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The Science of Aging: Metaphors, Medicine and the Quest for Vitality in Early Modern England

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This paper examines the linguistic and rhetorical strategies in early modern English medical texts to conceptualise old age, vitality, and life prolongation. Focusing on 16th- to 18th-century works, including reprints of Bacon's *The Cure of Old Age*, Quersitanus's *Practise of Chymicall Physicke*, Sennert's *Nine Books of Physick*, and Salmon's *Ars Chirurgica*, it explores how aging was metaphorically framed and scientifically rationalised. Central to these texts is the humoral concept of "radical moisture" or the "balsam of life," equating vitality with the gradual depletion of a finite, life-sustaining essence.

Old age is constructed as a phase of depletion and imbalance, contrasted with youthful vigour. Metaphors like the "lamp of life" or "water of life" depict aging's progression, while remedies—dietary regimens, alchemical preparations like potable gold—are presented as restorative or preservative through persuasive rhetoric, reflecting the interplay of science and moralising language.

By situating aging within socio-political and theological discourses, the paper highlights enduring metaphors and shifting paradigms in the cultural understanding of old age. It contributes to the medical humanities, history of science, and sociolinguistics by revealing how early modern English texts framed aging as both a physiological process and a cultural construct.

Short Biography

Elisa Ramazzina is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Insubria, where she is working on a project titled "Exploring Old Age in 18th-Century English Medical Texts". Previously, she was a Lecturer in the Earliest English Writings at Queen's University Belfast and spent two years as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow at the same university, working on a project titled "Water and Baptism in Old English Poetry". She also contributed as a research assistant at the University of Oxford on the ERC-funded project "CLASP: A Consolidated Library of Anglo-Saxon Poetry".

Her research interests are diverse and interdisciplinary, encompassing the Germanic philological tradition, including Old and Middle English literature, Old and Middle High German, and Anglo-Latin literature. She is particularly interested in medieval science, medicine, cosmology, and cartography, as well as monster studies and border studies. In her previous research, she explored scientific imagery in John Donne's "Songs and Sonets", combining literary analysis with insights into early modern science.

Elisa is one of the three co-editors of the four-volume series "The Elements in the Medieval World: Interdisciplinary Perspectives", published by Brill, which explores the cultural, scientific, and literary significance of the four elements in medieval thought. She is also currently authoring her first monograph on the Old English versions of the "Wonders of the East".

Her scholarly work reflects a commitment to exploring the intersections between literature, science, and cultural history, spanning from the early medieval period to the early modern era.

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