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Summary

Old Age in Black and White

The Representation of Old Age in Prints from the Netherlands (1550-1650)

‘In the past everything used to be better. Then there was at least respect for the elderly.’ This book illustrates that this adage does not apply to the representation of old age. Since Antiquity, the depiction of old age in texts and images has namely been polarized. In literary and pictorial traditions, the elderly are initially portrayed with esteem, respect, and as being wise. But at the same time this imagery is complemented with descriptions and representations in which old age is ridiculed and scorned, and is associated with physical and mental decay, avarice and in search of compensation for sexual decline. In this book this discrepancy and parallel representation of old age is examined in Netherlandish prints produced between circa 1550 and 1650. The aim of this study is to map out the iconographical framework and explain the co-existence of positive and negative representations of old age within several types of prints, by examining them in the greater realm of the history of the old age.

The imagery in the investigated prints can roughly be distinguished in positive themes dominated by a strong mental state and the negative that is overshadowed by the mundane and physical state. On the one hand, piety and modesty (Chapter 3) and wisdom and experience (Chapter 4) triumph, and on the other hand, avarice and greed (Chapter 5) and unequal love (Chapter 6) prevail. These themes go back to the traditional rhetorical odes of Cicero, and the laments of Aristotle, Juvenal, and Maximian on the

subject of old age which are discussed in Chapter 1.

The representations of piety and modesty correlate with the ideal image of old age being a phase of life that has freed itself from the urges of mundane and physical needs. The lack of desire for pleasure and feelings of lust is regarded as a pleasure itself. These worldly and physical desires are replaced by spiritual ripeness, moderation, and the focus on God and the afterlife. Representations of elderly praying women with a rosary, a Bible or prayer book manifest this ideal imagery, just as elderly couples in prayer, and old men with a rosary or elderly men performing charitable deeds. The idealized image of moderation and modesty is also used as a pendant in which old age is illustrated in shrill contrast to the cliché of young people who were often portrayed as affluent and spoiled.

In depictions that project wisdom and experience, old men and women are often portrayed as those who give advice or admonish inexperienced youths who have yet to learn moderation. Older men with honourable occupations or elderly scholars are also included in this theme. According to the praises about old age, it appeared that the physical decay of the body was a condition for spiritual growth. The spirit can only become enlightened when the physical vessel starts to deteriorate. For scholars, studiousness can be achieved with the advancement of age in combination with a melancholic temperament. The wisdom of the elderly who give

counsel is based on their abundance of life experiences. In short, old people have the cardinal virtue of *Prudentia* (Prudence), which includes wisdom, prudence, and far-sightedness.

On the other side of the spectrum, dominate images of stinginess and greedy old men and women who are only interested in earthly matters. These representations are characteristic of how old age and the cardinal sin of *Avaritia* (greed) are integrally connected. This association can be observed and explained in several coherent manners. First of all, the image of the old scrooge illustrates how physiognomy and moral appreciation (ugly appearance = bad inner self) are related. In addition, avarice was regarded as the result of the (ambivalent) melancholic temperament, and therefore characteristic of the elderly. Furthermore, the representations of avaricious old people reflect the fear of poverty during old age.

Desire, lechery and impurity are not only shameful, but also detrimental for the elderly. This morality, which is mostly addressed in emblems, is the basic principle of the commonly mocked and comical character of depictions in which the sexual desires old men and old women were represented. The most common example is the portrayal of unequal love – in which there is great age difference between the two lovers. There are numerous variations that can be distinguished such as the ‘classical’ old person who has money and tries to persuade the younger. The variant without money is used to illustrate the outrage of the *senex amans* (elderly lover) in general.

When this division in the image of old age is presented in a moral fashion and coherent with the early modern notion of good and evil originating from original sin – it can be explained through the principle of the world turned upside down. Positive representations are idealized images or *exempla*. Negative representations on the contrary are *exempla contraria*. Both represent the same morality, but in

contrasting manners. In a moralising context, old age and mortality portrayed in characters can project spiritual tranquility and growth while at the same time symbolize moral decline. The representations that illustrate desire and love in a negative and mocking way seem to be the most popular. However, this does not originate from a potential contempt for the elderly, but rather coincides with the public’s appeal to the imagery of the world turned upside down, and particularly to desire and deceit.

At the same time, the ambiguous image of old age is deeply embedded within the tradition of the ages of life, in which there are two successive phases of old age that reflect the positive and negative image of old age (Chapter 1, Paragraph 3 and Chapter 2). One striking aspect is that this negative imagery not only condemns the behaviour of the old, but also admonishes the younger generation that shows little respect. Moreover, this imagery also focuses on the physical and mental deterioration of the elderly, as well as addressing the struggles with one’s conscience in old age. These portrayals are not always easily distinguished in the moralizing categories of *exempla* and *contra exempla*. Only when the elderly start compensating their decay or denying their age – even though they might literally have one foot in the grave – they show reprehensible behaviour, which contradicts the principle of *tempus vivit*, implying that every phase in life has its own season – or each age has its own qualities.

Especially when old people act like young people, such as in the portrayals of *senex amans* (elderly lover), they are condemned, their behaviour is seen as incredible, and moreover their actions are deemed as ridiculously, and they become the brunt of humour. Depictions of avarice and greed, however, are another story. Corrupting behaviour is initially regarded as a serious matter, and less as the object of ridicule. Often the manner in which the destructive

behaviour is presented, is usually related to the type of print. In general, emblems are more serious and moralistic than random prints, and are less likely to be crude and caricature-like. The positive depictions of piety and wisdom are usually more austere, despite the nature of the type of prints. In this case, the theme dominates more, and the type of print is of lesser relevance.

There are a few general characteristics that can be distinguished within all the themes that are addressed. First of all, the depiction of the elderly can symbolize mortality, just as *Vanitas* motifs. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that old people are frequently connected with youths. The consequence of contrasting old and young is to accentuate both the physical characteristics of old age and of youth, and thus reinforce the *Vanitas*-effect. By contrasting, both phases of life become substantively defined, and which is often the case, one of the two is perceived as positive while the other as negative. The characteristics attributed to youth are just as stereotyped as those to old age.

Besides the affiliation between old and young, there is also the overwhelming tie between old and cold. There is a parallel between old age, winter, and the cold, melancholic or phlegmatic temperament. This is often portrayed in a fusion of the iconography of winter (warm clothing, fire, bare tree), melancholy (head resting on hand, table with money or books) with the iconography of old age. The polarized traits of winter and melancholy overlap with those of old age. Winter is, on the one hand, the season that is characterized by decline and depression, and on the other hand a period of rest in which the harvested past can be enjoyed. Melancholy can enhance scholarly behaviour, but it can also instigate avarice.

There is a clear distinction between old men and old women within the depictions. Both show positive and negative aspects, however, the difference lies in the manner in which they are portrayed. This

coincides with the different roles that men and women fulfil in the public and private realm of life and the contrasting expectations that are attributed to them. The polarized relationship between the pious old woman and the voluptuous old woman can co-exist with the ambiguous and stereotyped image of women in general, and the elderly widow in particular. On the contrary, the conventional equivalent of the good and bad widower does not exist.

In the past, everything was not better - nor was it worse. However, the most distinctive feature in the depiction of the elderly is its ambiguity. Images of stereotyped 'good' and 'bad' elderly were produced simultaneously and can be regarded in the greater realm of rhetorical praise and condemnation, *exempla* and *exempla contraria*, and successive phases of old age. Hopefully this investigation has opened a door for a new interpretation of the representation of old age in other periods and through other means as well. Moreover, the interpretation method used in this study can be used as a starting point for the study of the depiction of other subjects that have ambiguous traits. This book successfully demonstrates how fruitful it can be to investigate the association between positive and negative depictions, instead of addressing them separately and only emphasizing the contradictions.

Translation Benjamin Roberts