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32 (2022)

Ageing in Germanic Cultures and Languages

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germanica@unior.it



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Ageing in Germanic Cultures and Languages

a cura di Maria Cristina Lombardi

Letizia Vezzosi

**The Ages of Man:
Young and Old in Healing Recipes and Charms**

The theme of age has always been at the center of men's interest, and the medieval man was not an exception. Aging and the ages of man were at the core of the literary, philosophical, theological and scientific medieval thought. The present study aims to offer a survey on the main medieval theories that influenced the scientific debate, especially in the field of medicine, and on their reflections on healing recipes. Based on a corpus of Middle English and Anglo-Norman healing recipes, it has concentrated on the frequency of age reference and its role in the treatment. Unexpectedly, the age factor appears to be more frequent in indirect reference than in relation to patients. This was due to the fact that it was up to the healer to adjust them to the patient's complexion. However, the few instances retracable in the corpus clearly show how the medieval man was worried about old age and looked for youth, the target of the only charm present in the corpus.

[aging; recipes; Middle Ages; humoral theory; man's ages]

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All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players,
They have their exits and entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then, the whining schoolboy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice
In fair round belly, with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws, and modern instances,
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side,

His youthful hose well sav'd, a world too wide,
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again towards childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything
Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II.vii

Interest in aging from a historical point of view arose in concomitance with the publishing of the famous book by Philippe Ariés, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* in 1960 (known in English through the 1962 translation *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*) where the author recreates a fundamental dimension of the medieval (and modern) European family in relation to childhood through literary and iconographic sources. Here the French historian claimed childhood to be 'an artefact of modernity', in that before the Modern Age there was no awareness of the nature of childhood *per se*, but the child was conceptualized as a little adult, not distinguished from an adolescent. Such a view seems to be further confirmed by the depiction of children as 'miniature adults' in medieval art (Oosterwijk 2018: 509).

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken, or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature that distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny, or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society¹.

This provocative claim had the merit to spur medieval historians to enter into intensive research on childhood, and consequently on adolescence and adulthood as well as on the notion of aging as a whole, and to spark off a heated debate that refined the general knowledge of how medieval people perceived and cared for the different stages of man's life. The research of the last sixty years has provided a rich account of how much medieval man cared about aging, and of how the different ages of man were perceived in the medieval and Renaissance periods, and what practices were associated with them. This does not mean that there was unanimous agreement among scholars nor that the notion of the different ages did not change over time.

¹ Ariés 1962: 128.

That medieval people did care a lot about aging is proved by the numerous treatises dedicated to this topic, such as *De retardatione accidentium senectutis cum aliis opusculis de rebus medicinalibus* by Bacon, whose title itself is quite explanatory of the medieval man's interest in aging and which became a point of reference for the medieval schools of Montpellier and Padua. Medieval medical tradition on both age and childhood (and their care) is indeed very rich: *De senectute conservanda* by Burchard Hornecke (1464) and *De regime pregnantium et noviter natorum usque as septennium* by Michele Savonarola (1462) are both excellent abridgments of previous authors (Gilleard 2013) and introductions to the following developments in the medical discipline such as *Libellus de aegritudinibus infantium* by Bagellardi (1472), *Ein Regiment der jungen Kinder* by Metlinger and *Liber de aegritudinibus infantium* by Roelans (Demaitre 1977; Levene 2011; Ottaway 2011). The proliferation of medical manuals should not make the modern reader think that age and childhood were unambiguously defined in Middle Ages or in the Renaissance period.

Age is undoubtedly “an organising principle that we all of us live with all of the time” (Blaikie 1992: 4), but defining the different stages of age is only apparently an easy matter, especially before modern times. They can have both a chronological and functional definition, and either definition depends on cultural and social variables. Although chronological age rests on measurable criteria, that is, the number of years a person has lived, where to set the threshold among the different stages of aging is quite arbitrary. This particularly holds true for the Middle Ages, when the threshold between the ages of man depended on the theoretical schema adopted. Since the ages of man were at the core of the ancient and medieval philosophical, theological, and scientific debate, literary, philosophical, and cross-cultural studies (Conrad von Kondratowitz 1993; Sokolovsky 2009) have long paid attention to the theme of aging, in particular old age (Burrow 1988; Classen 2007). The philosophical theories about aging exerted a great influence on medical thought. Thus in medieval medical treatises *old* and *young* were indexes of those abilities and/or deficiencies, qualities and/or shortcomings theoretically, culturally, and physically connected with age, due to imbalances in humors (Porck 2019; Lewis-Simpson 2008; Esteban-Segura 2010; Newton 2010). Age was indeed necessary information to diagnose a phenomenon as a disease and to cure it (Godderis 1998) according to the most relevant (philosophical) age theories, which harmonized both with the theory of four elements and four bodily humors and astronomical views of the world (Siraisi 1990). In spite of that, the reference to age in medical recipes and healing charms has only very recently been the subject of investigation. The present study aims partially to fill this gap.

After an overview of both those theories of the human ages, elaborated within medieval disciplines such as theology, philosophy, astronomy, and mathematics, which had a significant influence on medicine, the paper will focus on medical recipes, including healing charms. The period under investigation is the Late Middle Ages that witnessed great development and distribution of medical treatises and medical collections of remedies, geographically limited to England. In particular, the analysis is based on a corpus of Middle English and Anglo-Norman medical recipes (including healing charms), which will be searched to individuate the role of age: how the patient's age is conceptualized and represented if it is at all, and what kind of functions the properties of being *old* and *young* play to solve the problem the recipe or the charm is directed to. This investigation will help explain the relationship between medical theories and medical practices and what getting old and being young meant in medieval England.

1. The ages of man: four, six or seven?

“If an early medieval scholar had been asked to name the number of ages, he might just as well have answered four, five, six or seven” (Sears 1986: 38), or three, ten, and twelve, depending on what the man's life was compared to. Medieval age systems were based on different criteria and principles that hark back to two main sources: biblical exegesis and the world's model.

From Classical Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages man's life was compared with the temporal cycle in the world, and accordingly conceptualized within the classical cosmological system based on a tetradic natural order: just as the year was divided by solstices and equinoxes into four parts, so human life had its four seasons. Childhood was likened to spring, youth to summer, adulthood or maturity to autumn, and old age to winter.

The seasons of the year are the turning-points of their lives, rather than their age, so that when these seasons change they change with them by growing and losing feathers, hairs, or leaves respectively. But the winter and summer, spring and autumn of man are defined by his age (GA V.3.784^a 13-18)².

Such a holistic view was successfully conveyed with ‘schemata’ that linked the single section to the qualities of the four humors of the human body and of the four primordial elements of the world. Among the most famous ones, there

² Reeve 2019: 173. GA V = *On the Generation of Animals* by Aristotle, Book V (translated by Arthur Platt, 1912).

are the circular diagram, renowned as *Liber rotarum*³, and the following *rota* in Lambert of Omer's *Liber floridus*, a great cosmological compendium compiled in 1120, showing *homo* placed at the center, surrounded by *annus* above and *mundus* below.

Diagram 1

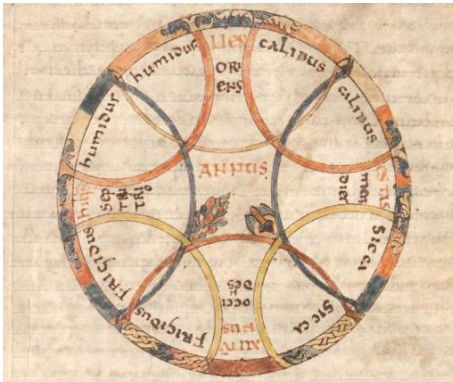


Diagram 2

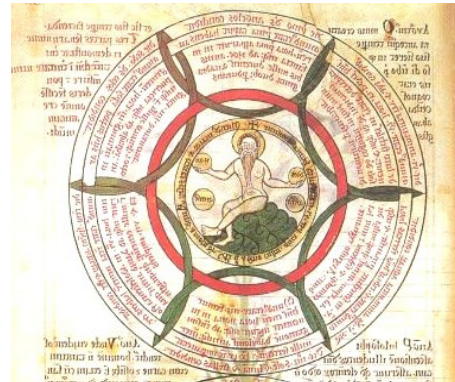


Diagram 1: Isidore of Seville – Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm 14300, fol. 5v.⁴
 Diagram 2: Lambert of St. Omer⁵ – Wolfenbüttel HAB Cod. Guelf. 1 Gud. lat., fol. 31r.

Since Galen, the properties of the four elements had been organized into a mathematical system where they interplayed with the planets. The fact that the planets were seven (Mercury, Venus, Moon, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) resulted in the conception of the seven stages of life: the moon presided over infancy and Mercury over childhood, Venus, naturally, reigned over the courting couple, the Sun governed the prime of life and Mars the mature age, Jupiter was responsible for the serenity of the elderly, and Saturn accompanied the end of life (Haskins 1924; Sears 1986). Seven were also the days of the week, the virtues and vices, or the arts. Seven further represented the organic body composed of three dimensions (length, height, and breadth) and four limits (point, line, surface, and solid). Seven was also venerated as a perfect number for its arithmetic properties. For example, the sum of the numbers from 1 to 7 is equal to the sum of the numbers in which 7 can be decomposed, 1,2 and 4, plus the first two multiples of 7 ($1+2+3+4+5+6+7=1+2+4+7+14$). Moreover, 7 is the highest prime number in the decade 1-10. Seven symbol-

³ It was first elaborated in copies of Isidore of Seville's *Liber de natura rerum*.

⁴ <<https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb00046640?page=14,15>>.

⁵ Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, <<http://diglib.hab.de/inkunabeln/14-astron/start.htm>>.

ized the Holy Spirit and expressed unlimited quantity (Meyer/Suntrup 1977). Since Solon's notion of human life's partition, hebdomads had indeed been the measuring unit⁶ to establish the ages of man, characterized by physical and intellectual properties:

Sic autem in hominis natura septem tempora sunt; aetates appellantur puerulus, puer, adolescens, iuvenis, vir, senior, senex. Haec sunt sic: puerulus usque ad septem annos in dentium mutationem; puer autem usque ad seminis emissionem, quatuordecim anorum, ad bis septenos; adolescens autem usque ad barbam unum et viginti annorum, ad ter septenos, usque ad incrementum corporis; iuvenis autem consummator in XXXV annos et in quinque septenos; vir autem usque ad XL et VIII annos, ad septies septem; senior vero LX et III ad VIII hebdomadas; exinde senex in quatuordecim hebdomadas⁷.

The centrality of the number seven in the medieval debate was fostered by biblical exegesis. Following Remigius⁸, who paraphrased Gregory the Great⁹, seven was the sum of three (the first odd number and the number of the mystery of the Trinity) and four (the first even number and the number of the Cardinal virtues), which are factors of twelve (the number of the Apostles). Actually, the systems born in exegesis, where the course of life was defined in relation to biblical sets and the pattern of human existence was provided with an edifying message (Sears 1986: 54), could also be based on different numbers: for instance, six as the six vessels at the Marriage of Cana or as the six days of creation. In this regard, Saint Augustine holds an incomparable position, inasmuch as the later debate was shaped on the basis of his view.

⁶ Seven was “the number by which man is conceived, developed in the womb, is born, lives, and is sustained, and passing through all the stages of life attains old age; his whole life is regulated by it” (Stahl 1952: 112), translation of “Hic denique est numerus qui hominem concipi, formari, edi, vivere, ali ac per omnes aetatis gradus tradi senectae atque omnino constare facit” (Willis 1963: 30).

⁷ Hippocratic Corpus, *De hebdomadibus* 5 (Roscher 1913: 9-10). Trad: “In like manner there are seven seasons in the nature of man, called ages: *puerulus*, *puer*, *adolescens*, *iuvenis*, *vir*, *senior*, *senex*. They are as follows: *puerulus* up to seven years, until the exchange of teeth; and *puer* up to the emission of seed, fourteen years, to twice seven; and *adolescens* to the appearance of the beard, twenty-one years, to three times seven, to the completion of the body's growth; *iuvenis* is perfect at 35 years, at five times seven, and *vir* up to 49 years, to seven times seven; and senior, 63, to 9 hebdomads; then *senex* to fourteen hebdomads” (Sears 1986: 41).

⁸ I refer to *Liber numerorum* by Remigius d'Auxerre who reconciled Isidore de Seville with Martianus Capella. He never mentioned the seven ages, but his arithmetical considerations are based on hebdomads of seven (Leonardi 1956).

⁹ In particular *Moralia in Iob*.

In Augustine's sixfold system, the course of human life metaphorically paralleled the six days of creation and the six phases of the history of salvation. The first age in the history of salvation spanned from Adam to Noah, ending with a deluge, which corresponded to the *infantia* of the world and to the creation of light. The deluge symbolized the deluge of forgetfulness erasing one's infancy. The second age, ranging from Noah to Abraham, was comparable to childhood or *pueritia*, and to the creation of a firmament and the division of waters below and above. The lack of genders indicated that this age is not suited to procreation. The first two ages consisted of 10 generations, but 14 ones characterized the third age, from Abraham to David, that is the *adolescencia* of the world, when God separated the dry land from the waters and Abraham the people of God from the Gentiles who lived in error. The 'generation' of the people of God indicated that the adolescent could bear children. The fourth age extending from the reign of David to the Babylonian captivity was paralleled with the period of prime or *iuventus*, and the fourth day when stars were created in the firmament¹⁰. The fifth age coincided with the Babylonian exile to the coming of Christ and the first period of decline (*senioris aetatis*) when the man was no longer in his prime, but not yet in his old age, and already experienced a loss in strength, as much as the strength of the kingdom was broken. On the fifth day, the creation of fishes and fowls represented the condition of Jewish people that began to live among nations as fishes in the sea, but without fixed abode like birds in the sky. The sixth age, beginning with the preaching of Christ, has not yet finished: it is the age of decay and weakness (*senectus veteris hominis*), both for the kingdom with the destruction of the temple, and for the man with the gradual loss of strength. An evening will distinguish the sixth age from the seventh one when the Lord comes in splendor and righteous men rest in him. The three circles – the biblical week, the history of the world, and the life of man – show the same pattern: six plus one. Six was a perfect number, being the sum of its factors (1+2+3), and the symbol of the perfection of God's works (Meyer 1975)¹¹.

Augustine's sexpartite system had a great influence on medieval men's thinking first thanks to Isidore of Seville (Bischoff 1961) and became popular to such an extent that the six ages of man – *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adolescencia*, *juventus* or *gravitas*, *senectus*, and *senium*¹² – were canonized as a hexad in arithmetical literature

¹⁰ The Sun, linked to the fourth age of man in the astrological thought, meant the splendor of the reign. Cf. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* IV, 10 (205-206) in Robbins (1940: 444-445).

¹¹ Cf. *De genesi ad litteram* IV, 7 in Zycha (1894: 112).

¹² Augustine gave this list in his *Eighty-three different questions* and the same is literally repeated in Isidore's *Etymologies*, Book XI.

as in Isidore's *Liber numerorum* and became a poetic theme as in Dracontius's *Satisfactio* (ll. 221-256)¹³ where they are named as casually as the four seasons:

Sex sunt aetatis hominum procul usque senectam
Hae distincta tenet tempora quaeque sua. (ll. 221-222)

Quatuor alternant tempora temporibus.
Omnia quum redeant, homini sua non redit aetas,
Sed velut acris auis, sic fugitiua volat. (254-256)

The exegetical interpretation of biblical narrative led to other schemas. Quite diffuse was also the fivefold system, mainly based on the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard and already attested by Early Christian authors such as Ireneus or Tertullian. The correlation between the five hours and the phases of the man's ages spread throughout Europe thanks to the reading offered by Gregory the Great: it was present in an influential homiliary attributed to Paul the Deacon, partly or integrally incorporated in commentaries and homilies by medieval exegetes such as Hrabanus Maurus and Aelfric (Callewaert 1937; Grégoire 1966). Saint Gregory interpreted the five hours as symbols both of the five periods of the world history and of the five ages of man: *mane* symbolized *pueritia*, the third-hour *adolescentia*, since heat increased as the sun advances to its height, the sixth-hour *iuuentus*, because it represented the achievement of zenith and the man's full development, the ninth-hour *senectus*, because of the diminishing of the heat of youth and the descending of the sun; and the eleventh-hour *aetas decrepita* or *veterana*.

However, this and the other systems based on exegesis were highly influential in the philosophical debate, but never crossed the borders with other disciplines, such as mathematics or medicine, with the only exception of the four- and tree-partitions of man's life, although in different ways (see below).

1.1 Counting the age

Defining the limits of each age of man was a topic of debate. The point of reference was Solon's life cycle, where the critical points in man's life occurred at intervals of seven years (7-14-21-28-35-42-49-56-63-70). Indeed, hebdomads established itself as the measuring unit to count ages in every system, probably thanks to the straightforward adaptation of the pentapartite schemata to Solo-

¹³ De Duhn (1873: 87-88).

mon's ages where ten hebdomads were distributed in multiples¹⁴: *infantia* had 7 years; *pueritia* twice 7; *adolescencia* added twice 7 (up to 28) and so did *iuventus* (up to 42), while *senectus* added further four times (up to 70).

On how to draw the line between ages, there was no agreement, apart from the first two ages quite coherently related to the same number of years in every system – *infantia* up to the age of seven, *pueritia* up to the age of fourteen – and *adolescencia* (up to the age of 28) for systems of five or more ages¹⁵. As for the other phases, there was much less coherence even within the same author's works. For instance, Isidore, who was the first scholar independently to put temporal limits to the ages of man, followed Solon's ages in his *Etymologiae* – thus *iuventus* lasted up to 50 and *gravitas* up to 70 years, followed by *senectus* (up to death)¹⁶ –, but in *Differentiae* he strictly counted in hebdomads – so the fifth age, renamed as *senectus*, ended at the age of 49, and the last period started at the age of 77. The number of hebdomads assigned to each age was directly proportional to the complexity of each age: *infantia* and *pueritia* were only assigned one hebdomad because of their simplicity, *adolescencia* two because characterized by both intellect and activity, *iuventus* three because characterized by intellect, activity and bodily strength, *senectus* four because it also had the property of gravity, while *senium* had no fixed number of years¹⁷.

This lack of coherence was not a prerogative of Isidore¹⁸ and was of no concern because it depended on the theoretical approach, i.e. numerical progression, according to which man's ages were calculated. For example, within the sevenfold system, the calculation was based on the planet's period (Swerdlow 1968), which was probably based on the length of its cycle (from supposedly stationary earth): the Moon supposedly ruled four years, Mercury ten years, Venus eight years, the Sun nineteen years (Meton cycle), Mars fifteen years, Jupiter twelve years and Saturn thirty years (Bouché-Leclercq 1899; Boll 1913; Colson 1926). Accordingly, the terminal points were fixed at 4, 14, 22, 41, 56, 68 and

¹⁴ These equivalences are attested in Chartres, Bibliothèque Municipale, ms 62, fol. 37r.

¹⁵ This is also true for pentapartite systems. For example, in Bodleian Library, ms Laud. Misc. 277 (fol. 71v) *iuventus* ends at 56 years, while the rest of life is allotted to *senectus* because "Illuc usque virtus est in homine indeficiens. Sed ex tunc incipit defectus virium, et totum reliquum tempus senectus appellandum est" (Lottin 1947: 20 no. 425).

¹⁶ *Etymologiae* XI, 2, 1-8.

¹⁷ *De differentiis sive de proprietate sermonum* II, 19, 74-76.

¹⁸ The 10th-century miscellaneous manuscript, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms Lat. 2825 (fol. 80r), lists six ages of man (up to 7, 14, 27, 48 or 49, 70 or 80, and beyond) the limits of which are only partially confirmed in their descriptions in terms of hebdomads: following Isidore's *De differentiis* the threshold became 28 for *adolescencia*, 49 for *iuventus*, 77 for *senectus*.

death¹⁹. However, numbers had also a symbolic meaning, and this is the reason for Isidore's effort to insert the perfect number (=49) in his counting.

Within the tetric system, which was strictly correspondent to the humoral theory, the age computation was influenced by two traditions: the works by Hippocrates and Galen²⁰ and the Arabic compendia by Haly Abbas²¹ and Avicenna²² (Uhlmann 1970; Horden 2011). On the one hand, those following the Western tradition calculated the age limits in hebdomads²³. For example, Byrhtferth in his schematic summa²⁴ added the duration of the four ages correlating the seasons and the set of three months: *pueritia* lasted to age 14, *adolescentia* to 28, *iuventus* to 48 and *senectus*²⁵ to 70 or 80, according to a progression in sevens. On the other, the Arabic and Oriental traditions used multiples of ten, thus establishing their pivotal ages at 30²⁶ for the period of growth (which was indifferently called *pueritia* or *adolescentia*), 40 for the period of stability (which was either called *iuventus* or also *etas pulchritudinis*), 60 for the period of initial decline (*senectus*) before the time of the manifestation of weakness (*senium*) which lasted until death (Pormann/Savage-Smith 2007).

¹⁹ This is the scheme published by Delatte (1915) on the basis of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms gr. 1788, fol. 159v.

²⁰ Cf. the *Hippocratic Corpus*, in particular the *Aforismen* with Galen's commentary, and *On the elements according to Hippocrates* and *On the temperaments* by Galen (Horden 2011)

²¹ *The Royal Book* or *The complete book of the medical art* by Haly Abbas ('Alī ibn 'Abbās al-Majūsī) was known in the West thanks to *Liber pantegni*, the compendium of Hellenistic and Islamic medicine, compiled by Constantinus Africanus before 1086 (Sears 1986).

²² In particular, Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā)'s works such as *The book of healing* and *The Canon of Medicine*.

²³ This progression proposed in Bede (especially in *De temporum ratione*) laid ground for further development, as in the works by Heleric of Auxerre, Hrabanus Maurus, and Abbo of Fleury, and obviously Byrhtferth, and also maintained later, as in Lambert's *Liber floridus* (Sears 1986: 33). Its influence is visible in treatises such as *Sapientia artis medicinae* where the four ages followed the sequence in hebdomads (14, 28 and 42), but special consideration is given to the fifty-six year, as in Byrhtferth.

²⁴ It survives in two copies, in the "Ramsey computus" in Oxford, St. John's College, ms 17 fol. 7v, which carries the attribution to Byrhtferth and the identification of the composition as a harmony of the months and season, and in the "Peterborough Computus", in London, British Library, ms Harley 3667 fol. 8r. (Hart 1970; Baker 1982).

²⁵ This is the terminology that goes back to Ambrose and reflects Martianus's statement that "[m]ortalium quoque rerum quatuor vitae sunt, initium, augmentum, status et declination" (*Liber numerorum* 5(24)). Remigius named the four ages as *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adolescentia* and *iuventus*, beyond which "non crescit homo nec ingenio nec statura" (*Commentum in Martianum Cappellam* 396, 21, Lutz 1962-1965, vol. II, vii. 374.5: 193).

²⁶ The first phase was usually subdivided into two sections (*infantia* and *pueritia*) of fifteen years each.

1.2 *The tetradic system and medieval medicine*

The great fortune of the tetradic system in medical treatises was due to its immediate correspondence with the humoral theory, although an exegetical interpretation based on the four evangelists, the four rivers of paradise, and so on was not to be discarded.

In medical treatises, the age threshold had no moral or symbolic meaning, but was functional to treatment and/or illness. For instance, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms Lat 11218 (fol. 23r-23v) adopted a sixfold system whose age limits were instrumental to describe the types of illness to which a man was more susceptible according to his age: the thresholds were at 7, 14, 28, 56, 70, and 74. Age thresholds were also significant data for the cure itself, that is, according to the age of the patient some remedies were regarded to be more appropriate or effective than others. In *Sapientia artis medicinae*²⁷, a 6th-century text, the age of the patient was an important diagnostic feature in that it indicated the nature of the humors predominant in the patient and accordingly the attest therapeutic treatment or procedure.

A die autem qua nator infans usque in annos XIII phlegmatic et reumaticus erit. Completis XV annis accedit illi caliditas sanguinis et exurget illi colera rubea, iam flebotomum meretur. Dominatur illi colera rubea usque in annos XXV, et exurget illi colera nigra et dominatur usque I annos XLII. Infra XXX autem annos iam illi catarticum oportet; [...] Post annos autem LVI iam declinant humores corporis et caliditas minuit; reuma corporis dominat et flegma. Iam suspende flebotomum, per catarticum subveni et adiutoria calida; et si in infantia caput purgavit, repurget propter gravitatem capitis et caliginem oculorum²⁸.

The four humors – blood, red gall, black gall, and phlegm – were typified by some qualities, i.e. hot, cold, dry, moist, on which each age was based. As clearly

²⁷ For more details, see Bates/Bates (1995); Effros (2019).

²⁸ Wlaschky (1928: 106). Trans.: “From the day on which the child is born up to the age 14 he is phlegmatic and rheumatic. Once this age is reached, the blood becomes hotter and red gall increases; now phlebotomy is appropriate. Red gall dominates to age 25 and black gall increases and dominates to age 42. Up to age 30, purging is proper [...]. After age 56, the fluids and heat of the body diminish, and rheum and phlegm dominate. At this time suspend phlebotomy in favor of purging and heat therapy. And if the heat was purged in childhood, let it be purged again, both on account of its heaviness and the dullness of the eyes” (Sears 1986: 26). This passage results from the effort to reconcile the indispensable presence of blood at all stages of life with the theory of humors. The sequence of humoral dominance determining the age, and the personality – phlegmatic, sanguine, choleric, and melancholic – was supposed to be cyclical and therefore the feature of a phlegm-dominated childhood and a phlegmatic old age never took hold.

expressed in *Regimen* from the Hippocratic Corpus, the child was composed of moist and warm, and thus grew quickly, the adolescent of warm and dry as a result of an increase of fire and the drying effect of growth and exercise, the mature man of cold and dry, because his growth was complete, and the old man of cold and moist, since he experienced an increase in water. Since the human body was thought to be a mixture of two elements and in a constant state of flux, one's health depended on their balance, and accordingly, therapeutic practices pointed towards the correction of imbalances and the compensation for dangerous excesses and deficiencies.

As is clear from Diagrams 1 and 2, the four elements constitutive of the world and the four periods of the year were believed to share the same qualities as the four humors (Archambault 1966): air, spring, and blood were considered as hot and wet; fire, summer, and gall as hot and dry; earth, autumn and black bile as cold and dry; winter, water, and phlegm as cold and wet²⁹. The parallel image of the cycles of year's seasons, the four elements and man's ages soon went beyond the scholastic erudition and entered the popular culture as proved by those mnemonic verses written in the Salernitan School:

Consona sunt aer, sanguis, pueritia verque
 Conveniunt estas, ignis coleraque iuventus;
 Autumpnus, terra, melancholia, senectus.
 Flecma, latex et hyemps, senium sibi consociatur³⁰.

All this had an impact on both therapies and diagnosis since the principle of treatments to restore the balance of humors was based on opposites. Thus, an illness during the winter was considered to be affected by an imbalance in phlegm, which caused respiratory and chest problems. On the contrary, an illness that occurred during the summer was associated with yellow bile, which resulted in fever, bad temper, liver disorder, and so forth. Accordingly, to counter the over-saturation of phlegm, which was associated with the coldness of winter, implied the use of hot substances, whereas cold treatments were used to heal from a warm illness during the summer, which was thought to affect the yellow bile humor.

²⁹ Ps-Bede, *De mundi celestis terrestrisque constitutione* I, 6-12.

³⁰ Klibansky/Panofsky/Saxl 1964: 114. "Air, blood, boyhood and spring are in harmony | Summer, fire, cholera, and maturity agree together | as do autumn, earth, melancholy, and old age. | Phlegm, water, and winter take decrepitude as their companion" (trans. L.V.).

2. Aging in medicine

The topic of aging was differently dealt with in medical treatises than in remedies. Unlike medical treatises, practical medicine was mostly prescriptive or normative, that is, it instructed on what ought to be done rather than documenting why something happened. Therefore, to understand the principles underlying recipes, one has to look at a broader context, including also popular beliefs and customs.

Aging was never considered *per se* a disease, but the *accidentia senectutis*, that is, normal concomitants of getting old(er) or diseased conditions linked to it, had always been the object of attention since Hippocrates. According to the theory of humors, natural heat (*calor naturalis* “innate heat”) was greatest as the child left its mother’s womb and therefore the first age of man was characteristically hot and moist (*humidum radicale* “radical moisture”). Consequently, aging was a progressive cooling and drying of the body, with a rise in the melancholic and ultimately in phlegmatic humor, or rather a progressive wasting of the innate heat until it became inadequate to keep up with the diminishing radical moisture. Moisture was the nourishment of heat. Without it, there was *dessicatio*, following Arabic authors’ terminology, through which natural heat consumed natural moisture and coldness and dryness gradually prevailed. Where water and fire did not predominate over earth and air, the active qualities (hot and cold) were in a less favorable ratio and the organism would be less resistant to change and disease.

Medicine could help restore health, and delay aging, more specifically the *accidentia* annexed to it, by means of therapies that could ease the maintenance of radical³¹ or innate heat and moisture and restore the humors to balance. Those therapies relied on the regimen of the so-called six “nonnaturals” (Burns 1976), which contributed to regenerating moisture (Mc Vaugh 1974; Godderis 1998)³²: air, meat and drink, sleep and waking, motion and rest, the retentions and excretions, and the affections of the mind. “Nonnaturals” were necessary and affected humans without being part of their composition or constituting their nature. They did not cause diseases like “contranaturals”, but their importance increased with age: *magnam vim habet consuetudo [...] quoniam natura gaudet in consuetudo*³³. For

³¹ Avicenna, *Liber canonis* 4.1.3, fol. 413v: “sicut incipit flamma adurere corpus lichinii et humiditates eius radicales” “As when a flame begins to attract the body of the wick and its radical moistures” (trans. McVaugh 1974: 267).

³² According to the metaphor of the lamp of life, when the moisture derived from nourishment is exhausted the material of the organism itself would be consumed, much as the wick of a lamp would be charred, drawing on its inherent moisture, when the oil fails. See for instance Peter of Spain, *Thesaurus Pauperum* (Zarra 2018).

³³ Gordon 1542: 240. “the habits are very forceful [...] since nature is keen on habits” (trans. L.V.).

instance, with the advancing of age, one should be in places with sufficiently warm and moist air as well as have hot baths in order to balance the advancing of phlegm and coldness. Likewise, to allow good digestion, which refueled the body with moisture, the older one gets the more attention should be paid to what one eats (Wallis 2010: 485-510). Cheese was recommended because of its cold properties, especially if it was of the young, soft, and unsalted type, usually called green cheese, with bread for the young and without for the old, because of its closeness to milk, and accordingly high degree of nourishment. Certain kinds of poultry were indicated to increase natural warmth, such as quail, pigeon, and partridge, and so was wine which could work like “a medicine”³⁴ by warming and moistening, restoring blood, aiding sleep and digestion, and provoking perspiration, if it was of good quality³⁵. Swaddling was not just a strategy to defend the infant from cold or to ease the transition from the mother’s womb, like other recommended practices such as warm baths, and wrapping with furs. More appropriately, swaddling served to prevent untimely desiccation of the infant and to support its weak, wax-like frame “until it became less liquid and more firm”³⁶.

The patient’s complexion was another important criterion in the prescription of regimen and therapy because the balancing act of humoral properties manifested themselves in different ways in each individual according to the patient’s own complexion. Thus, physicians raised theoretical issues concerning the use of wine with children, in spite of its general effects on sleeplessness or digestion, because of its hot and moist qualities, which could unbalance the child’s complexion and provoke, for example, epilepsy. Hiccups required different remedies according to the age of the patient. Since it was believed to be caused by excessive dryness and heat, the remedies against it for children required drinks with “cold herbs” to “humidify the stomach”, but simply with liquids – often hot or warming such as wine or beer – in adults whose complexion was colder and drier³⁷. Abdominal swelling was usually mentioned among common annoy-

³⁴ See Lawn 1963.

³⁵ See *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum* (De Frutos González 2010: 155) and *Flos medicinae scholae Salerni* (vv. 412-413), where the importance of the wine’s good quality is underscored: “Vinum subtile facit in sene cor iuvenile, sed vinum vile reddit iuvenile senile” (De Renzi 1859: 11).

³⁶ “Donec infans coaularetur et solidetur” (Caelius Aurelianus/Mustio, *Gynaeciorum Sorani e graeco uersorum et retractorum quae exstant*, 155), available at <<https://digiliblt.uniupo.it/xtf/view?query=&brand=default;docId=dlt000066/dlt000066.xml>> [20.12.2022].

³⁷ See recipes (191)-(194) in Poggesi (2022: 251): (191) For yeskyng | Take sawge and stampe it and temper it with vyneger drynke | it and it schall staunche · / (192) or held bothe thyn handes in | hote water ouer the wrestes · / (193) or sowpe · iij · sponfull of | vyneger · or water · or ale · / (194) or sey kyryeleyson · christel= | leyson · kyryeleyson and hold thi mouthe vparde

ing effects in children and in old people as well as in adults, against which different procedures were suggested according to the age and also the environment of the patient: for adults a drink made of wine or ale and green rue, whose nature was hot and dry³⁸, and for children the bandage with a diafinicon – a date pulp electuary in vinegar infusion – whose main ingredient, dates, was considered a cooling agent³⁹.

As shown by these examples, medieval medical treatises embraced the regimen of the *nonnaturales* as well as the area of therapeutics proper. This depended on the fact that distinctions between diet and pharmacy or between foods, spices, perfumes, and medicines were quite blurred, and at the same time, mental states, considered as *accidentia* at a certain age, were regarded as diseases when occurring in other ages. For this reason, some ailments occurring at old age in the Hippocratic aphorisms appeared in the list of *accidentia senectutis* in Roger Bacon's *Epistula de retardatione accidentium senectutis*: among them, insomnia, dyspnea (weakness of breathing), cachexia (weakness of faculties and power), dimness of eye and dullness of hearing (lesion of the instruments of the senses) and so on (Demaitre 1990: 10). However, medieval physicians rarely limited their treatises to hygiene and therapeutics, but approached aging from a more philosophical perspective. Thus, for instance, treatises on childhood would include topics related to the medical care of infants and childhood diseases, but also theoretical reflections merging with moral philosophy on the ages of infancy and childhood and on the rearing of children.

and thin | handes be-for thi throte and hold so thi brethe als longe | as thu mayste and it schall staunche ·|·. “For hiccups. / (191) Take some sage and crush it, then mix it with vinegar and drink it and the hiccups will stop. (192) Or hold both hands in warm water above your wrists. (193) Or drink three tablespoons of vinegar or water or beer. (194) Or say Kyrie eleison Christe eleison Kyrie eleison and hold your mouth up and hold your hands in front of your throat and hold your breath as long as possible and the hiccups will stop” (trans. L.V.).

³⁸ See recipe (224) in Poggesi (2022: 263): For a suellynge wombe | Drynke grene rewe with wyne or with ale oft and he {scbbe} 'schalbe' hole | sekerly for it is prved ·|· “For a swollen belly. Drink green rue with wine or beer often and he will recover surely because this remedy is proven” (trans. L.V.). As far as the properties of green rue, see the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, the latinized version of the 11th-century Arab medical treatise *Taqwim as-Sihḥa* (lit. maintenance of health) Ibn Butlan of Baghdad (Elkhadem 1990).

³⁹ Paolo Bagellardo claimed that “[o]ne of the remedies which have been tried and proven (*expertis*) in modern times is the application of a dyfinicon [?] plaster as described by Mesue [...] and I have seen this to be marvelous with a three-year old Hebrew child” (Demaitre 1977: 478).

3. Aging in remedies and the three ages of man

Medical recipes both in specific collections and in medical texts are not just a reflection of a scholarly tradition of classical medicine and moral philosophy, but are rather a more complex collage of merged and interlacing classical, liturgical, popular, and folkloric healing practices (Jolly 1996). The role played by popular culture might be the reason why references to other partitions of the man's life than the threefold system are very scanty in remedies. As a matter of fact, the three-age system was not so bookish a schema as the others, as it mostly held its own in folklore mythology.

If three represented a totality and a whole in Pythagorean and Aristotelian records, one cannot forget the Sphynx's riddle the solution of which depicted the three phases of man's life, or the description of the sun god in Martianus Cappella's allegory, *On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, where the sun appears as a boy at the beginning of the gods' assembly, as a young man out of breath in mid-course and as a declining old man at the end of his course⁴⁰. The three ages of man were also identified with the Magi and their gifts, but this motif was not rooted in scripture or scriptural commentaries, but rather in folklore and its diffusion ought to be sought in apocryphal texts, popular literature, and works of art.

Unlike other European areas, the Anglo-Saxon world seemed to prefer a three-folded division of the life cycle into *iugop* "youth", *midfyrhtnes* "middle age", *ylde* "old age", over a division into four, six or seven ages of man in literature, as is clear from the homiletic literature⁴¹, and also in the theological and philosophical debate, as confirmed by biblical exegesis. Following *verbatim* a homily by Gregory the Great⁴², Bede's⁴³ and Ælfric's⁴⁴ commentaries on the Parable of the Three Vigils (Luke 12:36-8) equated the three vigils to the three ages of man – *cildhade* "childhood" (Bedian *pueritia*), *weaxendum cnihthade* "growing youth" (Bedian *adolescentia vel iuuentus*)⁴⁵ and *forweredre ylde* "wornout old age" (Bedian *senectus*) – to explain why it was never too late to turn to a Christian way of life. The popularity of the three ages of man must have been very high if the interpolator

⁴⁰ "[F]acie autem mox ingressus est pueri reidentis, in incesso medio iuuenis anhelis, in fine senis apparebat occidui" (*De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* I, 76; Willis 1983: 23).

⁴¹ See, for instance, BIHom XIV. 161-163. Cf. De Bonis (2014) for the sources and the interpretation of *midfyrhtnes*.

⁴² Gregory, *Homiliae in evangelia*, hom. 13, 74-82 (Étaix 1999).

⁴³ Bede, *In Lucam evangelium expositio* (Hurst 1960: 257).

⁴⁴ Ælfric, *Sermo in Natale Unius Confessoris*, 70-83 (Assmann 1889).

⁴⁵ Bede comprises the Gregorian *adolescentia vel iuuentus* into *iuuentus* (Borrow 1998: 66-68).

of the homily *De temporibus Anticristi* by Wulfstan modelled the original sequence of Simon Magus's physical changes on the pattern of the three ages of man – i.e. *cild* “child”, *medemre ylde man* “middle-aged man”, *eald gedungen man* “distinguished old man” – thus departing from both the source (the apocryphal *Passio sanctorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli*) and further reworking⁴⁶, which contained the sequence *puer* “child”, *senior* “old man”, *adolescentior* “young man”.

Another source for the tripartite division of the life cycle, well known in the Anglo-Saxon world, was the Adoration of the Magi (Matt. 2:1-12) and the additional material, such as their origin, age, names, number, etc. developed within apocryphal traditions: since the 6th century, the Magi had been three, depicted as representations of the three ages of man. A textual example of it is offered by a passage from the so-called *Collectanea* or *Excerptiones partum*, a compendium of encyclopaedic and esoteric material, once attributed to Bede, but more recently to an 8th-century Irishman. Here, the three Magi were described, respectively, as an old man (Melchior), a beardless youth (Caspar) and a mature, fully bearded individual (Balthasar).

Magi sunt, qui munera Domino dederunt: primus fuisse dicitur Melchior, senex et canus, barba prolixa et capillis, tunica hyacinthina, sagoque mileno, et calceamentis hyacinthino et albo mixto opere, pro mitrario uariae compositionis indutus: aurum obtulit regi Domino. Secundus, nomine Caspar, iuuenis imberbis, rubicundus, milenica tunica, sago rubeo, calceamentis hyacinthinis uestitus: thure quasi Deo oblatione digna, Deum honorabat. Tertius, fuscus, integre barbatus, Balthasar nomine, habens tunicam rubeam, albo uario <sago>, calceamentis milenicis amictus: per myrrham filium hominis moriturum professus est⁴⁷.

Although a direct influence on Old English literary and homiletic writings cannot be assessed with absolute certainty, Anglo-Saxons must have known the theme of the Magi from the beginning. One of the earliest pieces of evidence is the front panel of the Franks Casket where the Magus nearest to the infant Christ is depicted as kneeling on one knee and has the longest beard, the second stands up straight and has a slightly less prominent beard, while the third, standing furthest away from Christ, is beardless⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ *Blickling Homilies*, hom. 15 (Morris 1967 [1880]: 175), and *ÆCHom* I, 26, ll. 172-4 (Clemoes 1997: 70-83).

⁴⁷ Bayles/Lapidge 1998: 126-127.

⁴⁸ For other examples in England, see Porck 2019 and in Europe, see Sears 1986.

The fortune of the three partitions of life continued in late medieval England, when it also occurred in literary works, often with a moralizing character, as in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* or Thomas Hoccleve's poem *Learn to die*⁴⁹:

Ful many a wight in youthe takith shee
And many an other eek in middil age
And some nat til they right olde be (ll. 162-164)

The pervasiveness of the threefold system in the Anglo-Saxon world has not so far been questioned. It could be connected with the role of folk medicine and popular religion (Jolly 1996) as a middle ground between popular and elite culture in Old English literature which “was of and for the people” (Cook 1906: 39). Though absent in medical treatises, influenced by scholarly and learned literature, the threefold schema was nevertheless the point of reference for the division of man's life in (Old and) Middle English healing remedies, either explicitly when patients were referred to by means of a classification into children, adults (men/women), and old people or implicitly when the bipartite opposition between young and old was simply mentioned, leaving unexpressed whoever was neither old nor young. Such predominance is fully in coherence with the popular character of its transmission and circulation, a feature that perfectly combined with the nature of healing remedies.

3.1 Method and analysis

Thanks to the high number of editions and online corpora of Late Middle English medical treatises and healing recipes, the present analysis is based on edited material, ranging from texts from about 1375 to 1500. In particular, online corpora such as Middle English Medical Texts (MEMT) and Middle English Grammar Corpus (MEG-C) have been surveyed in order to find occurrences of the term *child*, *boy/girl*, *lad/maiden*, *young*, *old*, *elderly*, *men/women*, and synonyms or related words⁵⁰. For each token, it has been necessary to resort to the specific part in the corpus in order to obtain a larger context, and thus more details on its meaning or usage. The texts in the MEMT corpus fall into four categories: *Remedies and materia medica*, *Specialized texts*, *Surgical texts* and *Verse*. The present inquiry has centered on *Remedies and materia medica* consisting of 35 files with rec-

⁴⁹ See the edition of Furnivall/Gollancz 1892.

⁵⁰ Wild-card searches were employed, including search elements like *child** or *cild**, *eld**, *old**, *ould**, *wenclb*?*, *knaue**, *maiden**, *maydon**, *meden**, *cnibt**, *knyght** etc. in order to retrieve all the possible spellings. The spellings are taken from MED.

ipes, medical charms and works (or fragments of works) such as *Liber de diversis medicinis*, Crophill's books or John of Burgundy's *Practica phisicalia*. The Middle English Grammar Corpus (MEG-C) contains 410 text samples transcribed directly from manuscript or facsimile reproduction. In addition, full edited texts⁵¹, unavailable online, have manually been examined for further examples in order to get a more complete picture of the therapeutic role of age.

The number of references to the semantic sphere of *aging* and *age* is quite limited: 387 instances out of a corpus of 4374 recipes. They have constituted our selected corpus and have been classified according to whether the term denoting age refers to health matters either directly – i.e. recipes addressed directly to either children or adults or elderly people – or indirectly – i.e. the age of ingredients or performers, that is, age reference occurring in relation to the preparation of medicinal recipes, for general use, not purposely for patients of a precise age.

3.2 How do recipes address the age of patients?

The analysis confirmed the feeble correspondence between medical treatises and practical healings. Not only did they refer to different cycles of man's life – the fourfold and threefold ones respectively –, but also the attention expressly given to the subject differed a lot. Unlike scientific (medical and philosophical) debates and treatises, Middle English healing recipes seem to almost ignore the role of age in the cure of diseases. As a matter of fact, only 95 recipes explicitly relate the remedy to a particular phase of man's life.

Direct reference to the age of the patient could be accomplished in different ways. It could be stated either in the heading of the remedy (1a) or further within the text (1b) – 21 instances – by indicating to whom the remedy is addressed. However, this was not the most frequent option: remedies usually had no such indication (1c). More often the age of the patient was mentioned either in the sections dedicated to the evaluation of the remedy (2) – 39 instances – or in the instructions how to prepare the remedy (3) – 44 instances.

- (1) a. {For to make þe teþe of children wex wiþ oute | ache.} | Tak þe brayn of an hare and seþe it and frote þe gomes | þer wiþ of hem (*Medical charms*, in MEMT)
 “In order to make the teeth of children come in without ache: Take the brain of a hare and boil it and rub their gums therewith”

⁵¹ Alonso Almeida 2014; Dawson 1934; Henslow 1889; Hunt 1990; Hunt/Benskin 2001; Olsan 1992 and 2009; Poggesi 2022; Sheldon 1978.

- b. And petite morel is called in fflaundes | ‘Naghtstach’. And witte þou þat þe iuse of it doþe | best away þe pustules in childres mouþes (*Arderne, Fistula*, in MEMT)
 “And petty morel is called in Flemish ‘Naghtstach’. And be aware that its juice is the best to do away the pustules in children’s mouths”
- c. Item se humme soyt ponté d’etspyne: Pernez la muse de la neyre etspyne (*First Compendium*, Hunt/Benskin 2001: 126)
 “The same if one is stung by a thorn: Take the medicament of the black thorn”
- (2) a. Fenel ys | hote and drye yn þe [...] | And fenel seed powdred and dronkyn wyþ | wyn hyt ys gode for alle manere venym | wt-ynne mannys body . [...] And al-so hyt ys gode | for þe dropesye And þe seed ys gode | for-to vse for olde men (London, BL Lansdowne 680, f. 17v, in MEG-C)
 “Fennel is hot and dry [...] And fennel seed powdered and drunk with wine is good for all kinds of infection. [...] And it is also good for dropsy and the seed is good to be used for old men”
- b. þe vryn of him | þt vsiþ caule ys a nobill þinge | [...] childryn~ ben washen~ | in suche vryn~ hit shall kepe | ham in gode hele (London, BL Lansdowne 680, f. 18v in MEG-C)
 “the urine of that who uses cabbage is an efficacious thing [...] children been washed in such urine it shall keep them in good health”
- (3) ffor þe fallyng euel gud medcyne [f. 39v] | Take þe blod of þe litelle fingire of þe reighte hand þt es seek & writ þies iij names in perchemen wt þe blod | Iasper + Melchior + Baltazar | & lat crosse it & hang it a[-]bout hys nek þt es seek [...] & ilk a day a monethe | drynk þe rot of poony wt stale ale & he sails be hool sikirly | & if it be a chyld þt es Innocent draw blod on þe same fyngire þt es | before sayd & writ þe iij kynges names in a mazer wt | þe blod & wasche it wt alle or milk & lat þe child drink | it & he sail be hole[.] (Harley MS 1600, f. 39v, in MEG-C)
 “for epilepsy a good medicine. Take the blood from the little finger of the right hand that is sick and write these three names on a parchment with the blood: Jasper, Melchior an Baldasar. Close it and hang it on the sick’s neck [...] and every day for a month [let him] drink the root of peony with old ale and he shall surely be healed | and if it is a child, that is innocent, draw the blood from the same finger that is mentioned before and write the three kinges’ names on a piece of maple with the blood and wash it with ale or milk and let the child drink it and he shall be healed”.

The stage of life cycle was actually addressed to rather than patients’ age, in particular the first and the last phases of man’s life, i.e. childhood and old age. If it was either unspecified or if the generic *man* and *woman* occurred, the remedy was generally held good for everybody that is not a child or an old man, as in (4). There are however instances, such as (5) in which the occurrence of the terms

man and *woman* would seem to be redundant, unless they indicated a category of people who are neither children, for whom gender distinction was considered as irrelevant, nor elderly people, who usually have stains in their complexion even if not deformed. The interpretation of the terms *man* and *woman* as referring to the intermediate age between childhood and old age is the only possible one in those recipes either concerning birth, pregnancy, and conception (6a) or referring to problems, such as dysuria or baldness (6a and b), which could be caused by diseases if occurring in adults, but were simply *accidentia* at a certain age.

- (4) Item for gute þat tack man or wimman soum tyme in þe hed or in þe wombe so it ware þe fallande euele (*Second Corpus Compendium*, Hunt/Benskin 2001: 175)
 “The same for gout that takes men or women in some cases in the head or in the belly as it were the falling evil”
- (5) Oyle of tartarum | [...] that oyle is perfyte for Teles and | webbes to distroye hem and to do a-wey blemesche in the | face als wele of a man as of a woman that ben tortuose | and fowle it enblauncheth hem and maketh hem clene (Poggesi 2022: 153)
 “And this oil is perfect for the opacity of the cornea and cataracts to eliminate them and to eliminate the spots on the face of both a man and a woman if they are deformed and ugly as it lightens and cleans them”
- (6) a. The · iiii · Water of seynte Gyle [...] Take yonge swalowes and make poudere of hem and take | castorye and a lytill eysell that is fyne [...] and this water | drunken be it selue fastynge restoryth the kynde | of man ·/ but be ware that no woman [...] drynke ther-of for than hir concepcyon schalbe | distroyed and the childe with-jnn ‘hir’ schalbe deed [·] and maketh a man to pyssse | wele / and this watir will do a-wey heer that it | schall neuer growe a-gayne for no crafte jf it be a-no= | yntid ther-with (Poggesi 2022: 127-129)
 “The fourth water of St. Gyle Take young swallows and make a powder of them and take castoreum and some vinegar of good quality [...] And, drunk alone on an empty stomach, this water restores the temperament of a man. But be careful that no woman drinks it, because it will compromise pregnancy and the baby in her womb will die. [...] and makes a man urinate well and this water will remove the hair that will never grow again in any way if the skull is sprinkled with this”
- b. Medicine a l’homme que n’ad point de barb ou pynt de cheveu (*Rawlison Compenium*, Hunt/Benskin 2001: 57)
 “Medicine for the man who had neither beard nor hair at all”

More specific references to the patient’s age as in (7a) were very rare – four instances in our whole corpus –, and interestingly, if any distinctions were made, they only concerned the first phase. The seventh and the second years were

actually regarded as significant steps in the development of the child in medical treatises too: the first infancy up to the second year, characterized by the first teeth, first steps and first words (zonge children), and the “age of discretion”⁵², also called “the age of correct speech”⁵³ whose limit was set at the age of seven, when the child also gets a second dentition. In some treatises, such as Bernad de Gordon’s *Regimen*, with the second year, some diseases ceased to be lethal. Echoes of the medical debate might just as well be mirrored in examples like (7b-c) where the lexical specification of zonge children and *kenave* identified a child in his first infancy and a youth between boyhood and manhood respectively, as further supported by the number of years.

- (7) a. An oþer [...] Take & gare a childe drynke [...] or he be vij zere alde & he sall neuer hafe it afterward (*Liber de Diversis Medicinis* f. 196r, in MEMT)
 “Another [...] Take and make a child drink [...] before he is seven years old and he will never have it afterwards”
- b. Oþire seien þat þei [teeth] ben no bonys for þei [...]ben engendrid sumtyme as wel in riȝt olde as in zonge children (MS Wei 564, fol. 27b/a, in MEG-C)
 “Others say that they (teeth) are not bones because they [...] grow in certain periods so in quite old as in young children”
- c. For riȝt sich an accident bifel [...] vpon a knaue child of xvj zeer oold (London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library 564, fol. 17r, in MEG-C).
 “To adjuſt an accident happened on a sixteen-year old boy”

Therapeutically, the age functioned as an indicator of the patient’s properties. Accordingly, the very same remedy could be also directed to patients of different age, as in (7b), because their ages shared the same characteristics. A good case in point is (8a), the target of which was someone with a feeble or fragile complexion, which is usually (but not exclusively) attributed to children and elderly people (8b). This is also the reason underlying specification for gender as in (8c): being a woman was supposedly relevant here not *per se*, but because of the feature of weakness, strongly attributed to women.

- (8) a. The vj remedie is for thoo that been consumed in alle the body and | ouer | leene men, as men of tendre complexion and tendre wymen and | children and thoo | that han the tisik and the ethike” (*Rupescissa, Remedies*, in MEMT)
 “The sixth remedy is for those that have all their body enfeebled and for very lean men, as men of fragile constitution and fragile women and children and those that have the phthisic and the hectic fever”

⁵² Cf. Guglielmo de Saliceto in his *Summa conseruationis* (Demaitre 1977: 466).

⁵³ *Recte locutionis* by Paolo Bagellardo *Libellus de egretudinibus infantium* II.1 (Demaitre 1977: 466).

b. But euacuacioun wiþ | ventusis and watir-lechis is able to | hem þat | ben feble, children & olde | men” (*Mondeville, Chirurgie*, in MEMT)

“But evacuation with cupping glasses and water-leeches is appropriate for them that are feeble, children and old men”

c. Idem pur le rankle de femme: Lyetz desur foile de cholet (*Rawlison Compendium*, Hunt/Benskin 2001: 31)

“Idem for the festering sore of women: read above a leaf of cabbage”

In five instances, the recipe mentioned the young and the old at the same time. What the old and the young meant was not always the same. They never indicated the two extreme points, as *geogode* and *ylde* did in the following passage from Ælfric concerning the sun’s course.

Ðurh eastdæl magon beon getacnode þa ðe on geogode to gode bugað. for þan ðe on eastdæle is þæs dæges angin. Ðurh westdæl sind getacnode þa ðe on ylde to godes þeowdome gecyrrað for þan ðe on westdæle geendað se dæg⁵⁴.

In literary language coordinating or opposing these two notions – *old and young* and *old or young* – were often a means to express either all ages or any age. Similarly, the two adjectives could co-occur in recipes to indicate totality, i.e. the entire cycle of life: more precisely, in (9a), *young* referred to whoever is not old, rather than to the age called *youth*.

(9) a. An oþer. Tak his water & munge it with a womans mylke þat hase a knaue childe & if þat gange to-gedir, he sal lyfe &, if þay depart, he sall dy [...] his forheuede waxes rede, zong man ay wakande, alde man ay slepande, [...] thiese are þe takynynges of dede (*Liber de Diversis Medicinis* f. 304v, in MEMT)
“Another. Take his urine and mix it with the milk of a woman that has a boy and if that goes together, he shall live and if they separate, he shall die [...] his forehead becomes red, if young, always awake, if old, always sleeping, [...] these are the signs of death”

b. [...] þat olde men hadden sum-tyme in vs | to gadere modir-worth wolle wyde | W^t fenel grene in somer tyde | J n howse hangyn at ilke entre | þe deuyln ne wyk sprith hawe non powste | Hem ne here chyldir for to dere | And fro alle peryle hem to were (Stockholm Cod. Holm. X. 90, p. 57, in Shaldon 1978: 156)

⁵⁴ ÆCHom I, hom. 8, lines 162-165: “By the East may be signified those who turn to God in youth, because in the East is the start of the day. By the West are signified those who in old age turn to the service of God, because in the West the day ends” (trans. L.V.). Cf. *ab oriente, qui ab ipsa infantia vel pueritia Deo seruit: ab occidente, qui in senectute vel decrepita aetate ad Dei seruitutem convertitur* (Haymo, *Homiliae de tempore*: PL 118, col. 145c) “from the east, he who from his very infancy or childhood serves God: from the west, he who is converted to the service of God in his old age or the age of decrepitude” (trans. L.V.).

“the old men once had in use to gather mugwort not quite extensively | with green fennel in summer, to hang it at every entrance of the house. The devil or wicked spirit have no power to harm them or their children and from every danger [it is able] to protect them”

Direct reference to age could also involve the performer’s age (9b) – only three instances. In medical recipes, the complexion of those who would perform the remedy was irrelevant because of no influence on humoral balancing. Conversely, it had much to do with charms, the success of which depended on the magic words and acts that had the power to subjugate the supernatural as much as on the magician who knew how to perform and recite them. Therefore, the qualities of the performer played an important role. In (9) the old age of the performer was mentioned as a guaranty of efficacy, with the implication that the remedy was long performed, because proved to be successful.

3.3 Indirect references

Most references to the notions of *old* vs. *young* in the recipes of the selected corpus were indirect – 292 out of 387 – and concerned the ingredients. From that, one can conclude that it must have been very important to specify ingredients also according to their ‘age’, which symbolically suggested the quality of the substance necessary for the remedy to be effective. Both adjectives and nouns could do the job, though there was a difference: adjectives expressing different degree of freshness, novelty vs. decay, staleness, combined with several ingredients whereas only nouns referring to the first age – *knave* or *maiden* or *child* – occurred and modified exclusively two ingredients, namely either urine or (woman’s) milk. Given the high incidence of this pattern, it is considered useful to give an example of it, starting from the nouns denoting ages.

Woman’s milk⁵⁵ had been an important ingredient since ancient and early medieval pharmacology and retained an important role in late medieval healing recipes not only in the treatment of illness for eyes and ears, as it was in Anglo-Saxon times, but also for other illnesses, such as chest cough, head congestion, migraine or neuralgia, even madness or insanity or sleeplessness. Woman’s milk could also be listed as a basic ingredient for the treatment of a festering sore or ulcer (especially in Henslow’s collection) or of wounds or broken bones in the head (Dawson’s collection). In some recipes, it was the basic ingredient for a drug to eat or drink (10b), but it was mostly used externally and applied, along

⁵⁵ See Buck 2012.

with other substances endowed with acknowledged phytotherapeutical powers⁵⁶, on the patient's body in the form of either a salve, an ointment, and a plaster, or of an enema or drops, placed in the eyes or ears.

- (10) a. [to hafe clene eghne] An oper. Tak powdir of alom glase & temper it with womans mylke þat hase a knaue childe & do it in thyn eghne (*Liber de Diversis Medicinis*, fol. 283v, in MEMT)
 “[to have eyes cleaned] Another. Take powder of potash alum and blend it with the milk of a woman who has a boy and put it into your eye”
- b. For þe cold feuer take | iij . dropis of womans mylke þt has born~ a knaue child | & put hit in a-n+eg~ þt is nesche sodyn~ & þer-of lett hym~ ete | a litill ere þe euell take hym~ (Medical recipes and charms, London, BL Sloane 3160 fol. 156r in MEG-C)
 “For the cold fever, take three drops of the milk of a woman who has born a male child and put it in an egg that is soft-boiled and make him eat a little of it before the evil takes him”
- c. [A plastir for þe frenesy] [...] And poudir hem and medle hem with popilion, and with | þe mylke of a woman þat fedeþ a meide childe, and with | þe iuse of syngreen. And make þerof a plastir and ley it warme on þe heed nyze his forheed. And if his sleep a-swagid his foly, it is a good token. (*Gilbertus Anglicus, Compendium*, in MEMT)
 “And sprinkle them and mix them with popilion, and with the milk of a woman that feeds a girl child, and with the juice of houseleek. And make a plaster of it and lay it warm on the head near his forehead. And if his sleep mitigates his folly, it is a good sign”
- d. Contra dolore capites | Take housegrene & stampe hit & take the Juste | & as muche of maydons mylke to a wommon~ & | to a mon~ the mylke of a knafe child and take | a good quantite of barle mele & medull thus | to-gedur in maner of a plaster & put on~ a lynon~ cloth | & bynd hit cold a-boute the seke hed an hour. (Medical recipes, London, BL Sloane 3160, fols 160r., in MEG-C)
 “Take houseleek and mash it and take the juis ans as much of the breast milk of a girl (lit. maiden's milk) for women and for men the breast milk of a boy and take a good quantity of barley malt, and blend them together in a sort of plaster and put it on linen cloth and bind it cold around the sick's head for an hour”

The use of woman's milk could partially be accounted for in terms of humoral theory because of its nourishing power, as breast milk was thought to be the

⁵⁶ For instance, henbane is often used for congestion, pain, sleeplessness, and it actually contains chemicals, such as hyoscyamine and scopolamine, which might relax the muscles lining the digestive tract, relieve muscle tremors and have a calming effect.

same fluid as menstrual blood, converted by the pregnancy⁵⁷, and infancy was regarded as the stage of maximum warmth and moisture. Breast milk was indeed considered as *holy mete for parfyt men*⁵⁸ and Bernard de Gordon, who used breast milk as a cure-all for multiple conditions, praised it as *mete and drinke and medycyne*. Recipes sometimes added the specification of the gender of the child fed with the breast milk that was to be used: *knave* or *mayden* (10d). It was indeed believed that a woman's body should be strong and robust to bear a male child and that the properties of her milk should thereby change accordingly, as the boy needed stronger nourishment. Therefore, it is not surprising that, if specified, it was the breast milk of a woman who bore a male child to be preferred in healing. Only one kind of disorders specifically required the breast milk feeding a girl, i.e. mental disease (10c), in coherence with medieval lore that associated the brain with women's physiology, in particular the female generative organs (Williams/Echols 1994: 40-41; Jose 2008). The belief that breast milk was endowed with different properties according to whether it had to raise either a boy or a girl is probably the reason why in few remedies the gender of the child coincides with the gender of the patient as in (10d).

There are further instances such as Dawson's recipe 119, where breast milk is used as a liquid in which to wash hands before administering a treatment, which speak for a cleaning or sterilizing function of it. Although effective antimicrobial agents in breast milk have been acknowledged by recent scientific literature, it is much more likely that breast milk was employed for its pureness, following Isidore of Seville who etymologically explained *puer* as derived from *puritas* "purity"⁵⁹.

The mention of children could also function as an emblem of purity in the case of children's urine in medical remedies. Like breast milk, children's urine occurred as a base for ointments and medicaments for ears (ulcer of the ear) (11a), eyes (11b) or as a sort of sterilizer as in the healing remedy against cancer (11c). This is apparently contrary to the criteria for which urine was extensively used as a diagnostic tool. During Middle Ages, uroscopy was a very popular test

⁵⁷ Blood was thought to transport through the body the four humors produced in different stages of digestion. Other bodily fluids, specifically breast milk, blood, and semen, were also thought to be blood at more advanced stages of digestion. Therefore, they all play significant role in re-establishing the patient's humoral balance.

⁵⁸ MS reference: London, BL Harley 3300, fol. 173r.

⁵⁹ One should not forget the physical properties of milk (its thickness, fat and oil content) for which it was considered useful in the preparation of specific types of salves and ointments, along with other fats, oils, and honeywax (Sigerist 1951: 487-488).

to check on the patient's health: from the look, the consistency, the *contenta* (the non-soluble constituents) and the smell of someone's urine one could detect what health problems they might have. This practice plunged its root into the concept of humoral pathology, according to which urine was produced in the liver during the process transforming chyle into a mixture of blood and humors, which was then excreted by kidneys and bladder. The analysis of the urine would provide the healer with the information about the state of the humors in the patient's body necessary to determine health or disease. Nevertheless, urine was never regarded as an 'impure' substance. The chemical properties of urine were well known in the Middle Ages, for example, in the field of texture and dyeing. Moreover, human urine had always been used for eons, as a sort of antiseptic. As a matter of fact, during the Middle Ages, in many a circumstance, urine was probably cleaner than any nearby water. Being a child's urine must have been a further guarantee of purity. In the selected corpus, like breast milk, urine was preferred if a male child's (11b), but instances where the sex of the child had to coincide with the patient's were not rare (11c).

- (11) a. [for kiles in þe eres] | An oþer . Tak a childes [vryn] & make it lewke with wyne & do it in thun eres & it dryes þe humors [...] & heles wonderfully (*Liber de diversis medicinis*, in MEMT)
 "For ulcer in the ears. Another. Take a child's urine and warm it with wine and put it in your ears and it dries the humors [...] and heals in a wonderful way"
- b. For to make a precieuse water for eyzen þat beþ faire, clere & blynde | [...] Do to þe herbes & iij sponeful of lif hony & v sponeful of a knaue childes pisse þat is an innocent. Medle hem wel togedre &, þenne, let boile them wel togedre ouer þe fuyr a lytel (Alonso Almeida 2014: 83)
 "To make an efficacious liquid for eyes that are fair, clean and blind [...] take the herbs and three spoonfuls of fresh hony and five spoonfuls of a male child's piss that is innocent. Blend it well together and then, let them boil well together over the fire for a while"
- c. [For þe kankir] An oþer | [...] & of þat powdir strewe on þe kankir and, if þe kankir be on a man, wesche it ilk a daye with þe pys of a knafe childe &, if it be on a woman, wesche it ilk a day with þe pys of a mayden childe (Alonso Almeida 2014: 81-82)
 "For the cancer. Another [...] and spred some of that powder on the cancer and if the cancer is on a man, wash it every day with the urine of a male child and if it is on a woman, wash it every day with the urine of a female child"

The strong connection between these two human liquids is further supported by a series of procedures to diagnose whether the patient was going to live or die. Milk, being a product from blood, to put it simply, was viewed as a life-force,

functioning to sustain and nourish life. Therefore, it is associated with life. Urine somehow contained the humoral assortment present in someone's body. If the humors were so in balance as to sustain the milk floating or to blend with it, that would mean the sick's physical complexion was strong enough to let him survive; if there was such a humoral imbalance in the patient's body that the milk (that is, life) sank, then the patient would die (12).

- (12) For to knowe whare man~ yt es woundede sall lyue or dye | [...] Anoyer
Take vryn~ of ye seke man~ in a vessell & tak | womans mylk~ of a knaue
child & droppe yer-in & zif it | medle to-gydre he sall lyue & zif it will nozt
medle | bot dwelles hole a-twynne he sall dye (Oxford, Bodleian Library,
Ashmole 148, fol. 37r, in MEG-C)

“To know whether a man that is wounded shall live or die [...] Another.
Take the turin of the sick man in a vessel and take the milk of a woman
who have a male child and drop it in it and if they blend together, he shall
live and if they do not mix, but completely separate, he shall die”

3.4 *What is old or young in indirect reference to age?*

Direct reference to age was mainly made by means of nouns (e.g. child, maiden, etc.) and nominalized nouns (e.g. the old, the young) and usually limited to the phase of man's life cycle, apart from very few cases like (7b) where the adjective indicated an interval within men's age. Indirect reference to age was contrarily expressed via adjectives. Since indirect references mostly occurred with ingredients, besides *old* and *young*, one has to list 'stale', 'fresh', 'virgin', 'new' and 'green'. This kind of qualification looks even more interesting because ingredients usually lacked attributive modifications in recipes, with the exception of specifications for quantity. The degree of 'newness' vs. 'oldness' of the items included in the cure has to be understood within the theory of humors. Five ingredients are often qualified in terms of age: (virgin) wax, (old, stale and, less frequently, new) ale or wine, (old vs. fresh vs. green) cheese, (old or stale, very rarely fresh) grease and poultry, (*fledgling*, *chick*, *tender*, that is young, especially for hens, young or three-year-old for cocks), for which the number of years was often given. Since the case in point only marginally relates to the topic of this paper, a couple of examples will be analyzed.

Virgin wax was the basic ingredient in the preparation of medicinal plasters and ointments for different ailments: ringworm or any other kind of scab in the skin (also scalp), dropsy, abscess, fistulous wounds, fever, headache or gout. What these ailments had in common does not immediately stand out. Fever, headache and gout were commonly considered as disorders stemming from yel-

low or red bile (cholera)⁶⁰: its fumes could ascend through the body, causing fever, and up to the head, causing cause migraine or dizziness; if it dropped into a joint, it would cause pain and inflammation (gout). Since treatments were based on opposites, these disorders could be healed with therapies based on opposite qualities, that is, moist and cold. But virgin wax always had to be warmed.

- (13) a. /ffor werkyng of þe heed/ Take ij vnces of betayne- [...] put þer-to in þe ffryng * An vnce of | virgine wex • & j quarter of ffrankensens made in powder when it is | wel boyllede wryn[-] ged þorow a streynoure • (Sheldon 1978: 96)

“For the pain of the head. Take ii ounces of betany [...] add to it by frying one ounce of virgin wax and one quarter of incense grinded into power, when it has boiled up, wrung through a sieve”

- b. For to do a-way scalles | First byhoues gere schafe þe scallede hede and þan take virgine wax and pyke, of aþer ilyke mekill & boyle þam to-gedir and sprede a lyn clowte on a bord & þis plaster þer-on [...] it sall hele it sekirly (*Liber de diversis medicinis*, in MEMT)

“To eliminate a skin disease. First it necessary to shave the diseased head and then take the virgin wax and pitch, of either the same quantity and boil them together and spread a line cloth on a board and this plaster on it [...] it shall heal it surely”

The request of virgin wax could depend on an intertwining of motivations. First, the term *virgin* indicated it was untouched wax, that is, the most apt to take impression. Secondly, through heating, the wax loses the smell of flowers and the taste of honey to become “liquid and hot”, thus becoming even more ready to absorb and potentiate the virtues of other ingredients. As is clear in (13a), the efficacy of the remedy relies on the phytotherapeutic qualities of betany that help improve circulation, digestion, and have calming and soothing effects on headache.

For some ingredients, getting old is the way to potentiate their qualities. This is the case of (animal) fat (*gres, smere*), which becomes like ghee when aged, or ale that, if old or stale, could be used in alternative to wine. Age in ale emphasized its curative qualities, that is warm and moist, that is the reason why it occurs for lung diseases. Ale’s and beer’s diuretic powers had long been acknowledged, and therefore advised, for instance, against dropsy (14). However, one cannot then forget that the presence of beer, ale, vinegar or wine in medical drinks, balsams, electuaries, plasters or the like also meet hygienic needs, since fermentation in-

⁶⁰ Hildegard of Bingen on the contrary in *Causae et Curae* interpreted migraine as a disorder stemming from melancholy (black bile), which was supposed to be cold and dry, unlike cholera.

hibits pathogens, and thus they could be better preserved and less deteriorated than simple water at the time, which it was advisable to boil before drinking.

- (14) a. [for þe dropsy] An oþer | Tak alisaundir, azarabackara, smalache, fawethis-
tills & tyme, of ylkan elike mekill, & bray þam wele in a mortar & stepe þam
in alde ale & drynk it alle dayes to þu be hale (*Liber de diversis medicinis*, in
MEMT)
“Another. Take horse parsley, asarabacca (*assarum bacca*), smallange (*apium
graveolens?*), wild celery and thyme, in the same quantity, grind them well in a
mortar and steep them in old ale and drink it every day until you are healed”
b. For euyll at a mannys hert and for a man | that hath lytyll talent to his
mete ·// | Take centorye and sethe it in stale ale and whan it is | wele
soden stampe it wele and seeth it wele a-gayn | and clense it throwe a clothe
and take ij partyes 'of the jous and the iij part' of hony boyled | and do hem
to-gedre in a boyste and yeue the seke ther-of to ete | ·iij ·sponfull fastyng
/ till that he be hole · and that schall do a-w|ey glete fro the arte and make
him to haue talent to his mete/// (Poggesi 2022: 205)
“For the pain in the heart of a man and for a man who has little appetite.
Take a minor centaury and boil it in old beer and when it is fully boiled,
pound it well and boil it again. Then filter it through a cloth and take two
parts of the juice and the third part of boiled honey and put them together
in a jar, and have the sick person eat three tablespoons on an empty stom-
ach, until he heals. And this can eliminate the phlegm from the heart and
make him hungry again”

Unexpectedly, youth, that is, being or keeping or becoming young, does not seem to be the explicit target of medieval English remedies. They actually seem to have ignored the quest for eternal youth which spread within medical science as an inevitable consequence of the emphasis put by Arabic authors on *desiccatio* as the cause of aging and death, which encouraged the belief that it was possible to extend life by diet and special remedies. Instead of answering Albertus Magnus's question *utrum iuuentus possit renovari*, late medieval English medical recipes seem to have focused more on the query *utrum senectus possit retardare*⁶¹. This appears to be the meaning of *yongli*, namely youthful or better young in appearance, in the following remedies:

- (15) a. A goode watur for all maladys | [...] when þu wylt vse þer-of . | put tho
on sponefull þer-of v sponefull of wyne drynke hit first | & last for whyle
þu vsyst þis watur þer may no malady engendyr | yn þy body but euer
þu schalt be jolyffe and seme zongely (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole
1438, Part II, Hand L, p. 148-149, in MEG-C)

⁶¹ Respectively qq. 29 and 30 in the VII book of *Quaestiones super De animalibus Aristotelis* by Albertus Magnus.

“An efficacious water for all diseases [...] when you want to use some of it, put for one spoonful of it five spoonfuls of wine, drink it first thing in the morning and last thing at night because while you use this water no disease can endanger your body but you shall ever be vigorous and youthful”

b. Accate comfourteth & saueth an olde man [...] & holdeþ hym yongely and in strenthe [a1450 Lapid. (Dc 291), p. 25]

“Agate comforts and saves an old man [...] and keeps him young in appearance and in strength”

4. Conclusions

Aging has always been at the center of scholarly interests since ancient and early medieval times, as is proved by the philosophical, theological and scientific debate on the man’s ages, which informed culture, literature, and art and, at the same time, had a great impact on medical theories and approaches. In this latter field, the theories concerning the phases of the life cycle played a significant role for the diagnosis and the cure and coherently occupied an important space in medical treatises. Among the different systems, the tetric schema was predominant thanks to its immediate correlation with the theories of humors and four elements. Of all this, nothing or at best very little is apparently retraceable in medical practice, more explicitly in healing treatments and recipes, let aside the fact that remedies depended on humoral theories and their efficacy was mainly based on humoral balancing.

Out of a corpus of 4,374 remedies, only 387 contained references to ages and aging, most of which were indirect and concerned the qualities of the recipe’s ingredients. Since the patient’s complexion was a necessary factor in the diagnosis and the cure, one would have expected to find remedies either organized according to or addressing the age of the patient. On the contrary, direct reference was surprisingly infrequent. At most, it concerned childhood and infancy, and at a much lower degree, old age, although retarding old age was one of the aims claimed in medical treatises. Looking at the occurrence of age reference, one would conclude that, if anything, this factor was more important to be specified for ingredients than for patients.

Another discrepancy with medical treatises concerned the life-division recipes appeared to refer to: that is, the threefold partition of man’s life, the least bookish and the most popular schema circulating in the Middle Ages. More precisely, recipes tended to have no reference to age, as if the scientific debate about it was of no interest. At the most they distinguished a first age (childhood) from a last phase of life (old age) with an intermediate stage addressed to either

by exclusion or via generic terms such as men or women. However, scattered evidence proved that the issues of medical treatises did have mirroring effects on practical medicine, such as the influence of the first set and/or second set of teeth. The reason for such formal absence can neither be the lack of interest of the medieval man for age and aging nor ignorance and lack of knowledge of medical theories. For sure, medieval healing practice reflected a complex collage of interlacing liturgical, popular and folkloric rituals, rather than exclusively the scientific tradition, as is shown by the predominance of the least learned partition of life. The lack of direct age reference could be understood as a further confirmation of the irreplaceable role of the healer or physician or practitioner in the medieval medicine. The recipe actually listed the ingredients of the treatment, the procedure to follow and, if needed, the words to utter, but it was the healer who had to adjust the transmitted recipe to the needs of the patient, to his complexion, and to the environment the treatment was to take place in.

Age and aging were of great interest and a source of worry for the medieval man, who feared what old age meant and ideally identified youth with health, strength, and beauty, as proved by the only unambiguous charm in our corpus:

Amonges wommen zif þu schuldist gon | And hennebane hawe þe vp-on |
 þis ilk cas it schalle be-falle | Jt schalle hem make to lowe þe alle | Jt schalle þe
 makyn zong & lyth | And dilitable to here syth[.] (Stockholm Cod. Holm. X.
 90p. 67)

“Among women if you should go, have henbane on you. This case shall happen. It shall make them all love you. It shall make you young and attractive and pleasant to their sight”

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