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Ageing in Germanic Cultures and Languages: a Common Concern through Time and Space. An Introduction

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The current issue of «*germanica;*» is dedicated to ageing, the lifelong process of maturation and change at a physical and mental level that we all know. But the way people perceive the phenomenon varies considerably according to their social position as well as to geographical and historical factors.

The effects of ageing involve modifications, like declining energy, which are often challenging and accompanied by anguish and a fear of decay.

In many different cultures we find myths and religious rituals, magic charms and medicinal recipes aimed at contrasting ageing while preserving youth and physical strength, like several contemporary youth-promoting projects[1]. Nonetheless, ageing has not always been experienced negatively everywhere. In some periods and civilizations, the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom following the passage of time has been highly valued. Indeed, ageing may be seen as more or less acceptable depending on the level of age prejudice found in a society or on its high consideration of the elderly as experienced and wise[2]. For example, the use of words such as the Latin *senatus* (from *senex*) to designate an influent institution reveal an undoubtedly great respect for the elderly in the ancient Roman society.

Despite all contemporary innovations in rejuvenation and life extension techniques and, ultimately, projects aimed at transcending death, the depression and fear connected to ageing have not been eliminated. This can lead to a widespread segregation between the old and the young at institutional, social, and cultural levels[3].

Therefore, over the last decades, interdisciplinary research groups (involving, besides medicine, biology, pharmacology, and chemistry, also humanities and social sciences) have studied ageing and later life in social, cultural, and personal contexts, suggesting the need for an approach rooted in the humanities, particu-

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[1] Velten 2022: 19-56; Cumming/Henry 1961.
[2] Packer/Chasteen 2006: 218-247; Staudinger 1996: 57-77.
[3] Hagestad/Uhlenberg 2006; see also Bühler 1933 and Améry 1968.

larly in linguistics, philosophy, and literature, to better understand and accept human temporality. In a recent study published in «The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology»[4], researchers stressed the tendency to experience negative effects as we age, and noticed that the negative perception of ageing may change in a number of contexts depending on whether it is presented as dissolution of identity, language and self-determination, or as a time for recollecting memories and reconstructing the past, and as a challenge to imagine the future.

A multicultural approach entailing scientific and humanistic disciplines is adopted by Swetaly, a research group formed by a number of Swedish and Italian Universities addressing this question. In the cultural and political social debate, exclusion is mainly considered with regard to race, geographical origin, and language[5]. Swetaly tries to draw attention to another type of exclusion, where 'otherness' is based on advancing age, and where the others are the elderly.

With this thematic issue, «*germanica;*» aims to contribute to the international debate through series of articles describing this topic in different times and places in the Germanic world, which it tackles from various perspectives by highlighting mythological, literary, linguistic, and philological aspects, and focusing on the opposition between old/young and on its changes occurring with the development of Germanic societies.

The issue opens with Jasmine Bria's article examining the topic of the ageing king, with King Leir's depiction in the Middle English *Layamon*, a narrative text of legendary events concerning Britain's monarchs. It suggests some analogies with the tone found in Old English elegiac poetry echoed by *Layamon*'s insistence on the king's fall from grace and change of fortune, on the contrast between the present condition and the glorious past, as well as on the inconsistency of human fates.

Donata Bulotta's article analyses several 15th-century medical Middle English recipes against ageing and for regenerating wounded and sore flesh. It investigates the relationship between alchemy and this specific field of medieval medicine, arguing that some practitioners also gave rise to the birth of theories and behaviors disseminated and assimilated in England ever since the 13th century.

Dario Capelli's contribution concentrates on the discrepancy between the late medieval poet Oswald von Wolkenstein's negative representation of advancing age in his early poems and the *Lebenszeugnisse* written during the latter years at the peak of his career as an appreciated statesman. The second part of Capelli's

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[4] Shallcross 2013: 734-749.
[5] Pinna 2011: 54-58; Schaie 2005.

analysis investigates the phenomenon of ageism in Oswald's *Lieder*, associated with sexism and misogynism.

Maria Cristina Lombardi's article provides an overview of the tradition of magical remedies against ageing in Medieval Scandinavian literature, looking for their origin in classical and religious sources as well as in the romances that had penetrated Northern Europe after Christianization. In particular, it focuses on the mythical figure of Iðunn and her golden apples, powerful means of contrasting ageing, suggesting a parallel with classical mythology in the Hesperides' garden and, more specifically, with the goddess Persephone, based on the Eddic *Lokasenna* and kennings in some skaldic texts.

Angela Iuliano's article, investigating the figure of the old witch in medieval Swedish ballads, argues that magic provides old women with a form of productiveness, granting them respect and autonomy. The figure of the old witch, in fact, did not reflect the actual condition of the ordinary old woman, needing the protection and care of her relatives and community. The witch's marginal status and the fact that she was despised and excluded by social networks amounted to her independence and being fully in charge of herself.

Rosella Tinaburri's contribution concentrates on the young versus old dichotomy as presented in the Old High German *Hildebrandlied* where the ageing hero, Hildebrand, fights against a young warrior who turns out to be his own son Hadubrand. Tinaburri claims that in the poem, ageing provides a significant climax to the conflict mirrored by the dialogue between the two. Several examples of ageing heroes, like Egill and Njáll belonging to the Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, are given in order to illustrate the development of the concepts of hero and heroism as corresponding to social and historical changes in Medieval Germanic societies.

Letizia Vezzosi's study presents a survey of some Middle English and Anglo-Norman medical recipes (including healing charms) identifying the role played by age, namely, how being young or old affects the way the problem can be solved by the recipe or charm applied.

In Ferron/Schettino's, Luppi's and Rocco's articles the focus shifts from Old Germanic literature to the present time. They describe linguistic behaviors in ageing people when expressing or perceiving emotions, stressing the importance of a sociolinguistic perspective for a detailed analysis of the language elements used by elderly speakers, as Coupland and Giles have clearly indicated in *Language, Society and the Elderly*.

Ferron/Schettino's contribution focuses on a lexical and prosodic analysis of a corpus consisting of audio files taken from several sources (ZDF Mediathek,

YouTube, Spotify), the protagonists of which are old native German speakers, and investigates the way in which the older ones express emotions, both from an acoustic-prosodic and lexical-semantic point of view.

Luppi's article demonstrates how retelling can be fruitfully applied to the investigation of retrieval and reconstruction processes of memory traces. By comparing number, duration and position of silent pauses occurring in retold stories, as well as in their preceding and subsequent passages, Luppi shows that the higher stability of retold memories brings about a lower number of silent pauses in retellings as well a predominance of pauses occurring at the end of intonation phrases, thus contributing to the impression of a more fluent speech.

Rocco's contribution focuses on the occasionalism *youthwashing* and tries to interpret the discourse elements that can be subsumed under x-washing with regard to the characteristics of *Problematisierungsdiskurse* and in the context of the metalinguistic counterdiscourses on *simulative democracy*.

Although limited to a linguistic area, these articles are of interest for researchers willing to explore documents relating to different times and social contexts, highlighting the cultural transformation of the conception of old age found in some Germanic speaking realities. The recent prolific literature on the theme of ageing shows that it is relevant and demands multidisciplinary and diachronic approaches. To this end, issues have been discussed such as the difficulty of accepting physical decay while maintaining one's own personal identity and political role during the ageing process, the reworking of the misogynistic *topos* of the old woman as an ugly witch into a still active person with a role in the society, pointing out gender differences in the perception of the elderly, and at the same time suggesting areas in which performance increases with advancing age.

We hope to provide researchers with useful viewpoints for their studies, stimulating a dynamic idea of the human existence which draws attention to how various stages of life have specific competences and how other cultures have addressed the question which seems to be a current concern in most cultures.

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