

On Life Transitions, Loss, and Frailty: Aging according to Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi (1408-1471)¹

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This paper examines the subjective experience of aging from a woman's perspective in fifteenth-century Florence. Between 1447 and 1470, the Florentine patrician Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi (1408–1471) composed numerous letters to her sons, Filippo, Lorenzo, and Matteo, seventy-three of which survived. Throughout this twenty-three-year correspondence, she frequently referred to age and aging, reflecting on her own experience of growing older, commenting on the ages of others, and interpreting appearance, behavior, and social roles through the lens of age. Drawing on this exceptional longitudinal source, this paper argues that Alessandra's letters reveal older age not as a fixed chronological condition but as a continually renegotiated experience shaped by biographical thresholds: moments at which bodily change, bereavement, shifting family relationships, and evolving social roles prompted new understandings of age, dependency, authority, and selfhood. In doing so, the article explores the interplay between embodied experience and cultural expectations, the gendered nature of life-course transitions, and changing patterns of intergenerational care within the Strozzi family. More broadly, it demonstrates the value of epistolary sources for reconstructing the lived experience of aging and contributes to ongoing efforts within age studies to recover the subjective dimensions of later life in the premodern past.

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In later life, major transitions often reshape an individual's relationship with themselves and their surroundings. Experiences such as the end of fertility, the arrival of grandchildren, retirement, physical decline, or the loss of loved ones require individuals to relinquish past identities, relationships, and ways of living. These transitions evoke a spectrum of emotional responses, from resistance to acceptance of reliance on others. Literary scholars Elizabeth Barry and Margery Vibe Skagen describe this process as “transitional aging” (Barry and Skagen). In such moments of change, social identities may be reshaped and, at times, rendered uncertain.

Late medieval sources offer only fragmented glimpses into how individuals—especially women—navigated the transitions associated with aging. Few texts authored by women reflect on aging, older age, or age more broadly, and first-person accounts are particularly rare. The majority of writings that address female aging were produced by men, largely for male audiences. These works frequently perpetuate negative stereotypes, depicting older women as either threatening or irrelevant (Cayrol-Bernardo). Against this broader textual landscape, the correspondence examined in this article constitutes an unusually rich and revealing source, offering rare access to a woman's own reflections on the lived experience of growing older, making it significant for the study of aging in the premodern past.

Although Alessandra's life and widowhood have long attracted scholarly attention, especially in relation to family strategy, kinship, and household economy,² her letters have not been explored systematically as a record of the subjective experience of aging. This paper traces how Alessandra traversed biographical thresholds: those moments at which life transitions acquired particular biographical significance, prompting a reassessment of her place within her family, household, and wider social world. Conceived in this way, biographical thresholds draw attention to aging not as a uniformly progressive process, but as one punctuated by critical moments that reshape an individual's

² Alessandra and her correspondence have been the focus of substantial scholarly attention, including but not limited to Doglio; Klapisch-Zuber, *La Famiglia e le Donne*, 161–162, 170; Doni Garfagnini; Crabb (“How Typical” and *The Strozzi of Florence*); Valori; Bourel de La Roncière; Collange; Brucker; and Brambilla.

sense of self and social identity. Rather than marking discrete stages in the life course, these thresholds reveal how the meaning of age itself can interpret changing circumstances through the lens of growing older. Read through this lens, the letters reveal an ongoing process of negotiating identity in later life, as Alessandra vacillates between invoking the authority associated with age and acknowledging its vulnerabilities. These are not contradictory positions so much as complementary ways of articulating the experience of growing older, each inflected by the particular circumstances in which she wrote and by the expectations of her correspondents.

Alessandra di Filippo Macinghi was born in Florence in 1408 and died in the same city in 1471 at the age of 63. While not exceptionally old by modern or even late medieval standards, individuals over sixty were considered "old" in the context of 15th-century Florence.³ Alessandra was born into a prominent Florentine merchant family and, in 1422, married Matteo Strozzi, whose family held greater social prestige despite having less wealth. After the men from her husband's family were exiled from Florence in 1434, she relocated with her family to Pesaro. Tragedy struck the following year when Matteo and three of their children died of the plague. She then returned to Florence, where she gave birth to her youngest son, also named Matteo, and dedicated herself to preserving the family fortune and restoring its social standing. Her elder sons, Filippo and Lorenzo, left the family home to pursue careers in banking, initially working abroad before ultimately settling in Naples. Matteo joined them there in 1450. In 1458, the brothers were formally exiled from Florence. Their extended absence prompted Alessandra to write frequently between 1447 and 1470, with seventy-three of her letters surviving today.⁴ As Christiane Klapisch-Zuber points out, during this time, Alessandra wrote "a lot about what she did

³ On female longevity in the Late Middle Ages, see Herlihy, "Life Expectancies for Women"; Shahar 33–35. On categorizations of old age, see, among others: Ghellinck; Sears; Burrow; Adler and Storm 157–188.

⁴ Alessandra's letters were first edited by Cesare Guasti in 1877. They have since been partially translated into English by Heather Gregory (1997) and fully translated by Judith Bryce (2016). This article draws on the original letters preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, which are available online at <https://macinghi-strozzi.labdilef.it/>. References to the letters throughout this study follow their chronological numbering.

and a little about how she felt,"⁵ providing a rare glimpse into the life of a woman in her position during this period.

Addressed to her sons Filippo, Lorenzo, and Matteo, Alessandra's handwritten letters span nearly twenty-three years, offering valuable insight into her experiences of aging, her perceptions of generational dynamics, and her views on age. These letters allow us to trace not only the events of her later life but also the evolving ways in which she interpreted and articulated the experience of growing older, particularly in relation to her sons, who lived far away. However, since her correspondence is solely addressed to them, it reveals little about her relationship with her daughters, Caterina and her namesake, Alessandra, who lived in Florence and were likely in more direct, personal communication with her. The epistolary relationship with her sons is not incidental to the content of the letters: writing to sons from whom she sought both practical assistance and emotional connection, Alessandra had reason to foreground her authority as matriarch even as she invoked her frailty to solicit care and attention. The letters should therefore be read as situated expressions of lived experience, shaped by her relationship with these particular correspondents rather than as transparent records of Alessandra's inner life, a methodological point to which the analysis returns below and which recent work on letters and aging in other periods has similarly emphasized (Harvey and Fox).

Alessandra's overlapping discourses on aging and later life highlight various internalized meanings of age. In addition to her lived experience about growing older, Alessandra's letters mention others' appearances and behaviors framed through an aging lens. This gives rise to exploring concepts of age as a key social structuring element and gender roles in shaping life cycles.

THE AGING SELF

Alessandra addresses subjective aspects of the aging process and features of late life, revealing the complexities and contradictions of individualized aging.

⁵ "beaucoup sur ce qu'elle fait et un peu sur ce qu'elle sent." Klapisch-Zuber, "Le dernier enfant" 287. Translation mine.

Taken together, the letters document not a continuous progression into old age but a series of biographical thresholds through which Alessandra repeatedly reassesses what growing older meant for her life. These letters offer insight into fluctuating concepts of selfhood and identity over more than two decades. They also capture a growing awareness of Alessandra's life's impending end. Her experience of aging is deeply shaped by biographical thresholds, most notably those connected to her relationship with her children.

In a letter written in 1449, Alessandra reflects on her past and recalls her late twenties—the period when she was widowed—as a time when she was young.⁶ However, just over a decade later, her letters begin to express a growing awareness of aging, marked by frequent laments about its physical and emotional toll. In a letter dated November 4, 1448, Alessandra makes her first reference to growing older. At the time, she was 40 years old, yet she was experiencing a significant decline in her health, which she explicitly links to the aging process gaining momentum.⁷ In the same letter, she hints at the possibility that she does not have much time left to live (*che poco tempo ci ò a vivere*). Drawing on 15th-century sources from commercial cities in Germany and the Low Countries, Anneke Mulder-Bakker argues that the age of 40—what she terms the “age of discretion”—marked a significant turning point for 15th-century women, particularly widows (Mulder-Bakker 2011). It is plausible that Florentine women like Alessandra also viewed this age as a moment of transition, although she never refers to it specifically when writing about herself.⁸

Two years later, after her youngest son Matteo had left home, Alessandra again mentions her age, marking a meaningful shift in her life. She expresses feeling unwell and in need of a child by her side, believing she had reached an age that required care and support.⁹ From that moment on, she increasingly

⁶ *E pensa se m'è dura cosa, quando penso como io rimasi giovane allevare cinque figliuoli, e di poca età come savate.* Letter IV.

⁷ *che forte invecchio e divento poco sana più l'un di che ll'altro.* Letter II.

⁸ For further discussion on the age of forty and the growing authority of older matrons in 15th-century Florence, see below.

⁹ *...e che ormai è di bisogno uno di voi torni qua; che i' sono oggima 'd'età da volere essere governata, e son poco sana, e fatica mi pare lo scrivere.* Letter VIII.

presents herself as having entered a new stage of life, often highlighting her sense of frailty and vulnerability. Such appeals cannot be separated from their epistolary purpose: framing herself as frail and in need of care was also the most effective rhetorical means available to Alessandra of securing her sons' attention and engagement from a distance, at a time when their actual return was not yet within her power to bring about.

In the Late Middle Ages, women in their forties were generally considered unfit for childbirth, regardless of whether they still menstruated. This stage of life was also associated with significant physical decline, particularly the loss of youthful appearance. Women at this age were widely regarded as past their prime, though sources typically refrained from overtly labeling them as "old" until they reached fifty (Cayrol-Bernardo). Alessandra may have internalized these societal beliefs. Furthermore, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber proposes that the reproductive strategies employed by Florentine families in the Late Middle Ages, which involved frequent pregnancies starting at a very young age, may have contributed to premature bodily aging among women (Klapisch-Zuber, "Le dernier enfant" 283). Ninon Dubourg examines the cases of eight mid-15th-century nuns in Iberia and Italy who, in their forties and fifties, sometimes described themselves as old and received papal permission to leave enclosure and bathe in healing waters in order to address various health issues, some of which may have been related to menopausal symptoms (Dubourg 272–273). It is possible that Alessandra's sense of accelerated aging arose from similar causes.

As will be explored further, Alessandra's references to her own age are primarily associated with declines in physical, mental, or emotional well-being, as well as with major personal events. She may have framed her experiences through the lens of age due to internalized cultural expectations. It is important to recognize that feelings of aging can arise at any stage of adulthood, and that younger individuals can also have age experiences (Gullette 217–218). Age awareness, therefore, is not confined to late life. Expressions of concern about aging do not necessarily indicate that individuals were seen as, or saw themselves as, truly old. Records and poetry from the same period include men

in their forties voicing similar anxieties (Gilbert). Alessandra's reflections on herself and others in her letters reveal the deeply subjective nature of age awareness, portraying aging as a fluid continuum in which the boundaries between youth and old age are shaped by personal, social, and cultural contexts.¹⁰

In August 1459, nine years after leaving the family home, 23-year-old Matteo died of the plague in Naples. His death affected Alessandra deeply. In a moving letter, she expresses a desire not to live too long, hoping to avoid further tragedies (letter XIX). In the aftermath of this loss, Alessandra's references to her declining health, old age, and proximity to death become increasingly frequent. In 1460, for example, she writes that she felt old and unwell, expressing a hope that the little time she had remaining might be spent in spiritual, if not physical, well-being (letter XXII). She was then in her fifties and felt her life drawing to a close, though she would in fact live for another decade.

Alessandra's perception and expression of her aging do not follow a straightforward trajectory. In 1465, when her son Lorenzo received safe conduct to enter Florence as an exile, she expresses both excitement and concern over her frailty and inability to care for him. She describes herself as being in the final stage of life, longing for peace and comfort in body and soul (letter XLIV). After Lorenzo left, in a letter to Filippo about her poor health, she predicts a prolonged illness, noting that she had eaten eggs—recommended in medieval medical texts to strengthen the blood and provide warmth for older adults.¹¹ However, news of Filippo's upcoming marriage soon lifted her spirits, renewing her sense of hope and recovery. Upon hearing of his decision to marry, she even considers it reasonable and her duty to live a little longer.¹²

On one occasion, Alessandra explicitly uses an allusion to rejuvenation to describe an improvement in her health and vitality. In a letter from 1469, she

¹⁰ On age as a spectrum, see: Gullette; Wohlmann 15.

¹¹ *...che poi partì Lorenzo no mi sono sentita bene, en modo che ho mangiato dell'uova: non ho avuto febbre, ma i' ho molto debole il capo, e alle volte pare che il cervello mi si volga.* Letter XLV.

¹² *...ed io, vedutomi dell'età ch' i' sono, e malsana, non credendo giungere a questo tempo, n'ero invilita, e quasi perduto la speranza d'aver mai consolazione, se non per lettere. Pure la veduta di Lorenzo, e inteso che tu e' disposto di tor donna, e che avendo fermo l'animo a fare questo passo, mi pare ragionevole e dovere ched io estia tanto si dia effetto; che tosto si doverrà vedere.* Letter XLVI.

employs a botanical metaphor to convey how, a few months earlier, she had felt younger and, as a result, was able to be more active. However, she notes that her health has since worsened. She also mentions undergoing purging treatments. Medieval health advice aimed at older adults emphasized the importance of elimination, recommending both dietary adjustments and laxatives to maintain health (Gil-Sostres 846, 850). Such treatments are also discussed in *Gerontocomia*, the first printed monograph on old age, published in Rome in 1489 by the physician Gabriele Zerbi. Zerbi recommended laxatives such as figs, prunes, and raisins, as well as "softening suppositories" (Zerbi 243; Gilleard 200). Despite Alessandra's efforts, these treatments seem to have been ineffective. In this letter, she underscores her advancing age, noting with frustration that just when she feels her health might be improving, instead, it worsens. Though still active, she feels constrained by age, describing it as a barrier that slows her down and keeps her from being as energetic as she wishes.¹³ This is her second-to-last surviving letter, followed by a final one dated April 14, 1470, written ten months before her death.

Taken together, these successive references to her own aging show that Alessandra did not experience older age as a single, settled identity, but as a state she moved in and out of according to her health, her circumstances, and the emotional charge of a given moment. Rather than simply documenting the passage of time, Alessandra's letters reveal how the meaning of growing older was repeatedly renegotiated through successive biographical thresholds, as changing family circumstances, bodily decline, and bereavement reshaped her understanding of herself and her place within the household.

AGING AS BODILY DECLINE

All references to Alessandra's own age center on the loss of vitality, ability, or specific physical ailments, approaching aging as an embodied process of

¹³ *Non m'è briga nè noia nuova, quando potessi fare e aiutarmi della p(er)sona più ch'io non posso; ma i' no· sono però cho' talli chome mi scrivesti i(n) questo verno, ch'io avevo messo un tallo; e di poi è passato, che mi senti' male i(n)sino pella settimana s(an)c(t)a; e chosì fatto Pasqua; di poi mi purgai, ma (n)no(n) molto bene. Son pur ve(c)chia, e credo miglorare, ed i' pegioro; tanto farò così io finirò e mie debiti. Sicché no(n) t'avendo iscrito ispesso come solevo, fu la chagione i(n) prima il no(n) mi sentir bene, e poi ò pure da fare.* Letter LXXII.

decline. In her writings, she either explicitly identifies herself as old or implies it by referencing her proximity to death. Her letters frequently frame aging in terms of bodily ailments, illustrating how she internalizes and expresses the physical realities of growing older.

In a letter dated January 3, 1465, Alessandra writes to her son Filippo, mentioning her old age, poor eyesight, and the fact that she is writing with spectacles.¹⁴ The *Lillium medicine* (written in Montpellier in 1305) is the first medical text to mention a magnifying tool that can be considered a precursor to spectacles and eyeglasses. It describes a recipe for an eye drop so powerful that "it would make a decrepit man read small letters without a beryl eye"—referring to a tool made from green beryl, a type of stone, of which emerald is a variety. The lack of further details suggests that the use of such a tool was sufficiently well-known to be mentioned casually. Importantly, the text links the need for this tool with advanced age. According to Luke Demaitre, as early as the 14th century, Venetian glassmakers from Murano (Venice) fitted two glass lenses into iron frames for binocular use. By the mid-15th century, the physician and professor of medicine at the University of Padua, Michele Savonarola, referenced this innovation, replacing *sine oculo berellino* with the plural *sine ocularibus* (Demaitre, *Medieval Medicine* 175–177). Alessandra herself refers to her vision aid using the plural term *occhiali* (eyeglasses), providing a rather early documented mention of the use of spectacles in everyday practice by an older woman.¹⁵ It is worth noting that medical authors rarely offered recommendations for vision aids. While spectacles and orthotic devices were seldom mentioned in medical treatises, historical records, iconography, and archaeological findings suggest that they played an essential role in the daily lives of older adults (Cayrol-Bernardo and Dubourg).

Poor eyesight is not the only specific age-related ailment Alessandra mentions in her writing. In a letter written in 1464, when she was in her late fifties, she explicitly links her chronic respiratory condition to aging, remarking that she is "like all elderly women"—always coughing (*io mi sto chome le vecchie, che*

¹⁴ *Questa mia è scritta chog'ochiali: rilegiete e rivolgete più d'una volta, tanto che lla i(n)tendiate bene.* Letter XL.

¹⁵ On the development and use of spectacles and other lenses in 15th-century Florence, see Ilardi.

senpre crochiano, letter XLI). This remark underscores her broader view of aging as a process defined by physical decline, highlighting the embodied nature of her experience. The following month, she reinforces this connection with another reference to her persistent condition (*tuttavia crocchio*, letter XLIV).

In 1465, Alessandra remarks that her advancing age has made travel impossible.¹⁶ Such observations are not limited to her own experience; she also notes the decreased mobility of others due to older age.¹⁷ Loss of mobility appears to have been a common affliction among older adults during the late medieval period, as evidenced by both historical records (Andrade Cernadas; Dubourg) and visual representations of older individuals using walking sticks (Lallouette; von Hülsen-Esch, “Armut und Alter”; Helas, “Der Körper des Bettlers” and “Krank, alt, blind”).

All the symptoms examined—coughing, impaired eyesight (including cataracts and dim vision), and joint issues affecting mobility—are commonly cited among *accidentia senectutis* or normal concomitants of old age in medieval medical literature (Demaitre, “The Care and Extension” 10). These conditions are also addressed in the *Gerontocomia* (Zerbi; McCleery 280). In Alessandra’s letters, her perception of aging as a gradual process accelerating in her forties later shifts toward a heightened focus on specific age-related ailments, declining abilities, and an explicit acknowledgment of old age (letters XLVI, LVII, LIX). This evolution reflects a transition from *senectus*—active old age—to the phase of *senium* or decrepitude, as conceptualized by medieval physicians and writers (Ghellinck; Sears; Burrow).

INTERGENERATIONAL CAREGIVING

As mentioned earlier, Alessandra begins referencing her vulnerability and need for care at a relatively young age, more than two decades before her death, and these references become more frequent as she grows older. In the Late Middle Ages, individuals had several options to ensure receiving care in old

¹⁶ *E sonci gl'anni, che m'anno tenuto ch'io non vi sono venuta a vedere. Credo che Idio l'abia fatto p(er) lo meglio.* Letter LXIV

¹⁷ *Credo se Angnolo potrà tanto chamminare, ch'è pur vecchio, verrà a vederti, che n'à voglia; ed io ne ll'ò pregato.* Letter IX.

age,¹⁸ with moving in with next of kin remaining a common practice. For Alessandra, this choice was influenced by her status as a widow. After her husband's death, she chose to remain living with the Strozzi family, keeping her dowry within the family assets rather than reclaiming it and leaving.¹⁹ As she began to experience age-related vulnerability, she considered relocating to live with one of her sons. Initially, she explored moving to Naples, where Filippo and Lorenzo were working (Crabb, "How Typical" 47–61; *Strozzi of Florence*), but later found it more feasible to wait until Filippo married and settled in Florence, with the expectation that his wife would care for her. Her discussions about moving in with a son are closely intertwined with expressions of concern about aging and health.

In late medieval Western Europe, bodily care was predominantly managed within the household, where women played a central role in overseeing diet, hygiene, and overall well-being (Cabr   i Pairet). Under the supervision of the female head of household, domestic work and direct care for older individuals were primarily managed by female slaves, servants, and other hired professionals (Klapisch-Zuber, "Female Celibacy and Service"), some of whom were specifically employed to assist ill or disabled older adults (Comas-Via, "Mujeres que sirven" 148). However, much about these caregiving methods—especially those concerning older adults—remains unknown, as they were largely passed down through oral tradition and learned through physical demonstration (Cayrol-Bernardo and Dubourg). The expectation that women would care for older family members was widely recognized, as seen in a letter from the humanist writer Costanza da Varano, written around 1444, in which she describes pausing her intellectual pursuits to care for her ailing mother (King and Rabil 54).

As a matriarch, Alessandra played an active role in finding Filippo a suitable wife, reflecting both her desire to see her sons settled (letter LXVI) and her

¹⁸ On retirement practices and assistance to older adults in the Late Middle Ages, see: Clark, "Some Aspects of Social Security" and "The Quest for Security"; Laumonier, "En pr  vision des vieux jours"; Zijlderduijn, "The Ages of Women and Men"; Comas-Via, "Envejecer en femenino" 108–115; Zijlderduijn and Overlaet; Svensson and Zijlderduijn.

¹⁹ On Florentine widows and their options upon their husbands' death, see Klapisch-Zuber 1983; Chabot 1988, 1994, 1999; Crabb 1992 and 2000.

concern for the continuation of the Strozzi lineage through legitimate heirs.²⁰ This held deep significance for her: in a letter written in 1465, she even suggests that her lack of grandchildren might be a form of punishment for her sins (letter LX). Beyond securing the family's future, marriage arrangements also held personal significance for her, as a daughter-in-law could provide care and support when she could no longer manage the household alone. Throughout her later years, she navigated a constant tension between asserting authority and claiming the need to relinquish it due to old age—an argument she strategically used to maintain influence.²¹ Despite these claims, she remained effectively at the head of the household until the end of her life. Her involvement highlights the crucial role of mothers of adult sons in shaping family decisions and dynamics in late medieval Florence (Herlihy, “Vieillir au Quattrocento” 1344). This aligns with a broader trend in late medieval Florence, where mothers gained increasing influence within the household as they aged, as noted by Didier Lett (23–24).²²

In the last months of her sons' exile, Alessandra's letters often express her worries about their marital prospects, the difficulties of securing a marriage while in exile, the possibility of their return, and political developments in Florence that might facilitate their homecoming. After the men of the Strozzi family were allowed to return to Florence in 1466, no further letters appear until March 4, 1469. By this time, Filippo and his wife, Fiammetta Adimari, had a son named Alfonso and another child on the way. Living in Florence while Filippo was on an extended business trip to Naples, Alessandra wrote to him

²⁰ In fact, in one of her letters (XXIV), she reproaches her sons for delaying marriage for so long and having a dozen illegitimate children.

²¹ On how older age could be invoked as a source of authority by a woman in the Late Middle Ages, see Kalas 201–210. Although centered on a fictional character, see also Scarborough for a relevant perspective.

²² In his seminal study of the Occitan village of Montaillou (1294–1324), Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie observed a similar dynamic: women faced oppression as young wives, later received greater affection from their children, and, upon reaching old age, were respected as matriarchs, especially if widowed. He attributes this shift to the fact that older women were no longer sexualized (Le Roy Ladurie 286, 288, 322). Similarly, Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker argues that in commercial cities of Germany and the Low Countries, women often gained greater authority after the age of 40, both within their households and in the wider community (Mulder-Bakker and Nip; Mulder-Bakker). For further discussion on shifts in the sexualization of women after menopause, see Cayrol-Bernardo.

about arranging a wet nurse for the new baby and teaching Alfonso to read—clear evidence of her continuous, hands-on role in managing the Strozzi household.²³ In fact, in the Late Middle Ages, grandparents often played a significant role in overseeing their grandchildren's upbringing and securing their future.²⁴ Alessandra also expresses feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility of managing household matters on her own during Fiammetta's postpartum recovery, noting that she felt old and physically frail.

A cyclical pattern of family care emerges, where younger adults who once received care, later take on the responsibility of caring for older adults (Laumonier, "Intergenerational Solidarities"). This intergenerational exchange of support is evident within the Strozzi family. Alessandra's firsthand account adds nuance by illustrating that older adults in need of assistance could also serve as caregivers for younger generations, particularly their grandchildren.

DOING AGE

Age is both subjectively experienced by individuals and observed by others, carrying with it value judgments and societal expectations. "Acting one's age" thus becomes a performative and social practice—essentially, "doing age" (Laz). Alessandra's writings illustrate how she frequently interprets people's behaviors, roles, and circumstances through the lens of age, emphasizing its function as a fundamental social structuring principle. For example, Alessandra links wisdom with age, advising her son Lorenzo, then 20 years old, that he is now old enough to be fully accountable for his decisions and should heed the guidance of his elders.²⁵ She thus conveys the idea of a hierarchical relationship

²³ *Non ti maravigli che Alfonso sia sì reo, insegnandogli io leggere.* Letter LXXI.

²⁴ On late medieval grandmothers in different areas of the Western Mediterranean, see Guglielmi 167; Comas-Via, *Entre la solitud* 126; Laumonier, "Grandparents in Urban and Rural Lower Languedoc" and "Intergenerational Solidarities."

²⁵ *E torniàno al fatto tuo. Che se 'd'età da governarti in altra maniera non fai, e oggimai doverresti correggerti, e dirizzare l'animo tuo al ben vivere; che insino a qui è stato da riputar fanciullo: ma ora non è così, e sì pell'età e sì perchè non si può mettere gli errori tuoi per ignoranza, e perchè non conosca quello che tu fai; que se 'di tale intelletto, che conosci il male e 'l bene, e massimamente quando ne se 'ripreso da 'tua maggiori.* Letter XII. I have chosen to use "elders" rather than "older adults" throughout the discussion below, as it provides the most literal English translation of *maggiori* and *vecchi*—the terms most commonly used in fifteenth-century

between generations, highlighting the role of elders as authority figures. Here again, age emerges less as a fixed chronological status than as a relational position whose meaning depends upon family roles and social expectations. An idea of growing older as a process of acquiring wisdom, sensibility, and respectability coexists with Alessandra's prevailing negative narrative of aging as a journey of loss and bodily decline. It is noteworthy that the verb *governare*, used to remind Lorenzo of his agency over his actions, is the same one Alessandra employs in her early forties when she states that she has reached an age where she needs to relinquish agency and receive care (*d'età da volere essere governata*, letter VIII). By examining how both generations exercise agency, Alessandra highlights internalized expectations about age, discernment, maturity, and autonomy.

In Quattrocento Florence, obedience to elders was a deeply ingrained social norm, upheld by both legal frameworks and cultural values. Age served as a fundamental criterion for structuring behavior and assigning privileges. While younger citizens often faced restrictions in terms of civil rights, political roles, and even access to luxury clothing, older individuals—valorized by humanist ideals—enjoyed broader freedoms and authority. Older men in particular occupied leadership positions in civic institutions, families, and religious confraternities. Certain political and professional offices were specifically reserved for men over the age of 30, 40, or even 45, reflecting the widespread belief that sound judgment stemmed from accumulated life experience (Taddei). This notion is central to Leon Battista Alberti's (1404–1472) writings, particularly in his *Libri della famiglia* (1433–1440), where he repeatedly emphasizes the authority of elders, their role in guiding younger generations, and the reciprocal care owed to them in recognition of past support (Alberti 17–23). As heads of their households, elders bore the responsibility of preserving family honor by educating and disciplining younger members (Alberti 18–21, 27, 113–117). Alessandra, as an older widow, occupied a unique

Florentine source material—and more fully captures the position occupied by older generations, particularly men, both within the household and in wider society in this particular milieu.

position within a male-dominated hierarchical framework, negotiating both the authority and vulnerability that came with her age and gender.

Alessandra's letters highlight the idea that elders deserve greater respect within their community. For instance, she points out that a 51-year-old man has reached an age that warrants increased deference. She expresses the belief that assisting elders and treating them with reverence is not only a way to honor them but also a means of upholding one's own dignity and reputation,²⁶ a view that aligns with Alberti's discussions on the same topic. According to him, the attitude towards elders should be modeled after the respect due to a father (Alberti 20). Here again, it is worth noting the contrast between Alberti's androcentric perspective and Alessandra's role as an older, widowed woman. In Alessandra's writings, her reflections on the reverence owed to elders extend beyond the boundaries of her own social class. She suggests that older people were deserving of greater respect than younger adults simply by virtue of their age, regardless of social status. In one letter, for example, she discusses with her son Filippo his decision not to purchase a slave who had been offered to him, out of respect for the older woman already working in his home.²⁷

Alessandra, however, expresses concern about older individuals who can no longer support themselves financially, viewing them as a burden. She refers to two of her tenants, Piero and Cilia, an older couple dependent on her support, and worries about her ability to continue providing for them for much longer.²⁸ She suggests that, given their advanced age, infirmity, and inability to work, they have outlived their productive years. A few months later, after Cilia's death, she implies that the best outcome for someone in Piero's condition is to be "called by God" (*che Idio lo chiami a ssé*, letter LXII).

Alessandra also conveys this functional perspective on aging when writing about herself, emphasizing the importance of remaining active and useful to the

²⁶ *Di' ch'io debbo avere i(n)teso da Giovani el pensiero avete fatto di lui per aiutarlo sollevare: che vi pare, essendo dell'età ch'egl'è (51), questo sia più onorevole p(er) lui e p(er) voi, e che se ne debba più contentare, che avere a stare di fuori. E duo cose vorresti da m(m)e enanzi che si strignessi la cosa.* Letter LXVII.

²⁷ *Diciestimi p(er) la tua de· 28 di settenbre, che t'era chapitato chostì una ischiava, ch'era qui di Lionardo Vernacci, e che l'aresti tolta, se nno(n) per rispetto della vecchia che ttu ài en chasa.* Letter LIX.

²⁸ *...anchora vive Piero e mona Cilia, tramendua i(n)fermi. Ò allogato il podere p(er) quest'altro anno, e me lo chonviene mettere in ordine; e que' due ve(c)chi, se non muoiono, àno andare achattare. Idio provegga.* Letter XLIX.

family in older age, both within the household and in business. Indeed, her influence extended well beyond domestic matters. Alessandra oversaw the family's business affairs in Florence and its surrounding areas. In the 1450s, she sold yarn in Florence that her son had procured at a favorable price in Naples. She also invested capital in her relatives' businesses and played a pivotal role in her son's banking operations, recruiting apprentices and serving as a point of contact (Crabb, *Strozzi of Florence* 63–64; Collange 288–306). This aligns with Alberti's perspective that elders should remain engaged and productive for the welfare and honor of their family (Alberti 14, 79, 167), reinforcing the notion that “successful aging” was defined by ongoing activity. Productivity appears as a central marker of aging well, reflecting a deeply ingrained cultural expectation.²⁹ This discourse coexists with Alessandra's previously discussed understanding of older age as a state of increased vulnerability, where infirmity is seen as an inevitable consequence of aging. Alessandra expresses concern for vulnerable elders in her community, such as an older woman whose son succumbed to the plague in 1464, leaving the woman, his pregnant wife, and six children in a precarious state—both physically and spiritually.³⁰ In 1465, she recalls the tragic end of a man called Bernardo who, fearing exile, died of melancholy due to the prospect of being far from home in poor health in older age.³¹

Although Alessandra never mentions her own chronological age, she frequently references the ages of others, using them to emphasize or frame specific traits and behaviors. In 15th-century Florence, a society profoundly influenced by mercantile and humanistic values, growing emphasis was placed on the measurement of time, which was closely tied to human endeavor and the progression of life stages (Le Goff; Taddei). In this context, there was

²⁹ For an overview of the concept of successful aging and how it relates to productive aging, see von Hülsen-Esch, “Introduction: Perspectives on Cultural Aging” 5–6. On the notion of successful aging applied to Renaissance health literature, see Gilleard.

³⁰ *Sonsi trovate la madre vecchia, e la moglie col corpo grande, e sei figliuoli, sole e senza governo d'anima, e male governo del corpo.* Letter XXXII.

³¹ *E mona Gostanza di Bernardetto mi disse, che Bernardo era morto di maninconia, sentendo a l'entrata di Nicholò Soderini così fiero; e che dubitò non eser confinato, e tutto di diceva: “Chome farò, vecchio e 'nfermo, fuori di casa mia?”.* Letter LXVII.

increasing attention given to accurately recording people's ages and birthdays (Crouzet-Pavan 39; Schmitt 75), reflecting the growing importance of chronological age as a social structuring principle. For instance, in 1464, Alessandra describes Giovan Tornabuoni as "very fat and almost 40," taking the opportunity to remind her son Filippo that he is the same age.³²

Alessandra often mentions specific ages when discussing women's marriages, whether referring to potential wives for her sons or commenting on recent weddings within her broader community. These references reveal her internalized assumptions about gender roles and the expected life trajectories of women. Her letters suggest that she views marriageability as strongly tied to age. In 15th-century Florence, girls from merchant families typically married at a very young age, with 15 to 16 being the most common age for marriage (Herlihy, "Vieillir au Quattrocento" 1346; Klapisch-Zuber, "La fécondité des Florentines" and "Le dernier enfant"). In a letter informing Filippo of his sister Caterina's marriage in 1447, Alessandra emphasizes that she could not delay the arrangement any further, as Caterina was already 16 (Letter I).³³

Alessandra became deeply involved in Filippo's marriage arrangements, placing great importance on the prospective bride's beauty and youth. It is important to note that, by this time, Filippo was roughly the same age Alessandra had been when she began expressing concerns about the effects of aging.³⁴ When discussing potential wives for her sons, Filippo and Lorenzo, she frequently mentions their ages, highlighting age alongside beauty and family background. When weighing two potential matches for Filippo—Fiammetta Adimari and Caterina Tanagli—she notes that the former was 14 and a half, while the latter was over 18.³⁵ Other Florentine mothers of the period also emphasize age when evaluating potential brides for their sons. Lucrezia Tornabuoni, for instance, notes that Clarice Orsini—who would later marry her

³² *Tornò qui Giovan Tornabuoni, e non sento dire nulla della figliola di Lorenzo. È ben grasso, ed à presso al 40, al modo tuo.* Letter XXX.

³³ For discussion on arranged marriages involving girls of the Strozzi family, see Brucker 151–168.

³⁴ Discussions about the suitable age of prospective wives started soon after the aforementioned reference to Filippo being almost forty (see above).

³⁵ *La giovane à 'nni 14 e mezzo, sechondo m'è detto; e l'altra di F(ranciesco), più di 18.* Letter LIX.

son Lorenzo—was between 15 and 16 years old, the typical range for girls to marry at the time (Tornabuoni 62; Brambilla 10–11). In Alessandra's letters, these remarks extend to other women. She writes that the daughter of Agostino Chapponi, newly married to Macigno di Giovachino, is twice widowed "but 25 years old" (*ma è d'età d'anni 25*, letter XI), implying that she is still young. In a deteriorated letter where the text is only partially legible, she mentions another woman, also twice widowed, who has taken a third husband at the unusually late age of 49 or 50 (*è d'età d'anni da 49 a 50*, letter XXVIII). Through Alessandra's observations and experiences, her letters uncover the multifaceted nature of age as a central organizing principle in society, revealing the intricate ways in which age intersects with gender, class, health, and ability.

CONCLUSIONS

Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi's letters offer a rare window onto the lived experience of aging from a woman's perspective, at the threshold between the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, illuminating the challenges, adaptations, and shifting sense of self that accompanied advancing age. Exceptionally well documented, the final two decades of her life provide an unusually intimate and sustained record, one that exceeds what is typically available in premodern sources. By reading her correspondence systematically as a testimony to the subjective experience of growing older, this paper has sought to extend scholarship beyond its established focus on Alessandra's widowhood and household management into the comparatively unexplored terrain of women's self-perceived older age. In doing so, it also demonstrates the interpretive potential of approaching premodern epistolary sources through the lens of aging, opening a line of inquiry that has thus far received little sustained attention for so early a period. The longitudinal character of the correspondence is particularly important in this respect, since it makes it possible to follow the unfolding of subjective aging across successive biographical thresholds rather than reconstructing isolated attitudes toward older age. This approach suggests that aging is most fruitfully understood not as a chronological progression but as an ongoing process of re-evaluation

prompted by changing life circumstances. At the same time, the exceptional nature of Alessandra's case cautions against treating it as representative of fifteenth-century aging. Rather, the value of this source material lies precisely in the richness and specificity with which it reveals the complexity, contingency, and individuality that must also have shaped experiences of senescence beyond the limits of the surviving evidence.

Alessandra's letters show that aging was experienced above all through the accumulation of life transitions rather than through chronological age alone. Bereavement, the departure of children, widowhood, deteriorating health, the prospect of becoming dependent, the arrival of grandchildren, and changing household responsibilities repeatedly altered how she understood herself as an older woman. These successive moments did not simply accompany aging; they gave it meaning. At different points the same woman presented herself as frail, authoritative, hopeful, resigned, productive, or near death, illustrating the unstable and relational character of subjective aging. Her recurring reflections on the nearness of death likewise formed part of this ongoing process. Rather than functioning only as rhetorical appeals to her sons, they reveal a continual reassessment of the time she believed remained to her, showing how awareness of mortality itself becomes one of the biographical thresholds through which growing older acquires meaning.

The transitions that marked Alessandra's later life did not produce a straightforward progression from one stage to another. Instead, her letters reveal an experience of aging marked by fluctuation, as periods of loss, recovery, and renewed purpose continually altering her sense of herself. Significant events, including her son's marriage and the birth of grandchildren, opened new familial roles that she embraced positively, while illness, bereavement, and increasing physical limitations brought uncertainty and vulnerability. These biographical thresholds also reflect changing generational landscapes, as later-life transitions were primarily experienced through evolving connections with children and grandchildren. Moments of recovery and optimism could even bring a sense of rejuvenation, suggesting that aging, for Alessandra, was defined

less by advancing years than by the changing circumstances and relationships that shaped her everyday life.

At the same time, the correspondence reveals the coexistence of multiple understandings of age. Alessandra interpreted her own aging primarily through bodily decline and emotional vulnerability, while invoking chronological age to evaluate the behavior, authority, marriageability, and responsibilities of others. Her letters therefore expose the interaction between embodied experience and culturally prescribed life-course expectations, showing how gender, kinship, productivity, and care shaped the meanings attached to growing older. The fact that Alessandra's letters are addressed to her sons influences both the topics she discusses and how she presents herself as an elder and a matriarch. In contrast, other Florentine women with extensive surviving correspondence mention age far less frequently, particularly their own.³⁶ Her position within the household grants Alessandra significant authority while also highlighting her vulnerability and dependence.

A further contribution of this study concerns the social value attached to later life. Although Alessandra frequently portrays herself as physically frail and increasingly dependent, she simultaneously strives to remain useful: managing household affairs, advising her sons, arranging marriages, overseeing family business, and caring for her grandchildren. As an older widow, she occupies a position of authority more commonly associated with older men, negotiating a continual tension between vulnerability and agency. Her letters reveal a functional understanding of aging in which continued usefulness confer social legitimacy, while dependency risks being perceived as burdensome, as illustrated by her descriptions of Piero and Cilia. Although rooted in the social realities of fifteenth-century Florence, this ideal invites comparison with modern debates surrounding productive and successful aging. Rather than suggesting direct continuity, Alessandra's correspondence highlights the longer historical roots of the expectation that older adults should remain active, productive, and socially valuable despite increasing frailty.

³⁶ See, for example, the letters of Margherita Datini (1360–1423) to her husband Francesco (translated in James and Pagliaro), as well as the case studies discussed in Klapisch-Zuber *Florence à l'écritoire*. See also King and Rabil; Kaborycha.

More broadly, this article argues for the value of longitudinal personal correspondence as a source for the history of subjective aging. Although Alessandra's experience cannot be taken as representative of all older women in fifteenth-century Florence, the richness and duration of her correspondence demonstrate how premodern life writing can recover dimensions of aging that remain largely inaccessible through normative, prescriptive, or administrative sources. Read through the lens of biographical thresholds, such sources reveal growing older not as a fixed stage of life but as an ongoing process of reassessing changing bodies, relationships, responsibilities, and expectations. In doing so, they open new possibilities for bringing premodern history into conversation with contemporary age studies.

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