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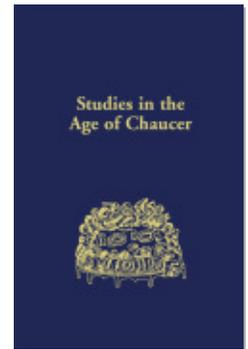
Old Age in Late Medieval England by Joel T. Rosenthal
(review)

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ROSENTHAL, JOEL T. *Old Age in Late Medieval England*. Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. Pp. xv, 260. \$39.95.

Late medieval poets often portray old men as foolish, incompetent, besotted in love, or impotent—witness January of *The Merchant's Tale*, the pilgrim Miller and Reeve, “John Gower” of *Confessio Amantis*, or Langland’s narrator, ravaged by Elde (B passus 20; C passus 22). Medieval iconographic depictions of old age (*senectus*) display a feeble, poverty-stricken, bent figure supported by a crutch. These literary and artistic views do not necessarily reflect everyday attitudes toward senior citizens in late medieval England, as Joel T. Rosenthal demonstrates in his fine recent study of *Old Age in Late Medieval England*. It would be more factual to proclaim, with Chaucer’s Knight, “Elde hath greet avantage,” or again, “In elde is both wysdom and usage.” The evidence suggests that Englishmen of the later Middle Ages respected old people, hoar upon their heads, and that more people than might be thought enjoyed productive careers into what today we conceive of as old age. This does not mean, however, that late medieval English society qualifies as a “gerontocracy,” as Rosenthal hastens to point out.

Rosenthal, a social historian who has written often and well about medieval gender and family issues, evaluates aging from cultural and historical perspectives. He examines “Some Data and Data Sets,” including Inquisitions Post Mortem, Proofs of Age, and the Scrope and Grosvenor Depositions (part 1); various material drawn from “Three-Generation Families,” including Last Wills and Testaments (part 2); and “Full Lives and Careers,” case studies including Genealogies, Bishops’ Records (drawn from Emden), and literary documents that disclose perceptions and *mentalités* toward old age (part 3). Of special interest to Chaucerians are “The Scrope and Grosvenor Depositions” (chapter 3) and “Men and Women of Letters” (chapter 10), both of which contain reflections on Chaucer’s life and career.

Rosenthal treats his prosopographical data with considerable caution. He is keenly aware that his sources may not be fully trustworthy from a modern statistical viewpoint, since they were assembled in codified, formulaic ways. Those giving testimony frequently relied on folk memory or invoked parables, hearsay, or round numbers (“forty years and somewhat more”). Nonetheless, the Inquisitions Post Mortem and Proofs of Age are, says Rosenthal, “a mine of information far beyond any

other body of extant material”—“if,” he adds, “used with care” (p. 15). He can and does read this material as “social discourse” (p. 42). Rosenthal has recourse to Durkheim’s concept of “social facts” and the more recent notion of “social memory” (p. 13) to approach his data sets as repositories of information concerning old age.

Rosenthal argues backward from the heir’s attested age to locate the probable age (within a range) of the predecessor. For example: “A son of 40 years and more must have meant a father in his early to mid-60s, and if the data are accurate the chances are that the father might have been in his late 60s or beyond” (p. 31). In his case study of the English bishops from 1399 to 1485, he compiles a fascinating table (9-4) that shows the date of first benefice (when known), date of nomination to the episcopacy, and year of death. The final column shows the length of total service in the church (“Pre- + as bishop”). Some men spent most of their career in lesser benefices while others were quickly nominated to the bishopric. Simon Sydenham’s pre-episcopal career lasted 40 years; he was bishop for 7 years. Thomas Bourghier (born 1410), by contrast, was bishop for 53 years but his pre-episcopal service lasted only 7 years. Of the ninety bishops in table 9-4, one (William Waynflete) served for 70 years, four for 60 or more, six for 50 or more, twenty-three for 40 or more, fourteen for 30 or more, and seventeen for 20 or more. Rosenthal remarks that longevity itself was an important factor in an episcopal career: “No matter how talented and well-connected one might be at the beginning of a career, if one did not survive a certain number of years one did not live to become a bishop” (p. 135).

For the Scrope-Grosvenor Hearings—the famous trial in the Court of Chivalry in which Chaucer gave testimony on behalf of Sir Richard Scrope, the eventual winner in this case—fully 29 percent of Scrope’s deponents were age sixty or more, whereas only 7 percent of Sir Robert Grosvenor’s deponents were that old. Nearly 80 percent of Scrope’s deponents testified that they were aged forty or more—“a distinctly gray-bearded group,” comments Rosenthal (p. 47)—whereas 54 percent of Grosvenor’s witnesses were that age. Chaucer in his testimony claimed that he was “xl ans et plus armez par xxvii ans.” From this statement Chaucerians have determined that Chaucer was born about 1340 and that he lived to “fifty years and more,” an age attained by about one in six landholding men in late medieval England. In the Scrope-Grosvenor trial, age, stability, and nobility mattered, since the issue was which family had the right to bear the device “azure a bend or.” “In this unique proceeding,”

says Rosenthal, “much more than in the run of Proof of Age determinations, age was likely to be equated with gravity and credibility” (p. 46).

Rosenthal considers retirements in late medieval England. For most people in this time retirement was not an option; but for those who enjoyed significant careers, especially in the church, retirement was sometimes possible. The issues Rosenthal tackles are: when did people choose to retire and under what circumstances? He concludes that there were no pressures to continue working and no concept of “golden years”: “We have moralizing about the final stages of the life line, but no one spoke about the potential pleasures and opportunities of golden years, now upon them, except for homilies about spiritual freedom from sensuality” (p. 113). Nor did senior men step aside to make room for younger generations: “If he was to stay in line, and if he chose to stay in line, tough luck for those behind him” (p. 114). Kings did not retire from the throne; prelates did not as a rule abdicate. There were distinct advantages to remaining on the job as long as possible. Age had its privileges.

Chaucerians will discover few surprises in Rosenthal’s chapter on “Men and Women of Letters.” He provides well-known autobiographical material from the writings of Chaucer, Gower, Hoccleve, Lydgate, Trevisa, and others—material about which he is properly skeptical. Yet these familiar statements have a somewhat new look in context of the demographic data presented in Rosenthal’s previous chapters. He concludes that patrons were not interested in supporting “boy geniuses” but rather “stable and trustworthy figures who could be relied on to trumpet their own political virtues and values” (p. 166).

As Rosenthal observes in his preface, old age has become a “hot topic” in medieval and modern studies. Within the last dozen years (and within three years of each other), three studies of the ages of man—by Elizabeth Sears, Mary Dove, and J. A. Burrow—appeared. In 1992 Alfred David gave a memorable Presidential Address on “*Old, New, and Yong in Chaucer*” at the New Chaucer Society Conference (published in volume 15 of *SAC*). More recently, Shulamith Shahar contributed *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* (1995; English translation 1997). Rosenthal’s study is not the last word on this important topic; but with his creative scrutiny of published material, Rosenthal shows how it might be done.

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