

"And She Who Passes this Age is Old." Perceptions of Menopause in the Late Medieval West

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This article explores perceptions of women's reproductive aging in the late medieval west, with a particular focus on the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula. Drawing on a diverse range of sources—including medical literature, narrative fiction, poetry, and documents of practice—it examines the role of reproductive aging in shaping conceptions of women's old age. It gives special attention to the end of women's reproductive capacity as a significant life transition and analyzes how this change contributed to the formation of negative stereotypes about older women. The article further examines the concept of menopause as a biographical threshold, exploring the cultural significance of fertility loss for women and the expectations associated with it. Additionally, it addresses notions of bodily sex differentiation in later life, particularly in relation to prevailing beliefs about the effects of menopause and the bodies of women of post-reproductive age. Finally, it reflects on the gender bias present in available source material and its lasting influence on cultural perceptions of age, shaping both the late medieval cultural repertoire and contemporary understandings of pre-modern beliefs about women's bodily aging.

INTRODUCTION

Menopause is not merely a biological event but a culturally significant phenomenon shaped by historical, social, and medical discourses. Before the late 17th century, explicit references to women were largely absent from surviving texts on aging or old age (Schäfer, "Alternde Frau" 91), making it difficult to reconstruct pre-modern conceptualizations of women's bodily aging and perceptions of menopause. The infrequency of terms meaning "old woman" (*vetula*, *anus*, and their synonyms in various vernacular languages) in health literature is likely a key reason for the limited scholarly attention to this subject.

This scarcity of direct references to older women in medical literature has been taken as negative evidence by historians of the early modern period, leading to the argument that women's bodies were perceived as becoming more masculinized after reaching post-reproductive age (Botelho, "Images of Old Age" 236; Churchill 115; Gowing 78; Schäfer, "Old Age" 164, 172). However, this view has been recently challenged by Amie Bolissian, who, in her study of English vernacular medical and popular health texts from 1570 to 1730, argues that older women were not seen as less feminine than younger women in medical discourse. Instead, they were perceived as embodying a distinct form of femininity shaped by the interplay of age and bodily change, with the lack of explicit mentions in medical texts likely reflecting an androcentric bias.

This article examines some of the ways in which symptoms defined as "menopausal" by modern medicine have been addressed in earlier centuries. My aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of ideas and discussions pertaining to women's reproductive aging in the late medieval Christian west, with a particular emphasis on the Iberian Peninsula. This analysis will examine the influence of beliefs about this topic on medieval perceptions of bodily sex difference in older age. I will also address the significant gender bias in the available late medieval sources concerning menopause and women's bodily aging. To this end, I will analyze medical literature, fictional narratives, poetry, and documents of practice in conjunction with one another, examining these diverse sources side-by-side to uncover intersecting perspectives. For the purposes of this study, the term "medical" is defined broadly to encompass a diverse range of works that engage with the health and bodies of women. This includes medical theory, surgical manuals, obstetrical texts, popular health advice, and collections of recipes. It should be noted that the pre-modern vocabulary did not include a specific word to describe the age-related cessation of the menstrual cycle. For the sake of practicality, I will use the term "menopause" to refer to this transition, although the term itself did not come into use until the 19th century (Stolberg 413; Tillier 269; McClive 281).

FERTILITY AND THE "AGES OF WOMAN"

The female life cycle as a whole was seldom conceptualized in medieval literature, and it did not give rise to a specific typology. As Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has noted, theoretical discussions on the human life cycle, known as *aetates homini*, were largely shaped by male experiences. While some texts aimed

to encompass both men and women, others explicitly defined the prime of life using the term *virilitas*. This is evident in the work of the 15th-century Florentine author Matteo Palmieri, who identified this stage as occurring between the ages of 28 and 58, following the phase of *adolescentia*. In the same milieu, this period coincided with the time when men from merchant families typically married and had children. Women were generally expected to marry and bear children at an earlier age than men, and they faced a higher likelihood of becoming widows at a younger age (“Le dernier enfant” 288). The cultural expectations surrounding the female life cycle also differed significantly, as will be explored below.

As early as the 7th century, Isidore of Seville suggested that the threshold marking the transition from youth to old age (*senectus*), occurring after the age of 49, is determined by the cessation of childbearing in women.¹ Seven centuries later, the *Speculum al foder* evoked a similar idea. This 14th-century Catalan treatise on male sexuality, halfway between medical and erotic literature, survives in two early 15th-century manuscripts. It includes a passage where the author, whose identity is unknown, classifies and evaluates women according to their age and qualities. He states that the life cycle of women is comprised of five distinct stages, the final stage commencing with menopause, which he identifies as the onset of old age. While the author does not provide an exact age, given that the previous stages each lasted ten years, it is reasonable to conclude that this stage was thought to begin around the age of fifty. According to him, women reach their prime in their twenties, although they “love men more” and soften their manners in their thirties. In their forties, women's bodies lose warmth, their eyesight worsens, and their skin sags. After menopause, however, the author declares that a woman becomes old, and “no man should desire her.”² A few decades later, the physician Jaume Roig expressed a similar perspective in *Espill*, a satirical novel in verse composed around 1460. The work

¹ *Prima hominis aetas infantia est, secunda pueritia, tertia adolescentia, quarta iuventus, quinta senectus, sexta senium. [...] Post haec succedens iuventus tribus ebdomadibus permanet, propter tria illa, intellectum et actionem corporisque uirtutem. Ista aetas a uicesimo octauo anno exoritur et quadragesimo nono consummatur, quando et in feminis partus deficiunt.* Andrés Sanz 49.

² *Item, dix que les edats de les fembres són cinc. L'una és la infantesa, entrò que ha vuit anys; la segona, entrò que ha vint anys; la terça, entro que ha trenta anys; la quarta, entrò que ha quaranta anys; la quinta, entrò que perd, que no li ve son temps. [...] La terça edat és que és ja complida de tot ço que ha mester, e aquesta és ja fembra feta. E la quarta edat, aquesta ama més los hòmens, e assauja's més en son anar e en son parlar e en ses obres, e vol veser. E la quinta edat minva sa vista e sa calor, e afluixen-se les carns, e serveixen molt a l'hom. E aquella qui passa aquesta edat és vella e negú no la deu cobejar.* Alberni 80–81.

presents a deeply misogynistic portrayal of women, narrated by a fictional protagonist who recounts his misfortunes with them. At one point, he describes an older woman as “incapable of giving birth or giving pleasure” (*no pot parir ni dar plaer*, Roig 139). Once more, these two conditions are seen as inextricably linked, with a woman's worth, from a male perspective, being contingent upon her ability to bear children and feed sexual desire. This raises the question whether this perspective was commonly held among medieval writers and whether menopause was generally seen as the defining transition into old age for women.

It is relatively uncommon to find explicit references to this link. Nevertheless, certain sources that address the subject of aging present women's fertility as an underlying theme. One such source is the *Secretum Secretorum*, a pseudo-Aristotelian treatise that addresses various topics, including statecraft, ethics, physiognomy, and medicine. This work was widely disseminated across Europe from the 13th century onward and was translated into numerous vernacular languages.³ Towards the end of the 12th century, the text was translated from Arabic into Latin by John of Seville, and subsequently into Castilian in the 13th century. The Castilian version, entitled *Secreto de los Secretos*, along with other translations of the same text, includes a passage that elucidates the attributes of the four seasons in relation to the fertility of the soil and compares them to the four “ages of woman.”⁴ In accordance with the fourfold division characteristic of Galenic medicine, autumn and winter are associated with the characteristics of senescence and old age respectively. According to the text, the first of these phases is marked by a loss of (body) heat;⁵ the second, by the proximity of death.⁶

The *Historia de la doncella Teodor* is a Castilian fictional short story dating from the latter half of the 13th century. The narrative details the experiences of an enslaved young woman who was purchased by a merchant and subsequently afforded access to an education. Later, when he becomes insolvent, he attempts to sell her to the king, underscoring her sagacity. The monarch then subjects

³ On the circulation of the text in Western Europe, see Williams.

⁴ About the English translation, which also contains the aforementioned passage, see Niebrzydowski 6.

⁵ *E entonçes la tierra es comparada a la mujer llenna de edat e auiente menester vestiduras, porque fue della la calor e allegase la vejez*, Bizzarri 83.

⁶ *Et entonçes es commo la vieja en graue edat cayda, vetidura acercana a la muerte*, 84.

her to a series of intellectual challenges, including debates with renowned scholars and poets, which she successfully navigates, demonstrating her profound wisdom and sound judgment. During one of these tests, Teodor is required to delineate the stages of an adult woman's life from the age of 20. To my knowledge, the model of the “ages of woman” presented in this work—structured in ten-year stages and concentrating exclusively on the adult phase—is a unique example within 13th-century literature. Between a woman's thirties and forties, the author, through the voice of Teodor, shifts his focus from her physical beauty to her intellectual abilities.⁷ The most significant change occurs at age fifty, when the comments become markedly negative.⁸ This is likely based on the prevailing assumption that this is the age when women experience menopause, as will be examined further below. The remarks become progressively harsher for the following decades up to the age of 80.⁹

The practice of women marrying at an advanced age, beyond the point at which they are able to have children, was also met with disapproval in late medieval literature. One example is found in the *Cancionero Castellano*, a collection of poems from 15th-century Castile, which includes an anonymous song that criticizes older women who marry despite their inability to bear children. In this text, such an act is portrayed as a violation of societal norms, and the poem suggests that it should be legally punished.¹⁰

Less frequently, allusions to fertility are also implicit in some visual representations of the “ages of woman.” In Francesco da Barbarino's *Officium*, an illuminated Book of Hours produced in Padua between 1304 and 1309, the woman in her prime is identified with the figure of the mother. This stage of the life cycle is then followed by widowhood (Hülsen-Esch). Widowhood is a marital status not directly related to chronological or biological age. Therefore, its association with the period after a woman's prime suggests that the widow depicted here is an older woman—too old to remarry, too old to bear children.

⁷ About the 40 year old woman: *tiene seso entero y para darlo a otros que no lo tienen*. Baranda & Infantes 72.

⁸ *Essa vos digo, señor maestro, que es para el cuchillo*.

⁹ At the age of 60: *En essa no hay bien ninguno*; at 70: *es tierra y fuera de toda razón*. At 80: *Essa vos digo que no me la mentéis y de las unas y de las otras renegad de la mejor*. The text implies that women have lost all value after the age of 60, and the reference to the earth upon reaching their seventies suggests the approach of death.

¹⁰ *vieja que faz casamiento/ no sperando engendrar/ qual ley consiente passar/ tal burla sin scarmjento*. *Cancionero Castellano de Paris*, BNF, ms. PN9, fol. 35r.

Although menopause itself is most often not explicitly mentioned, in the examples examined, the loss of fertility is closely tied to the perception of women as old, either directly or indirectly. This, in turn, is associated with a diminished social function and reduced value from a male perspective. These attitudes reflect the significant cultural emphasis placed on women's reproductive capacity during the period and the belief that a woman's primary role was tied to her ability to produce offspring.

MENOPAUSE IN MEDICAL TREATISES

Chapters on fertility represent one of the few instances in medieval medical texts where women's age is explicitly addressed. A number of authors concentrate on the factors that facilitate conception, frequently proposing that being either too young or too old can impede the process. These discussions pertain to both men and women. However, while some physicians maintain a symmetry between considerations for both sexes, when this symmetry is broken, it is systematically to the detriment of women, who bear the greatest responsibility for successful conception (Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference* 249; Rider 279).

From the 12th century onward, medical texts began to include sections on health problems related to fertility, which became more extensive and detailed in the following centuries (Park 162–163). These texts were heavily influenced by earlier works, especially the encyclopaedia *al-Qānūn fī at-Ṭibb* (Canon of Medicine) compiled by Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Constantine the African's 11th-century Latin translation of Ibn al-Jazzār's compendium *Zād al-musāfir*, known as the *Viaticum*. The 12th-century texts in question incorporate information on the link between aging and infertility which subsequent writers continued to adopt and expand upon (Rider 271). With regard to the ages at which menstruation begins and ends, the *Viaticum* exerted a particularly strong influence among medical writers. During the 13th century, this work formed part of the medical school curriculum (Wack 48). The author proposes a very wide chronological range for the cessation of the menstrual cycle, suggesting that it may occur at approximately 50 years of age, at 40, or even at 35 in very overweight women.¹¹ It is noteworthy that the possibility of fertility continuing

¹¹ Ibn al-Jazzar, *Viaticum*, trans. Constantinus Africanus (1515), book. 6, ch. 9, fol. 164v: *Menstrua*

into one's sixties was occasionally discussed, as evidenced by references in medical treatises from the Salernitan school. For instance, *De sinthomatibus mulierum* suggests that menstruation may persist until the age of 65 in women with a moist constitution.¹² It was in fact customary to consider a woman's constitution when determining the probable age of menopause. Bernard of Gordon argues that menstruation occurred between the ages of 14 and 45 or 60, noting that these ages could vary according to the complexion and other particularities of each woman. He further notes that the menstrual cycle may sometimes naturally cease at the age of 35 or 40.¹³ Although none of the examined sources delve deeply into this topic, the prevailing theory among medieval medical writers was that of menstrual retention, or the body's inability in older age to continue monthly menstrual bleeding, which was seen as a means of purging impure substances.

As far as Iberian medical texts are concerned, the author of the aforementioned *Speculum al foder* posits that the cessation of menstruation occurs at an unspecified age, but always after the age of 40. In his *Menor daño de la medicina*, written between 1406 and 1422, the physician Alonso Chirino states that women typically ceased menstruating between the ages of 40 and 50. He further suggests that premature cessation of menstruation before the age of 40 is indicative of underlying pathology.¹⁴ The *Compendio de la humana salud* (1494) proposes that the cessation of menstruation occurs at approximately the age of 50, associating it with a decline in bodily strength that impairs the expulsion of menstrual blood.¹⁵ Additionally, the author establishes a correlation between

mulieribus eueniunt cum etatem .xiiii. annorum subeunt. Sed tamen si festinauerint menstrua in .xii. hoc faciet natura. Que sic contigunt mulieribus sicut pollutio masculis [...] Eorum ablatio aut est naturalis, aut non naturalis, que mulieribus post l. annos contingit; aliis in .xl. aliis in .xxxv. maxime multum pinguibus et carnosiss. Rider 278.

¹² *Contingit autem mulieribus hec purgatio circa .xiii. annum, uel paulo citius uel paulo tardius, secundum quod in eis habundat magis uel minus caliditas uel frigiditas.* Durat autem usque ad .l. annum si macrae est, quandoque usque ad .lxx. uel .lxxv. si est humida. In mediocriter pinguibus usque ad .xxxv. Green, *The Trotula* 72.

¹³ According to the 15th-century Castilian translation: *Las menstruas corren natural mente desde los catorze años fasta los quarenta e cinco o .lxx., empero e algunas vezes mas ayta e algunas vezes mas tarde, segund la diuersidad delas complisiones e delos otros particulares. E detienen se algunas vezes natural mente e algunas vezes contra natura; natural mente assi como antes delos .xiii. años o .xiiii. o allende delos treynta e cinco años o .xl. o en los tiempos de medio, segund la diuersidad de los particulares.* Dutton & Sánchez, II, p. 1454.

¹⁴ *E qualquier desto trae muchos males asi como dureza en la boca de la madre o dolor o non se enpreña o vienen estos males despues de aver parido o quitasele el venjr de su mestrua muy temprano que comunmente el venjr les dura fasta quarenta años & quarenta & cinco & cinquenta.* Herrera 1973.

¹⁵ *¿Porqué las mujeres después de cinquenta años no tienen menstrosos? Responde porque entonces son mañeras. O en otra manera y mejor / porque la natura está entonces tan debilitada / que no los puede expellir.* Herrera 1990, 136.

the phases of the moon and the ages of menstruating women. He proposes that young women, because of their more sanguine complexion, menstruate during the first phase of the moon, while older women, whom he explicitly calls “old,” bleed during the subsequent phases.¹⁶

Some authors cite youth and old age as potential impediments to conception, yet they refrain from providing more detailed explanations. For example, the 14th-century healthcare manual *Sevillana medicina*, attributed to Juan de Aviñón, simply states that “the old woman out of age” (*vieja fuera de edad*) is infertile and that this condition can only be rectified through divine intervention.¹⁷ In his treatise *Rosa anglica* (1304-1317), John of Gaddesden elucidates that a plethora of ailments affecting the entire body, in addition to old age, can render women infertile.¹⁸

In general, while late medieval medical texts acknowledge age as a potential barrier to conception, reproductive success remains the primary focus. Menopause is often mentioned but not discussed in detail, and its effects on women’s bodies are not addressed, as will be further explored below. Moreover, it is notable that none of the aforementioned works explicitly connects menopause with the onset of old age for women.

WOMEN’S REPRODUCTIVE AGING: EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES

Concerns about the appropriate age for conception extended beyond

¹⁶ *Y como la lunación tenga quatro complexiones, assi corresponden las expulsions de la superfluydad delos menstros enellas a sus complexiones. Porque la luna nueva, como rezan Galieno e Gilberto, requiere las mujeres moças, las quales son mas sanguineas, como la luna vieja, las viejas.* 139. The comparison between the age of menstruating women and the phases of lunar cycle also appears in the work of other late medieval authors, such as Bernard de Gordon’s *Lillium medicine: Fluunt ergo menstrua secundum aetates lunae, puellis enim in prima quadra et iuvenibus in secunda et illis quae magis processerunt in aetate in tertia quadra, aliis in ultima quadra, ex hoc possumus elicere quod iuvenes debent phlebotomari in nova luna, senes in antiqua, quoniam ars est imitatrix naturae, bene dicitur igitur Luna vetus veteres, iuvenes nova luna requirit* (Jacquart 244). It is worth noting the parallel between this idea and the maxim *Luna vetus veteres iuvenes nova luna requirit*, which refers to the relationship between the phases of the moon and the different stages of the human life cycle. This idea was widely disseminated by the famous *Regimen salernitanum*, and was echoed in later writings by authors such as Guy de Chauliac and Jacques Despars (Moulinier, “Le sang au Moyen Âge” 4).

¹⁷ *Respuesta que non engendrar es en dos maneras: la vna es natural: assi como ser vieja fuera de edad y de engendrar o el ser lisiado: en guisa que non puede engendrar: este tal non puede ser corregido por física: saluo por milagro de Dios.* Naylor, fol. 113v

¹⁸ John de Gaddesden, *Rosa anglica*, bk. 2, ch. 17, fol. 95r: *quia menstrua sunt nimis retenta, aut quia nimis fluunt, aut quia mulier est nimis extenuata, aut puella, aut vetula.* Cited in Rider 275.

medical literature. In 1405, when Queen Catherine of Lancaster was pregnant with the child who would become John II of Castile, King Henry III requested the assistance of the Dominican nun Teresa de Ayala (1353–1424) in selecting a wet nurse to breastfeed his son. Teresa collaborated with the physician Diego Fernández de Córdoba to evaluate twenty candidates for the position.¹⁹ The king's first requirement was that these women should be between 20 and 30 years of age.²⁰ This indicates that the age range deemed optimal for motherhood did not align with the ages of menarche and menopause. This may also have been the case in medical texts that simply referenced women as “too young” or “too old,” without specifying a particular age. Indeed, similar age ranges are referenced in fiction. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*, the old man Januarie declares that the ideal wife is in her twenties and that women over thirty are old (*oold nyf*). He compares them to *bene-straw* and *greet forage*, indicating their dryness and perceived infertility (Chaucer lines 1421–2; Niebrzyowski 1).

In a chapter from the second volume of his *Espill*, Jaume Roig addresses the subjects of aging and infertility with a tone that is characteristic of his misogynistic perspective. The book's protagonist, disillusioned by his previous experiences, decides, at the counsel of a priest, to marry a widow as his third wife. The woman in question is over the age of 40 but claims to be 32 in order to get married and have children without delay.²¹ This illustrates that the author considered it acceptable for a woman to marry and have children in her early thirties, but that forty was already too late. Despite the persistence of her menstrual cycle, the woman is unable to become pregnant. Her husband justifies this by stating that her (real) age is a factor preventing pregnancy.²² Her preoccupation with motherhood prompts her to pursue a multitude of medical counsel, remedies, and incantations. Ultimately, without disclosing this to her husband, she adopts another woman's son and claims him as her own. However, after baptizing the infant a second time, God punishes her with the

¹⁹ Cañas Gálvez 125. In medieval Castile, it was common fathers to choose their children's wet nurses. On this topic, see Pastor 55.

²⁰ *La primera que sean de hedad de fasta veynte fasta treinta años e que sean bien complexionadas e de buenas colores e bien carnudas.* Cañas Gálvez 126.

²¹ [...] ha trenta y dos / anys, temps conplit;/ d'altre marit / es ja husada, Roig 181.

²² *Si hom contava / quants anys avia / - lo cap tenia / ja bruxellat, / lo front ruat, / he no paria -, / no li playa / dels anys parllessen / ni-ls hi contassen, / may conçebe. / E yo se be / en que u perdia: / ell'anys havia / quan m'enguani / he la prengui, / quaranta y mes. / La que tal es / ja poch conçepe: / com qui vell çep / enpeltar vol, / tart n'a mallol. / Mas puy purguava, / d'ella sperava / que fill n'auria.*

child's demise, leading her to take her own life (Roig 184–190). In a passage from the third volume, the protagonist dreams of encountering King Solomon, who explains that women are so driven by the desire for motherhood that, even when they are past childbearing age, they turn to stealing or adopting babies to fulfill that longing. In Valencia, he elucidates, this transgression was common and met with severe repercussions.²³ This passage highlights the link between the loss of fertility and perceptions of aging in women, equating the inability to bear children with a decline in worthiness from a deeply misogynistic perspective, and depicting women as desperate to resist or postpone this loss of value.

It is worth noting that although *Espill* is a fictional narrative, its author, Jaume Roig, was a prominent physician with strong ties to the municipal power structures of Valencia and the Aragonese monarchy. Between 1457 and 1469, he served as personal physician to Queen Maria of Castile and King Joan II of Aragon (Carré 59–72). Roig's dual role as a medical practitioner and a health policy authority is particularly noteworthy, as it offers insight into how his personal biases evident in his fictional writing may have influenced both his medical practice and his contributions to public health regulation.

In practice, although precise information on the age at which medieval women became mothers is very scarce,²⁴ it is known that some women had children after the age of 30, and in some cases, even after 40. For example, the documents pertaining to the trial against Geralda de Codines contain intriguing information on this subject. The woman from rural Catalonia, accused of practicing sorcery for healing purposes, was found to be pregnant when she was interrogated in 1303. The document indicates that the accused had been performing pulse readings and urine analyses on her patients for a period

²³ *Per infants fer, / velles modorres, / exorques, porres, / moltes y roden; / quant als no poden, / han fill furtat / ho manllevat, / suposant parts. / Ffill ab tals arts / tu ja n'has vist / mentres tengust / la viuda xorqua. / Tanbe 'n la forqua / d'esta çintat, / er tal tractat / dues mesquines / has vist madrines / sentençiadés, / ensemps penjades / ab hun terçer.* 242–243.

²⁴ No quantitative study has been carried out for the area covered by this article, and the data available are not sufficient for an in-depth analysis of the fertility of Iberian women in the Middle Ages. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber ("La fécondité des Florentines," "Le dernier enfant") conducted an in-depth study of women's fertility using Florentine documentation from the 14th and 15th centuries. It is, however, important to keep in mind that even in the best-documented areas, available information represents only a small fraction of the population. For instance, studies on Florence primarily focus on women from the merchant class, excluding much of the urban lower classes as well as the entire rural population.

exceeding three decades. Therefore, even if we assume that she acquired her expertise at a very young age, it is evident that she was over the age of forty at the time of her pregnancy.²⁵ This reality was also acknowledged by some physicians: Antonio Guaineri, in a treatise on the womb written in the 1440s, described the cases of two women he had observed who conceived for the first time after the age of 45.²⁶

These examples demonstrate that, while cultural and literary narratives often portrayed women's fertility as sharply declining after thirty, real-life experiences—and even some medical observations—acknowledged the possibility of childbearing well into a woman's forties. However, the social ideal still prioritized youthful motherhood, reinforcing age-based expectations that did not always align with biological realities.

SYMPTOMS AND CONSEQUENCES OF MENOPAUSE

Although medical sources frequently mention age as a factor affecting fertility, they rarely provide detailed accounts of the specific impact of aging on women's reproductive health or the physical effects of menopause. This is the case not only in general works that briefly touch upon fertility issues but also in texts focused on conception and books specifically aimed at women.²⁷ The late fourteenth-century Catalan text *Tròtula*, a manual on women's health compiled by a certain Master Joan for an unidentified *infanta* of Aragon (Cabrè i Pairet, "From a Master" 375–377), contains several references to aging and the prevention of its negative consequences. The book is divided into four sections, including a chapter on gynecology. As in other texts of the period, the process of aging is viewed as a decline that can be postponed or mitigated through the adoption of beneficial habits. Master Joan proffers counsel and treatments analogous to those typically recommended for men, encompassing dietary habits, exercise regimens, emotional equilibrium, restorative periods, and purging practices.²⁸ He occasionally notes that these recommendations apply to

²⁵ Arxiu Diocesà de Barcelona: Visita Pastoral, I/1, fol. 13v. Cited in Vinyoles Vidal 235–236.

²⁶ *et ego duas vidi que 45 transacto conceperant nunquam postea cum eisdem maritis prole habuere*. Van den Hooff 2013, 65. Cited in Rider 281.

²⁷ This is the case of the *Tractatus de conceptu* attributed to Pierre Nadille and the *Tractatus de sterilitate mulierum*, attributed to Bernard de Gordon, both written in Montpellier in the 14th century, which make no mention of menopause. See Conde Parrado et al.

²⁸ For recommendations on slowing bodily aging and/or targeting older adults in medieval health literature, see: Demaitre; Shahar; Gil Sostres; Nicoud.

both sexes (Reference omitted for blind review).

The chapter devoted to gynecology shares numerous similarities with the text known as *Des aides de la maire et de ses medecines*, which survives in three 15th century copies from the south of France. As noted by Montserrat Cabré, it remains unclear whether the relationship between the two texts is direct or whether they originate from a shared source. However, she considers that the latter is the more probable hypothesis (Cabré i Pairet, "From a Master" 384–386). The chapter commences with a concise overview of the physiological factors associated with the menstrual cycle. The author addresses the issue of menstrual blood retention, which can be attributed to two primary causes: inherent weakness and the effects of aging. When a woman experiences a cessation of the menstrual cycle after the age of 40 or 50, the underlying cause is likely to be advanced age, which is irreversible.²⁹ This is the sole mention of menopause in the work, and no accompanying explanation is provided. Furthermore, it is a rather vague and imprecise reference, although, as previously discussed, this was a common occurrence in texts of the period. *Flors del Tresor de bentat*, another Catalan medical compilation for women which shares a considerable amount of advice with the *Tròtula*, entirely omits this particular passage and any reference to the cessation of fertility (Dies de Calatayud). It is therefore pertinent to inquire as to why there is such a paucity of attention devoted to menopause, its symptoms and its physical consequences, beyond the inability to conceive. One might wonder whether there was a dearth of interest in women's health issues after childbearing age, or if it is simply a result of the limited knowledge of the male university-educated physicians and surgeons who authored these texts. The emphasis on fertility and motherhood in the sources examined suggests that the changes experienced by women after their reproductive years were not a primary concern.³⁰

The work of Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), though written in a period preceding the timeframe examined in this study, is of considerable value to this analysis, as it represents the sole known instance of a medieval woman addressing the subject of menopause in her writings. In her *Causae et curae*, she addresses the subject on several occasions. In the first instance, she posits that

²⁹ *Lo reteniment d' la flor per moltes guies se fa, car fas per veyla o per feblea de natura : o per veylea a cap d' .xl. anys o de .l., e no ual medicina.* Reference omitted for blind review.

³⁰ Laurence Moulinier makes a similar observation regarding female adolescence ("Le corps des jeunes filles" 101–102).

the onset of old age occurs at 80 for men and 70 for women, as this is the age at which those who remain healthy and robust cease menstruation.³¹ This underscores her view that a regular menstrual cycle signifies good health in women. In line with the dominant medical beliefs of her time, von Bingen embraced the view that menstruation functioned as a means of expelling toxic residues from the body. She further advanced the hypothesis that bloodletting could be performed on women up to the age of 100, a practice she believed to be more beneficial for them than for men due to the accumulation of toxins in their bodies following menopause (Moulinier, "Aspects singuliers" 10). In the absence of menstruation, the body's tissues may swell from a lack of drainage, which she saw as the reason why older women tend to gain weight. According to her, this trend continues until the age of seventy, when the body begins to decline and true old age sets in. For both men and women, aging entails the loss of the skin's smooth, full appearance, giving way to wrinkles. As they become as weak as children, older adults of both sexes must be sustained by food and drink, which act as substitutes for their diminishing flesh and blood.³² In another passage, the author observes that while women lose their fertility—linked to the deterioration of their reproductive organs—between the ages of 50 and 60, old age itself does not begin until 80, the same as for men.³³

In addition to addressing menopause with greater depth than other authors, von Bingen also provides a more detailed examination of late pregnancy. For instance, she indicates that women with a melancholic disposition are typically infertile. However, she notes that such women may be able to conceive a single child at approximately 50 years of age if they have a robust and sanguine

³¹ Moulinier, *Beate Hildegardis* 117: *Sed in mulieribus post quinquagesimum annum menstrua deficiunt exceptis illis, que tante sospitatis et fortitudinis sunt, quod in eis menstrua usque ad septuagesimum annum protrahuntur.* Moulinier, "Conception et corps féminin" 9.

³² [...] *et deinde sanguine, uelud prius fecit, amplius non profluente caro earum incrassatur usque ad septuagesimum annum, quoniam tunc per menstrua non attenuatur. Post septuagesimum uero annum caro et sanguis in eis iam defluunt, et cutis earum contrahitur et ruge surgunt ac debiles fiunt, cibo et potu ut puer sepius refocillande, quia carne et sanguine tunc enacuantur, et quoniam debiliores masculis sunt, cum hec miseria senectutis usque ad octogesimum annum in masculis protrahatur.* Moulinier, *Beate Hildegardis* 117; Moulinier, "Conception et corps féminin" 10.

³³ *A quinquagesimo uero anno aut interdum a sexagesimo femina circa fenestralia loca sua implicatur et arescit, ita quod et riuius menstrui sanguinis in domum suam, scilicet in membra, reuertitur [...]. Et hoc erit in muliere usque ad octogesimum annum, a quo deinceps a uiribus suis omnino inclinatur. Nam a quinquagesimo anno aut aliquando in quibusdam feminis a sexagesimo, menstrua cessant et matrix implicari et contrahi incipit, ita quod amplius prolem concipere non possunt.* Moulinier, *Beate Hildegardis* 146–147; Moulinier, "Conception et corps féminin" 9.

spouse.³⁴ Additionally, she argues that for certain women, the fertile window may be exceptionally long, enabling them to become pregnant up to the age of 80, albeit with an imperfect child, as did those who conceived before the age of 20.³⁵ Thus, in her work, we find references to early or late conception as potential barriers to a successful pregnancy, with the striking difference that she pushes back the chronological limits of women's fertility to a much later age.

It is noteworthy that the sole source written by a woman is also the most comprehensive in terms of providing information on women's reproductive aging. However, despite Hildegard von Bingen's clear association of regular menstruation with women's overall health, the only physical symptom linked to menopause in her work—which meticulously explores diverse ailments of both men and women along with their remedies—is weight gain. It is therefore of interest to consider that the symptoms currently associated with the onset of menopause in Western societies are not universal.

Anthropological research has demonstrated that the physical and emotional responses of women to the cessation of the menstrual cycle vary considerably across cultures. These variations are influenced by a range of factors, including cultural, environmental, dietary, reproductive, and genetic differences. This suggests that the absence of physical symptoms such as hot flushes in certain cultures or geographical areas may be attributed to these factors (Beyene; Lock; Lamb 40–41). The physiological process of menopause may have been addressed differently in pre-modern times than it is currently, with no rationale for its more extensive inclusion in texts on physical ailments or health. One potential reason for its omission from these texts may be that, at the time, this natural and inevitable process was not medicalized or conceptualized as a

³⁴ [...] *et steriles sunt, quia debilem et fragilem matricem habent. Unde semen uiri nec concipere nec retinere nec calefacere possunt, et ideo etiam saniores, fortiores et letiores sunt absque maritis quam cum eis [...]* *Sed quedam ex hiis, si cum robustis et sanguineis maritis fuerint, tunc interdum, cum ad fortem etatem uelud quinquaginta annorum peruenerint, saltem infantem unum pariunt. Si autem cum aliis maritis fuerint, quorum natura debilis est, tunc ab illis non concipiunt, sed steriles permanebunt.* Moulinier, *Beate Hildegardis* 128. See also Moulinier, "Conception et corps féminin" 8. On the theory of the four different temperaments of men and women according to Hildegard von Bingen, see Cadden, "It Takes All Kinds" 149–174.

³⁵ *Nam a quinquagesimo anno aut aliquando in quibusdam feminis a sexagesimo, menstrua cessant et matrix implicari et contrahi incipit, ita quod amplius prolem concipere non possunt, nisi interdum eueniat, ut aliqua ex qualibet superfluitate uix semel interim usque ad octogesimum annum prolem concipiat, in qua tamen tunc aliquis defectus interdum continget, uelud in illis multotiens euenit, que infra uicesimum annum tenere iuuenule existentes in illa teneritudine concipiunt et pariunt.* Moulinier, *Beate Hildegardis* 146–147; Moulinier, "Conception et corps féminin" 8.

disease.³⁶ It is, nevertheless, important to bear in mind that the vast majority of available sources were written by university-educated men, as previously mentioned, and they often reiterate information from previous sources over centuries. As a result, it is difficult to determine how medieval women actually understood and experienced menopause. Further research into the transmission of medical knowledge between women through the exchange of household recipes for health remedies may provide insights into this issue.³⁷

Infrequently, we are privileged to hear from a woman herself about her own menopause. This offers us a rare insight into the experience of loss of fertility for women in the late Middle Ages. In the early 14th century in southern France, the noblewoman Béatrice de Planissolles was subjected to questioning by the Inquisition regarding her connections to Catharism. During the interrogation, she spoke of her romantic involvement with a younger priest and expressed surprise at having “loved him with too much passion,” despite being a woman beyond reproductive age (Duvernoy 260–290). This suggests that she believed that the loss of fertility implied a loss of libido. It is unfortunate that there is an insufficient number of sources available to ascertain whether this was a widely held belief. Such references are exceedingly rare, even in the most thoroughly documented areas. However, it is worth noting that this belief directly contrasts with the common literary topos of the excessively lustful old woman (Cayrol-Bernardo).

Other more subtle textual references might correspond to allusions to menopausal symptoms. Ninon Dubourg examined the cases of eight 15th-century professed nuns from various monasteries and convents in Iberia and Italy. The women in question were in their forties and fifties, and at times self-proclaimed as “old.” They sought and received permission from the papal court to leave the enclosure in order to bathe in therapeutic waters, with the aim of alleviating a number of physical ailments. It is plausible that the ages of these women indicate that some of these conditions were associated with (peri)menopause (Dubourg 272–273).

The limited and fragmented attention medieval sources give to menopause underscores both the constraints of male-authored medical knowledge and the cultural frameworks that shaped understandings of women’s aging, leaving

³⁶ On the medicalization of menopause see, among others: Martin; Gullette; Barry; Charlap.

³⁷ On the interest of studying recipes in relation to the medical knowledge of medieval women and its transmission, see Cabré i Pairet “Las prácticas de salud.”

many aspects of their lived experiences largely invisible or filtered through male perspectives.

DANGEROUS BODIES

Certain texts cite another physical consequence of menopause and caution against its potential dangers, although this idea was not widely embraced in the medical literature. According to retention theory, the inability to expel menstrual blood on a monthly basis resulted in the accumulation of impure substances within the bodies of older women. In the view of some authors, this rendered them highly toxic. For this reason, the *Compendio de la humana salud* counsels men to avoid socializing with women of advanced age, as they are more susceptible to mucous membrane inflammation and coughing, and may potentially infect them with their breath.³⁸ The author refers several times to the approaches to menstruation described in *De secretis mulierum*, an apocryphal work attributed to Albert the Great. This text includes a passage suggesting that “old women,” be they of post-reproductive age or otherwise, possess the capacity to poison young children through their gaze. The author of this text regarded old and poor women as particularly poisonous because of their deficient diet, and hypothesized that the vapors of the contaminated blood would be expelled through the eyes (Jacquart & Thomasset 105). At the end of the Middle Ages, the Castilian physician Diego Álvarez Chanca published the *Tractatus de fascinatione* in 1499. A second treatise on the same subject was published in 1530 by Antonio de Cartagena, who was a professor of medicine at the University of Alcalá de Henares. This work established the theoretical basis for the concept of *fascinatio*, or the ability to cast the evil eye (Delaurenti “La Sorcière;” *Fascination*), which was believed to cause serious illness and even death in children and adults with weakened bodies.³⁹ While Álvarez Chanca makes reference to the proclivity of women, both young and old, to develop this ability, Cartagena advances the argument by directly stating that older

³⁸ [...] porende congregan en sí aquella materia mala / en tanto que con su aliento infectan los mochos & habundan en ellas romadizos & tos las mas vezes. Dévese el hombre porende, por consejo de los phísicos, guardarse de la comunicacion de las viejas. Herrera 1990, 136.

³⁹ On *fascinatio* from a medical perspective and women as 'fascinator' in the work of Diego Álvarez Chanca and Alonso de Cartagena, see Salmón and Cabré "Fascinating Women" 64; "Blood, Milk, and Breastbleeding" 93–117.

women are innately endowed with it.⁴⁰

As Monica H. Green has argued, the tradition that menstrual blood was poisonous and had lethal powers, which originated with Pliny, had minimal support among medieval medical writers (Green, “Flowers, Poisons, and Men” 57–59; *Making Women's Medicine Masculine* 204–245). Nevertheless, it appears that this belief and the notion that women of post-reproductive age were regarded as dangerous exerted a certain influence in the popular imagination during the late Middle Ages. This is illustrated by a poem written in Florence during the first half of the 15th century by Domenico di Giovanni (1404–1449), who was known as “Il Burchiello.” In it, he denigrates an older woman and claims that she is capable of corrupting people with her “poisonous” gaze.⁴¹ The idea that older women have a natural ability to poison through their eyes or breath is also presented as a scientific fact in works on magic and superstition published in the first half of the 16th century, such as the *Tratado muy sutil y bien fundado de las supersticiones y hechicerías y vanos conjuros y abusiones; y otras cosas al caso tocantes, y de la posibilidad e remedio dellas* by Fray Martín de Castañega (Logroño, 1529)⁴² and *Reprobación de las supersticiones y hechicerías* by Pedro Sánchez Ciruelo (Salamanca, 1538).⁴³

⁴⁰ *Ex hoc infertur quod non solum ophtalmia qua est aegritudo propria oculi contagiosa est, immo caeteri humores corporis si per oculos euaporant, possunt esse contagiosi, Patet hoc, nam sanguis menstruus qui de venis in matriser pellitur, potest cum euaporat per oculos, sicut inficit speculum inficere alia. [...] Quoniam possibile est illum, cuius humores corrupti sunt vaporibus, oculis emissis aerem inficere, et aerem pueros praenimia teneritate modice resistentes. Et sic credo, quod huius causa vetulae effascinant pueros. [...] Et si quaeratur, quod ergo pacto vetulae, effascinant pueros: Dico quod sanguis menstruus quem in inuenta poterant extra corpus deponere, nunc in senecta pare nimia virtutis debilitate in venis retentus, cum venenosus est inficit pueros, quippe si vetulae menses non habebant id non euenit quod sanguine illo careant, sed quia viae strictissimae sunt et expulsina debilis, quod fit vt saepe sanguinem menstruum in venis habebant. [...] Concluditur ergo hac prima probatione vetulas infantes posse effascinare ob vapores sanguinis venenosi oculis emisos. Et si quis quaerat quare ergo vetulae istae venenosae non sunt, et non nimium malde valent: respondeo quod venenum viperae ei non est venenum: respondeo secundo quod tanta est consuetudo sanguinis illius menstrui in venis semellae, quod dum vetulae sunt, membra earum non offenduntur a sanguine facto venenoso. Sanz Hermida 159–163.*

⁴¹ *Vecchia ritrosa, perfida e maligna, inimica d'ogni ben, invidiosa, / e strega incantatrice e maliosa, / trista, stravolta, che se' pian di tigna. Barbuta se' più folta che gramigna, / gli occhi e 'l naso ti colan senza posa, / puzzati el fiato, sdentata rabbiosa / se ridi pari un diavol che digrigna. / E tanto è velenosa la tua vista che ciò che miri corrompi per paodo. Bettella 11.*

⁴² *Y esta infección y ponzoña tiene más unas con otras, y en especial las viejas que han dejado de purgar sus flores a sus tiempos por la naturaleza ordenados, porque entonces purgan más por los ojos y de peor complexión por razón de la edad; y así la vista de las semejantes es más peligrosa y por eso deberían de tener este aviso, que nunca mirasen abito e de cerca a los ojos de los niños tiernos, ni en tal tiempo los besasen en la boca. Sanz Hermida 313.*

⁴³ *Y esta dolencia no solamente los ha dañado por la vista y ojo, más aun y mucho más por el aliento de la boca y las narices, y por el sudor o vapor o vaho que sale de todo el cuerpo de aquella persona inficionada; así como es un leproso, un buboso, una mujer sangrienta de su costumbre, alguna vieja de mala complexión, y de muchas otras maneras. 316.*

While medieval medical literature provided little backing for the idea that women became physically dangerous after menopause, such notions found greater acceptance in popular culture. The belief in the toxicity of retained menstrual blood, coupled with associations between older women and the evil eye, fueled a broader cultural perception of post-reproductive women as threatening figures.

CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between aging and the decline or cessation of fertility in women is a recurring theme in both medieval medical treatises and other textual sources. The terms “old” and “old age” were often used to describe women who had entered the post-reproductive phase of life. However, these terms were also used to differentiate between younger and older women who were still fertile, reflecting the nuanced way in which age and fertility were discussed. The age range considered most favorable for childbearing varied across sources, but there was general agreement that the likelihood of complications increased after a woman reached her thirties. Additionally, many sources acknowledged that a woman's fertility and the age at which she experienced menopause were influenced by her constitution and individual circumstances. Despite this, in medical literature, the event of menopause itself was not typically viewed as a defining transition into old age for women. In fact, it was often overlooked altogether, with the primary focus being on providing guidance for achieving successful pregnancies rather than addressing what happened to women's bodies once their reproductive years had ended.

While there was general agreement that fertility declined in a woman's thirties, some authors acknowledged that having children during this decade was not entirely unacceptable, though it was not ideal. In contrast, reaching the age of forty was often considered too late for childbirth. In late medieval literary fiction, this perceived decline in fertility sometimes marked a shift in emphasis—from a woman's physical appearance to her personality and behavior.⁴⁴ At the same time, satirical literature featuring older women became

⁴⁴ Studies based on late medieval documents of practice have reached similar conclusions. In his influential study of the Occitan village of Montaillou (1294–1324), Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie observed that women, initially oppressed as young wives, later came to be respected as matriarchs, particularly if widowed. He attributed this change in status to the desexualization of older women (Le Roy Ladurie 286, 288, 322). Similarly, Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker argues that in the commercial

increasingly common, frequently fixating on their bodies and portraying them in a derogatory light (Luce-Dudemaine; Gouiran; Bettella; Mieszkowski). While these texts rarely address infertility directly, they emphasize physical appearance, framing aging as a decline in women's sexual attractiveness to men. Overall, across various types of source material, there is a consistent association between reproductive aging, the decline of physical attractiveness, and the perception of old age in women. However, most sources address reproductive aging and the negative beliefs associated with it as a continuous process of development, rather than focusing on the interruption of fertility as a turning point.

The experience and understanding of menopause are shaped by specific cultural contexts and may shift historically. Therefore, relying on bodily symptoms and cultural beliefs common in the Western world today when examining medieval sources risks leading to inaccurate conclusions. However, the fact remains that the vast majority of available sources do not discuss or explain the physical changes or experiences of older women. Instead, medical texts concerning women—or directed at them—primarily focused on two main concerns: enhancing fertility during childbearing years and preserving beauty, which was largely equated with youth and minimizing visible signs of aging (Cayrol-Bernardo & Dubourg; Cayrol-Bernardo). If fertility and a youthful appearance were regarded as a woman's primary assets, it is reasonable to conclude that older women experienced a dual loss of social capital.

In practice, perceived infertility or declining fertility could carry significant social and relational consequences. Wives were chosen primarily on the basis of their expected reproductive capacity, and a couple's success was often measured by their ability to produce heirs, preferably male. As Christiane Klapisch-Zuber demonstrated, only 11% of widows from merchant families aged 30 to 39 remarried in late medieval Florence ("Le denier enfant" 249–261).

The absence of discussion of menopause in health literature suggests that discourses on the topic were not medicalized during the Late Medieval period as they are today. However, the theory of blood retention as a form of toxin accumulation shows that menopause, though natural and inevitable, was perceived as a negative phenomenon. This belief implied that menopause

cities of Germany and the Low Countries, women often acquired greater authority after the age of forty, both within the household and in the wider community (Mulder-Bakker & Nip; Mulder-Bakker).

affected not only a woman's body but also made her more susceptible to evil, which may have influenced broader social perceptions of women who experienced it. Such beliefs and the resulting stereotypes could be used as insults to degrade or ridicule a woman, as evidenced in Il Burchiello's poem. During this period, older women were indeed often associated with negative qualities, such as a proclivity for evil, credulity, and unreliability (Agrimi & Crisciani).

On the other hand, while significant emphasis was placed on the importance of reproductive capacity for women, none of the examined sources reference the idea that women became more masculine or manly after menopause. Retention theory—and even its most misogynistic presumed consequences, such as contagiousness or the innate ability to cast the evil eye—demonstrates that in the Late Middle Ages, bodily sex differentiation was fully recognized beyond childbearing age.

Overall, it is essential to account for the significant gender bias among writers, as predominantly male perspectives shaped how women's experiences, including menopause, were understood and represented. This makes it difficult to reconstruct the full range of societal attitudes toward women's bodily aging. The overwhelming majority of sources examined in this study were written by men—whether university-educated physicians, writers of fiction, or poets. This inevitably results in a biased body of source material. Some of the most explicit examples analyzed appear in satirical texts that adopt a distinctly misogynistic stance, targeting the aging female body with scorn while disregarding other dimensions of older women's lives. Other literary genres, by contrast, tend to ignore the topic entirely. As a result, the available sources are inherently skewed. While the available testimonies from women are too scarce to support broad conclusions, the few instances where a woman's perspective or experience is recorded help to provide a more nuanced picture.

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