considered to signify a ‘lack of belief in the final redemption through the grace of God’.⁴⁰ Melancholy was considered a particular medical susceptibility of older age, since an imbalance of black bile (which was thought to cause melancholy) is associated with bodies that are cold and dry, which might explain this aspect of Simeon’s characterisation. Yet, it also highlights how the stereotypical negative interpretations of the ageing body can be inconsistent in the context of the devout, older body.

The emphasis on the weakness of Simeon’s body in the *York* play and of the physically decrepit body of Simeon in the *Towneley* play is a dramatic technique used to emphasise the wonder of experiencing Christ through the strength of religious devotion and belief. In the *York* play the dramatic moment of Simeon seeing the Christ child is fully realised in a moment that transforms his weak body with strength, and Simeon emphasises the strength he feels through expressing his perception that he no longer feels old:

A, Lorde, I thanke thee ever and ay,
Nowe am I light as leyf on tree;
My age is went, I feyll no fray,

³⁸ ENGLAND. ‘The Purification of Mary’, ll. 5 and 56.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ll. 17-24.

⁴⁰ LAZDA-CAZERS, Rasda. ‘Old Age in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* and *Titurel*. In: CLASSEN, Albrecht (ed.), *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*. Gottingen: Walter de Gruyter, 2007, p. 214.



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Methynke for this that is tolde me
I ame not olde.⁴¹

This demonstrates how the characteristics of the devout body in age are used in terms of the strength God can show to it, rather than for its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The idea of Simeon's older body having physical strength only in terms of religious experience can also be seen in the Towneley *Purification* play, as Simeon describes that he only can find strength enough to go to church, and not for anything else: 'Ther is no warke that I may warke, / But oneths crall I to the kyrk'.⁴²

This dramatic device of strength coming to a weakened body also functions as a parallel to the suffering that Christ will undo through his resurrection, and through bringing about the salvation of mankind.

This technique would have had further dramatic potential in the *Towneley Plays* because unlike in the *York Mystery Cycle* the character is described as being visually impaired, which therefore provides another opportunity for Simeon's experience of the Christ child to contrast with the physical impairments of his body, since a profound visual experience occurs through a sense previously described as being diminished. Using the idea of Simeon's impaired vision also plays on the natural assumptions about the decrepitude of the body in older age in the late-medieval period.

The portrayal of Simeon as an older man is also significant for its dramatic effect of suggesting, and physically representing, his extreme patience in waiting for the Christ child and the consolation of Israel. Moreover, since in biblical drama the afflicted bodies of older people have their suffering reversed, their bodies also parallel the metamorphosis of Christ in death and resurrection, which in turn parallels the redemption Christ achieves for mankind.

III. Conclusion

The ageing body takes on a spectrum of meanings in medieval drama, which we can see represented throughout late-medieval literary and visual cultures as well as in religious, cultural and medical thought. For instance, medieval

⁴¹ DAVIDSON. 'The Purification of the Virgin', ll. 345-49.

⁴² ENGLAND. 'The Purification of Mary', ll. 41-42.



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medical ideas about the bodily humours and the coldness and sickness of the older body feature in the corpus of medieval drama, and the association of physical decrepitude with age is echoed throughout stained-glass windows and depictions of the various schemata of the ages of man's life.

This signification of the older body as being colder, suffering poor health and physically impaired has also been noted in representations of the devout older body, but these ageing bodies in medieval drama take on different significations depending on the moral status of the character. Whereas Mankind's ageing body takes on the signification of moral vulnerabilities and transgressions, conversely, the older virtuous body is used in biblical drama to symbolise exemplary qualities such as patience and faith.

It would have been natural for a late-medieval religious society to associate the ageing body with sinfulness because it is the time of final repentance for sins, the stage at which man has most knowledge of how much he has to atone for. However, the reason the devout older body can be used positively to symbolise virtues such as patience and faith is due to the wisdom of experience and the length of time devoted to virtuous behaviour, which is itself associated with the decline of the body and symbolised by its older appearance.

Therefore, the devout older body in death does not signify the last chance for repentance (having already lived a virtuous life) but presents the glory of a virtuous death. Yet, what morality plays and biblical drama share is that the interpretation of the way the older body is represented, in both cases, is formed from a moral interpretation of the older body. Significantly, the older age and physical health of Mankind and Simeon, is a definitive aspect of how they describe and represent themselves, thus suggesting the crucial importance of portraying their age within the context of the plays for the purpose of dramatic performance.

While the *Castle of Perseverance* associates specific ages with sinfulness, and sinfulness with the decline of the body, older age is not just a metaphor for the soul because bodily decline is a natural part of the ageing process. As this is a play that covers the expanse of Mankind's life, the character is expected to progress to later life and a state of physical decrepitude. Despite Mankind's heightened vulnerability to sinfulness in his older age, there is still a natural assumption that the human body is always vulnerable to sin. Sinning is

described in the play as something that is specifically linked to death and damnation:

Lust-and-Lykyng he schal have,
Lechery schal ben hys fode,
Metys and drynkys he schal have trye.
Wyth a lykyng lady of lofte
He schal syttyn in sendel softe
To cachen hym to Helle crofte
That day that he schal deye.⁴³

Therefore, as *The Castle of Perseverance* is a text that associates sinfulness with the increasing decline of the body as well as death and damnation, this suggests that Mankind's ageing and increasingly decrepit body signifies his morally imperfect character through physiognomy.

To see sin and disability as invariably linked is too simplistic a way of understanding the complex metaphorical uses of disability in late-medieval literary culture. Metzler has pointed out that in the modern day this has come to be 'the dominant historiographical notion on the subject of disability'.⁴⁴

As my earlier analysis of morality plays has shown, the disabled body may be very much associated with sin, in the context of moral transgressions, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. But as my section on the impairments of the devout ageing body has shown, in these plays there is not always a connection between the disabled body and sinfulness. Therefore, the disabled or impaired body does not necessarily signify sinfulness in its own right.

Ultimately, the ambiguous symbol of the ageing body and its complex relation to sin is encapsulated by the example of St. Jerome's approach to Paul of Concordia's healthy body in older age. St. Jerome, who did not believe in original sin, thought that good or bad old age was directly attributable to the individual's personal sinfulness.⁴⁵ In an extract of a letter from St. Jerome to Paul of Concordia (who was a centenarian), we can see older age referred to in positive terms and in an example that provides primary evidence:

And though we see such a healthy body given to many, even sinners, yet in

⁴³ KLAUSNER. *The Castle of Perseverance*, ll. 550-56.

⁴⁴ METZLER. 'Disability in Medieval Europe', p. 114.

⁴⁵ CUMMINS. 'Attitudes to Old Age and Ageing in Medieval Society', p. 80.



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their case the devil supplies it to them that they may sin, while in your case the Lord bestows it that you may rejoice.⁴⁶

Therefore, to St. Jerome the health of Paul's aged body conveyed to him that he had lived an exemplary life, rather than its other interpretation: that he was in league with the devil.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ CUMMINS. 'Attitudes to Old Age and Ageing in Medieval Society', p. 80.

⁴⁷ CUMMINS. 'Attitudes to Old Age and Ageing in Medieval Society', p. 165.