

RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY
AGE AND AUTHORITY IN
EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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I

OF all divisions in human society, those based on age appear the most natural and the least subject to historical change. The cycle of infancy, youth, maturity, and decline, seems an inexorable process and so does the tendency for power to rest with those more advanced in years, if only because in life's race they have an earlier start. Yet there is nothing constant about the social meaning of age. In modern Western societies, riven by vast differences of wealth and class, age is a less decisive determinant of a man's fortunes than at simpler stages of economic life. Among the hunting peoples of North America, thought Adam Smith, age was 'the sole foundation of rank and precedence'; whereas in 'opulent and civilized nations' its role was merely residual, regulating rank 'among those who are in every other respect equal and among whom, therefore, there is nothing else to regulate it'.¹

In England between the sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries differences of age were more important than Smith's words suggest. They did not cancel out those of class and sex, but they still did a great deal to determine how people were treated, how they were expected to behave, and what degree of authority they enjoyed. In one respect indeed age grew more important, for it was during this period that awareness of their numerical age came to form part of most men's basic self-consciousness. In Tudor times such awareness was far from universal. Nothing is more eloquent of the gulf separating the educated élite from their social inferiors than the accepted legal

¹ *Wealth of Nations*, v.i.2. The role of age in simple societies is surveyed in P. H. Gulliver, 'Age Differentiation', *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills (New York, 1968), and S. N. Eisenstadt, *From Generation to Generation. Age Groups and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill., 1956). For the lack of correlation between age and wealth in modern Britain see, e.g., A. B. Atkinson, *The Economics of Inequality* (Oxford, 1975), p. 141.

dictum that an idiot was someone who could not count up to twenty or tell his own age.¹ For, as any set of legal depositions will show, there were many who could not tell their age; while, as for counting up to twenty, this was a test which the Cornish could pass, but only just, for when they got up to thirty they ran out and had to start all over again.² When we read in the Ealing 'census' of 1599 that Annis Lawrence has two children aged four and one, plus a nurse child of nine months, yet is herself aged sixty-seven, we can see that the language of figures was not one which everyone had yet learned to speak.³

Indeed the very meaning of numerical age was still ambiguous. Did a man become forty when he entered his fortieth year or when he completed it? Here even the learned were confused. In 1601 two Inner Temple barristers made a bet as to whether an infant attained his majority at the beginning of his twenty-first year or at the end; the resulting quarrel ended in Star Chamber.⁴ The simultaneous use of numerical age in both cardinal and ordinal senses caused endless misunderstanding; and the situation was not helped by such niceties as the Anglican Church's rule that deacons had to be at least twenty-three, whereas priests needed to be twenty-four 'complete'.⁵

¹ Anthony Fitzherbert, *The New Natura Brevium* (1677), p. 519.

² Andrew Boorde, *The fyrst Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (Early Eng. Text Soc., 1870), pp. 123-4 (kindly shown me by Mr. John Bowle). Typical discrepancies in reported ages can be seen in the depositions summarized in M. B. Donald, *Elizabethan Monopolies* (1961), appendix i.

³ P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], E 163/24/35; printed in K. J. Allison, 'An Elizabethan Village "Census"', *Bull. Inst. Hist. Research*, xxxvi (1963), p. 102.

⁴ John Hawarde, *Les Reportes del Cases in Camera Stellata, 1593 to 1609* (1894), p. 130. For the tendency to regard 'xx years' as 'full age' see, e.g., *North Country Wills*, ed. J. W. Clay (Surtees Soc., 1908-12), i, p. 147; ii, p. 10.

⁵ Canon 34 of 1604 and previous enactments (below, p. 207 n. 1). In the 1640s the Presbyterian Church also required ministers to be twenty-four, but 'a day above twenty-three was then called twenty-four current, and allowed sufficient for matter of age, if other things concurred'; *The Life of Adam Martindale*, ed. R. Parkinson (Chetham Soc., 1845), p. 57. Cf. *The Register-Booke of the Fourth Classis in the Province of London, 1646-59*, ed. C. E. Surman (Harleian Soc., 1953), p. 22. By the eighteenth century it had become perverse to interpret the Anglican rule about deacons in the sense originally intended; see Bishop Chandler's defensive letter to Archbishop Wake in 1720, printed in Norman Sykes, *Church and State in England in the XVIIIth Century* (Cambridge, 1934), pp. 113-14. But not until 1851 was age for census purposes defined as 'age at last birthday'; D. V. Glass, *Numbering the People* (Farnborough, 1973), p. 94.

Yet during the Tudor and Stuart period a growing proportion of the English population came to know exactly how old they were. In the eighteenth century a man who gave his age was much less likely to fall back on a round number or an even digit than he would have been two hundred years earlier.¹ For this great mental change, literacy and the invention of parish registers must take some credit; though the factory act of 1833, which prescribed medieval-style proofs of age by physical appearance,² reminds us that the achievement of parish registers can be exaggerated. The real pressure on men to know their ages came from the lawyers, who constantly worked to replace practical tests of age by numerical ones,³ and the bureaucrats and legislators, who specified precise numerical ages for an increasing number of civil rights and duties, often requiring the production of baptismal certificates or written proofs of age. Numerical age, in other words, gained steadily in social relevance.

Yet the new rules about numerical age were merely an attempt to give more precise expression to society's fundamental assumptions about the meaning of age and the rights and obligations of the different age-groups. These fundamental assumptions, and the slow changes they underwent, are the subject of this lecture.

II

In early modern England the prevailing ideal was gerontocratic: the young were to serve and the old were to rule. Justification for so obvious a truth was found in the law of nature, the fifth commandment, and the proverbial wisdom of ages. Learned and unlearned alike followed Aristotle in envisaging human development as a slow growth of rationality, from the near-animal state of childhood, through the passions and follies of youth, to the wisdom and discretion of age. Children had powers of memory and imagination; young men were capable of vigour, eloquence, and invention; but only the mature had judgement, practical wisdom, and self-mastery. This was partly because wisdom came from long experience, partly because in humoral physiology the onset of age was portrayed as a progressive

¹ I hope ultimately to publish the analysis of reported ages on which this assertion is based.

² 3 & 4 Gul. IV, c. 103, s. 12.

³ See, e.g., Thomas Robinson, *The Common Law of Kent: or, the Customs of Gavelkind* (2nd edn., 1788), pp. 223-4.

drying-up of the body, whereby strength declined, but the 'animal spirits' became 'more fixed and the mind more sedate and quiet in its motions'.¹ It followed that the young should be diffident and deferential, while their elders exercised authority. 'Be the place ecclesiastical or civil', declared Bishop Babington, 'an aged man ripe in judgement and experience' was better fitted for it 'than a younger destitute of such mature wisdom and knowledge'.² Prevailing prejudices were well epitomized in Sir William Wentworth's advice to his son: he should choose a steward 'of some ripe years, at least above forty'; his schoolmaster should also be over forty ('I do utterly dislike of a young schoolmaster'); the man in his chamber should be 'about or above fifty'; most of his other servants should be 'of the more aged sort' and so should his friends and advisers.³

The preference for age and seniority was shared by all those corporate institutions which set a value on hierarchy, stability, and continuity. The universities had their long cursus of academic degrees: at Laudian Oxford seven years to M.A., fourteen to B.D., eighteen to D.D.; a system well designed to prevent young men from getting too far too quickly.⁴ In the Tudor period their government was shifting from the young regent masters to the graver heads of houses, who were usually required by statute to be at least thirty and were in practice often much more. In the Inns of Court precedence depended upon 'ancientry' in the House. The student moved slowly up a hierarchy denoted by distinctive dress, seating, and privilege: seven or eight years before he was called to the Bar; three or more before he could practise publicly; at least twelve years as a barrister before he could hope to be a bencher. When in 1668 Francis North was through royal influence made a K.C. at the age of thirty-one the Benchers of the Middle Temple refused to admit him to their number, 'alleging that if young men, by favour so preferred, came up straight to the bench and by their precedence topped the rest of the ancient benchers, it might in time

¹ J. A. Comenius, *A Reformation of Schooles* (1642), p. 80. Cf. Aris., *Rhet.* 1389^{a-b}; *Eth. Nic.* 1128^b, 1142^a, 1154^b, 1156^{a-b}, 1179^b.

² *The Workes of . . . Gervase Babington* (1615), ii, p. 14.

³ *Wentworth Papers, 1597-1628*, ed. J. P. Cooper (Camden ser., 1973), pp. 14, 16-17, 20, 21.

⁴ Although Adam Smith characteristically believed that it was intended to ensure that 'the student may spend more money among them, and that they may make more profit by him'; letter of 20 Sept. 1774, cited in *Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner, and W. B. Todd (Oxford, 1976), i, p. 137 n.

destroy the government of the society'.¹ Similar principles of seniority operated in a variety of comparable institutions, from the printers' 'chapel', in which the eldest workman was the 'father', to the Hull almshouse, where the last to be admitted swept the street.²

Within the local community status was also affected by age. Many villages were informally ruled by the 'ancientry of the parish', as at Clitheroe, where the schoolmaster was chosen by 'the most ancient and grave' of the school governors.³ (Some Puritans later proposed that the pastor be elected by the 'chief fathers, ancients, and governors of the parish'; and the sects continued to respect differences of age when other distinctions had been set aside.⁴) At church the generations were segregated, with young persons consigned to the back or the aisles; at Burnham, Essex, in 1617 a girl was presented to the church court for sitting in the same pew as her mother, 'to the great offence of many reverent women'. Some suggested that young men should stand up when old persons came in.⁵ Outside the church the age-groups gathered separately after the services; in rural games and calendar customs age-differences were fundamental. Richard Carew observed how at the Cornish village feasts 'not wealth but age is most regarded': however rich he was, a younger man would be ashamed to take precedence over his elders.⁶

In the towns the pressures of rank and wealth were harder to resist. Yet, even within the narrowest oligarchy, age and seniority continued to count. Characteristically, urban authority came with advancing years. In London the senior alderman being an ex-sheriff tended automatically to become the next

¹ Roger North, *The Lives of the Norths*, ed. A. Jessopp (1890), i, p. 50. Cf. William Dugdale, *Origines Juridiciales* (1666), pp. 144, 192, 318; E. W. Ives, 'Promotion in the Legal Profession of Yorkist and Early Tudor England', *Law Q. Rev.* lxxv (1959); Wilfrid R. Prest, *The Inns of Court under Elizabeth I and the Early Stuarts* (1972), pp. 50, 54-5, 61.

² Randle Holme, *The Academy of Armory* (Chester, 1688), iii, p. 126; John Tickell, *The History of the Town and County of Kingston upon Hull* (Hull, 1796), p. 765 n.

³ C. W. Stokes, *Queen Mary's Grammar School, Clitheroe*, i (Chetham Soc., 1934), p. 49. For the 'ancientry' see *Oxford Eng. Dicty.*

⁴ Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964), p. 474; John Nickolls, *Original Letters and Papers of State addressed to Oliver Cromwell* (1743), p. 99.

⁵ Alfred Heales, *The History and Law of Church Seats* (1872), i, pp. 132-5; Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel-Reconciliation* (1657), p. 424.

⁶ *The Survey of Cornwall*, ed. F. E. Halliday (1953), p. 144. Cf. Charles Phythian-Adams, *Local History and Folklore* (1975), pp. 27-8.

Lord Mayor. Most other cities had their similar *cursus honorum* and their civic processions in which, as at Exeter, mayors and ex-mayors proceeded in order of 'auntientie' of office.¹ The accepted model of society thus conformed to the Elizabethan critic's definition of a comedy: an action in which 'grave old men should instruct [and] young men should show the imperfections of youth'.² Didactic tracts often took the form of a dialogue in which docile Youth was taught by wise Old Age. At the annual perambulation the village elders showed the young the parish boundaries, bumping or whipping them at strategic spots so that they would remember them more vividly. In the same spirit the Presbyterian classis at Northampton in 1571 envisaged that 'the youth' should be examined after evening prayer 'before all the elder people . . . in a portion of Calvin's *Catechism*'.³ Knowledge was supposed to flow down from old to young, with cultural and ideological predominance remaining firmly in the hands of the elderly. Youth was notoriously unfit to teach youth.⁴

This explicit preference for age was reflected in the popular belief that men's souls grew with their bodies,⁵ and in the widespread conception of God as an old man, the ancient of days. It involved a relative devaluation of childhood and a common (though by no means universal) preference for precocious infants who rapidly assumed the externals of adult behaviour, revealing themselves to be pious or learned before their time. It equated a dignified style with an elderly one: in 1765 the aspiring young cleric was seriously advised not to wear his own hair 'till age has made it venerable'.⁶ By analogy it justified the whole social order; for the lower classes at home, like the savages abroad, were often seen as 'childish' creatures, living in a state of arrested development, needing the mature rule of their superiors.⁷

¹ Alfred B. Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London* (1908-13), ii, pp. xxv-xxvi; Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *Exeter, 1540-1640* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), pp. 36, 41.

² George Whetstone (1578), in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith (Oxford, 1904), i, p. 60.

³ Elliot Rose, *Cases of Conscience* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 153.

⁴ See, e.g., Thomas Morrice, *An Apology for Schoole-masters* (1619), sig. B6; *V.C.H. Sussex*, ii, p. 428; Marchioness of Newcastle, *Orations of Divers Sorts* (1662), p. 213, and *CCXI. Sociable Letters* (1664), p. 47.

⁵ Thomas Fuller, *The Infants Advocate* (1653), pp. 142-3; Newcastle, *Orations of Divers Sorts*, p. 196.

⁶ *A Letter of Free Advice to a Young Clergyman* (Ipswich, 1765), p. 15.

⁷ See, e.g., Reginald Pole, quoted by Rex H. Pogson in *Hist. Journ.* xviii (1975), p. 7; William Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix* (1633), fol. 540.

How far did this gerontocratic ideal correspond with reality? Far more work would be necessary to construct an accurate age-profile of the ruling groups in the early modern period. But its outlines are clear enough.¹ Essentially, it was men in their forties and fifties who ruled. Between 1542 and 1642 the median age of Privy Councillors was never less than fifty-one, never more than sixty-one. Secretaries of State in the seventeenth century were usually appointed in their late forties. Between 1500 and 1800 the median age of Lord Chancellors and Lord Keepers on appointment was fifty. So was that of Tudor and Stuart Treasurers. Speakers of the House of Commons were fifty (median age) on appointment in the seventeenth century, forty-two in the eighteenth. In the Church the legal minimum age for a bishop was thirty, but only in the relatively unsought-after diocese of Sodor and Man was the median age of appointment between 1500 and 1800 less than forty-five. At the Inns of Court between 1590 and 1639 the median age of new benchers ranged from forty-three to forty-seven.² Throughout the three centuries most judges were in their fifties when appointed, the Chief Justices of King's Bench usually in their early sixties. It was very unusual for a man under forty-five to attain high judicial office. In Norwich in the seventeenth century the sheriffs and aldermen averaged respectively forty-six and forty-eight on election.³ In late seventeenth-century London new aldermen averaged forty-nine, common councilmen forty-five.⁴

It would be easy to multiply and refine such figures. But it

¹ For the ensuing calculations I am much indebted to Edmund Thomas. They are largely derived from *Handbook of British Chronology*, ed. Sir F. Maurice Powicke and E. B. Fryde (2nd edn., Roy. Hist. Soc., 1961); *A[cts] [of the] P[ri]vy C[ouncil]*; G.E.C., *The Complete Peerage*, 2nd edn., ed. Vicary Gibbs et al. (1910-40); *D[ictionary of] N[ational] B[iography]*; Philip Laundy, *The Office of Speaker* (1964); and Edward Foss, *The Judges of England* (1848-64). Use was also made of M. B. Pulman, *The Elizabethan Privy Council in the Fifteen-Seventies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), pp. 44-5. Figures are confined to dignitaries whose dates of birth are known, and are therefore sketchier for the sixteenth century.

² Prest, *Inns of Court*, p. 112 n. 57.

³ J. T. Evans, 'The Decline of Oligarchy in Seventeenth-century Norwich', *Journ. Brit. Studs.* xiv (1974), p. 57 n. 33.

⁴ Calculations based on J. R. Woodhead, *The Rulers of London, 1660-1689* (Lond. and Mddx. Archaeol. Soc., 1965). For a similar situation in Tudor cities see Charles Phythian-Adams in *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700*, ed. Peter Clark and Paul Slack (1972), pp. 59-60; D. M. Palliser, 'Some Aspects of the Social and Economic History of York in the Sixteenth Century' (Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1968), pp. 193-6.

is unlikely that this would alter the general impression. Important offices were normally assumed by the solidly middle-aged: 'grave and sad men who are above the levities of youth, and beneath the dotages of old age'.¹ The same, no doubt, is true today.² But the great difference is that in the seventeenth century roughly half the population was under twenty, so that the ruling élite was selected from a proportionately much smaller segment. On Gregory King's calculation, men in their forties and fifties were a mere 7 per cent.³ Society drew its rulers and its creative impulses from the upper half of a rapidly narrowing pyramid.

Only at times of radical upheaval did younger men move in. The Civil War, in particular, shook things up: as Dr. Hill has observed, Fairfax was commander of the New Model at thirty-three, Ludlow military ruler of Ireland at about the same age, and Lambert the second most powerful man in England at thirty-five. The Interregnum saw younger judges and younger mayors.⁴ Contemporaries did not find it easy to adapt to this situation: Henry Cromwell, who became major-general of the Irish army at twenty-six and Lord Deputy at twenty-nine, reported how his Chancellor, William Steele,

read lectures to me of affairs and maxims of state, taught me to carry myself at the Council, gave me rules how things should be managed at the Board . . . and, lest I should forget my lesson, gave me three or four sheets in writing of those rules he thought of most importance . . . I listened to him with a good deal of attention, supposing that, if I got nothing else, I should get his measure.⁵

The Restoration saw a marked reaction, in deference to long-delayed expectations. At seventy-one Sir Robert Foster was the oldest man in three centuries to be appointed Lord Chief

¹ Edward Waterhous, *Fortescutus Illustratus* (1663), p. 361. In 1597 Robert Sidney, then aged thirty-four, was told that Elizabeth I thought him 'too young for any place about her'; *Letters and Memorials of State*, ed. Arthur Collins (1746), ii, p. 31.

² John A. Armstrong found no significant increase in the average age of high administrators in Europe between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries; *The European Administrative Elite* (Princeton, 1973), p. 241.

³ D. V. Glass in *Population in History*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (1965), pp. 207, 212.

⁴ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), p. 296; David Underdown, *Pride's Purge* (Oxford, 1971), p. 320; Foss, *Judges*, vi.

⁵ *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe*, ed. T. Birch (1742), vii, p. 199.

Justice, while the new archbishops, Frewen and Juxon, were respectively seventy-two and nearly seventy-eight.

The normal predominance of the middle-aged was offset by two mitigating circumstances. The first was a low expectation of life. This meant that those who inherited their wealth and power might sometimes do so very early in life. In this way a landed gentleman could become a Justice of the Peace or gain influence at court when still in his twenties. Such early advancement of the well-born young was eased by legal rulings that an infant could exercise many offices and forms of patronage, either directly or through a deputy.¹

The other mitigating circumstance was the power of patronage to bend the normal rules of seniority. The upper classes went through life on a fast stream. At Oxford in the 1590s the well-born students were on average two years younger than their social inferiors.² John Fell became a student of Christ Church at the age of eleven; his father was the Dean. In politics the better-born appeared earlier on the public scene. Infants were not supposed to be Members of Parliament, but almost every election produced a little batch of well-connected M.P.s aged under twenty-one. They sat by connivance, normally as silent observers, but sometimes speaking and voting on crucial issues; in 1667 George Monck's son, Christopher, opened a Commons debate at the age of fourteen.³

In the Stuart period, through patronage and influence, teenagers were knighted, made baronets, and given commissions in the army and navy. In the later seventeenth century royal influence created some exceptionally young judges: Jeffreys, Herbert, and North all became Lord Chief Justices in their thirties,

¹ Sir George Croke, *Reports* (3rd imp., 1683), iii, pp. 555-7; William Salkeld, *Reports of Cases*, iii (1743), pp. 195-6; John March, *Reports* (1648), pp. 38-43.

² Lawrence Stone, in *The University in Society*, ed. L. Stone (Princeton, 1974), i, p. 30.

³ Anchitell Grey, *Debates of the House of Commons* (1763), i, p. 41. See Edward and Annie G. Porritt, *The Unreformed House of Commons* (Cambridge, 1903), i, pp. 223-34; John Hatsell, *Precedents of Proceedings in the House of Commons* (3rd edn., 1796), ii, pp. 9-11; J. E. Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons* (1949), p. 317; *The Journal of Sir Simonds D'Ewes*, ed. W. Notestein (New Haven, 1923), pp. 420 n., 504-5; D. Brunton and D. H. Pennington, *Members of the Long Parliament* (1954), p. 188; Romney Sedgwick, *The House of Commons, 1715-1754* (Hist. of Parlt., 1970), i, p. 137; Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The House of Commons, 1754-1790* (Hist. of Parlt., 1964), i, pp. 97-8; Gerrit P. Judd IV, *Members of Parliament, 1734-1832* (New Haven, 1955), pp. 23-5.

an indication of the fragile basis of later Stuart absolutism. A hundred years later Francis Buller was made a judge of the King's Bench at thirty-two, perhaps the youngest ever; he was Lord Chancellor Bathurst's nephew. In the Hanoverian Church there was a new aristocratic rush for the episcopacy, resulting in a record crop of bishops under forty; a situation reminiscent of the fifteenth century, when prelates of noble birth tended to be appointed ten to fifteen years younger than the others. In 1771 Brownlow North, the Prime Minister's half-brother, became bishop of Lichfield within a month of his thirtieth birthday. He was young for a bishop, said Lord North, but when he was older he might not have a brother for Prime Minister.¹ The Society which could make not just William Pitt Prime Minister at twenty-four, but also John Wilkes a Fellow of the Royal Society at twenty-three was not an unmitigated gerontocracy.

Nevertheless the over-all pattern favoured the middle-aged. What then were the roles envisaged for those outside this stratum, the young and the very old?

III

So far as the young were concerned, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are conspicuous for a sustained drive to subordinate persons in their teens and early twenties and to delay their equal participation in the adult world. This drive is reflected in the wider dissemination of apprenticeship; in the involvement of many more children in formal education; and in a variety of measures to prolong the period of legal and social infancy.²

These developments were a response to long-term pressures felt throughout western Europe. In part it was the increasing complexity of professional and economic life which made a longer period of technical training seem desirable: when Sir Thomas Gresham urged an eight-years' apprenticeship as the sole means of entrance to the Merchant Adventurers Company, he did so because he thought youthful inexperience responsible

¹ Sykes, *Church and State*, pp. 156 ff.; Norman Ravitch, *Sword and Mitre* (The Hague and Paris, 1966), pp. 123-4; Joel T. Rosenthal, 'The Training of an Elite Group: English Bishops in the Fifteenth Century', *Trans. Amer. Philos. Soc.*, n.s. lx (1970), p. 19; *D.N.B.*, 'North, Brownlow'.

² Pioneering discussions of some of these trends may be found in Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (new edn., Paris, 1973); Georges Snyders, *La Pédagogie en France aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1965); John R. Gillis, *Youth and History* (1974), chap. 1.

for the poor state of the foreign exchange.¹ But such devices were also a response to the mounting burden of population on an inflexible economy. If opportunities were limited, then the older generation should have priority. The acknowledged aim of the statute of artificers was to protect 'ancient householders' and 'aged artificers' from the competition of their juniors. Access to trades should be made difficult, and the young kept waiting a little longer.²

This attitude did not involve any hostility to child labour as such. On the contrary, it was assumed that any child not at school would be earning his keep by the age of ten or twelve,³ while pauper children of five (later seven) were swept off the streets and put out to masters.⁴ In the merchant service boys went to sea at eleven or twelve.⁵ Such working children might in practice assume adult responsibilities. At Norwich in 1570 a ten-year-old was said to 'spin and keep a child', while in Essex the agricultural writer Fitzherbert described how

They use to have a child to go in the furrow before the horses or oxen with a bag or hopper full of corn, and he taketh his hand full of corn and by little and little casteth it in the said furrow. Meseemeth that child ought to have much discretion.⁶

Similar discretion must have been needed by the thousands of young people driven on to the roads by poverty, orphanhood, or simply the belief of their parents that it was time they left the nest. (A boy was spoiled if he stayed at home, thought Thomas

¹ P.R.O., SP 63/12/327-8 (Gresham to duke of Northumberland, 16 Apr. 1553).

² For such arguments see *Tudor Economic Documents*, ed. R. H. Tawney and Eileen Power (1924), i, pp. 356-7, 363; P.R.O., SP 12/93/134; *English Economic History. Select Documents*, ed. A. E. Bland, P. A. Brown, and R. H. Tawney (1914), pp. 323, 344; *H.M.C., Var. Collns.* i, p. 114; William Scott, *An Essay of Drapery* (1635) (reprinted Boston, Mass., 1953), p. 40; *Calendar of Assize Records. Sussex Indictments. James I*, ed. J. S. Cockburn (1975), no. 279; David Hey, *The Rural Metalworkers of the Sheffield Region* (Leicester, 1972), p. 58.

³ *Paston Letters and Papers*, ed. Norman Davis, i (Oxford, 1971), p. 132; *The Petty Papers*, ed. Marquis of Lansdowne (1927), i, p. 194. Maintenance orders for bastard children usually ceased when the child became twelve.

⁴ The age was five from 27 Hen. VIII, c. 25 (1536) to 14 Eliz., c. 5 (1572) inclusive, and seven thereafter.

⁵ G. V. Scammell, 'Manning the English Merchant Service in the Sixteenth Century', *Mariners' Mirror*, lvi (1970), p. 137.

⁶ *The Norwich Census of the Poor, 1570*, ed. J. F. Pound (Norfolk Rec. Soc., 1971), p. 35; Master Fitzherbert, *The Book of Husbandry* (1534), ed. W. W. Skeat (Eng. Dialect Soc., 1882), p. 40.

Gataker: 'The wise parent driveth him out at doors, sendeth him forth to school, bindeth him apprentice . . . or boardeth him abroad, where he seeth him but seldom'.¹ Henry Peacham writes of orphans of fourteen and fifteen coming up by carrier to seek a living in the city, 'where they know nobody, neither are they known of any'; and recent scholarship has done much to show the striking mobility of the adolescent population. Although most movement was short-range, some boys travelled hundreds of miles to be apprenticed; like migrant birds they make us wonder how they found their way.² Emigrants to the New World were also youthful: of about 5,000 who left in 1635, well over half were between sixteen and twenty-three; some were children of ten or eleven, apparently unattached to any family or master.³

Yet though many children left home early and child labour was thought indispensable, there was total hostility to the early achievement of economic independence. The graduated scales of the wage assessments show that the young were not to be paid an adult wage until they were sixteen, eighteen, twenty, twenty-one, or, very commonly, twenty-four.⁴ That was the earliest age at which the statute of artificers, following the custom of London, envisaged the emancipation of urban apprentices. In husbandry apprenticeship was to last to twenty-one or twenty-four ('as the parties can agree').⁵ Parish apprentices were also to serve until they were twenty-four (or twenty-one in the case of girls).⁶ Many guilds had restrictions to delay the achievement of independence even after apprenticeship had

¹ Thomas Gataker, *Dauids Remembrancer* (1623), p. 38. Cf. William Horman, *Vulgaria* (1519), fol. 146^v ('Children far from home thrive best').

² Henry Peacham, *The Truth of our Times* (1638), pp. 10–11. In addition to the work surveyed in John Patten, 'Rural-urban Migration in Pre-industrial England', *Research Papers* (Oxford Univ., School of Geography, 1973), see Paul A. Slack, 'Vagrants and Vagrancy in England, 1598–1664', *Econ Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. xxvii (1974), pp. 365–6, and A. L. Beier, 'Vagrants and the Social Order in Elizabethan England', *Past and Present*, 64 (1974), pp. 9–10. In an unpublished paper Mr. Alan Crossley shows that 14 per cent of those apprenticed at Oxford between 1559 and 1598 had travelled over eighty miles from home, many from the extreme north-west of England.

³ Calculations based on *The Original Lists of Persons . . . who went from Great Britain to the American Plantations, 1600–1700*, ed. J. C. Hotten (1874), pp. 33–144.

⁴ Mr. M. F. Roberts of Balliol College is currently working on this subject.

⁵ 5 Eliz., c. 4, ss. 18–19.

⁶ 1 Edw. VI, c. 3 (1547) (24 and 20); 14 Eliz., c. 5 (1572) (24 and 18); 39 Eliz., c. 3 (1598) (24 and 21); 43 Eliz., c. 2 (1601) (24 and 21 or marriage).

ended. By law a trained craftsman could usually be prevented from practising on his own until he was thirty.¹

Long apprenticeship was an old restrictive practice to which Malthusian pessimism gave a new justification: 'to avoid young marriages and the increase of poor people'. Hence the repeated attacks on it as a period of drudgery, far longer than was necessary to learn the technical skills concerned.² But the arguments for it were as much moral as economic. 'Until a man grow unto the age of twenty-four years', ran the famous defence of the statute of artificers, 'he . . . is wild, without judgment and not of sufficient experience to govern himself'. A period of restraint was essential to abridge 'the licentious liberty of youth' and 'avoid divers dangers and inconveniences which young men when they come to their own hands or government at nineteen or twenty years of age oftentimes fall into'.³ A seven-year term was necessary, thought Gerrard Winstanley, because a man should be 'of age, and of rational carriage, before he be a governor of a family'.⁴ Even in 1814 the repeal of the apprenticeship clauses was opposed, on the grounds that 'to abolish apprenticeships would be to deprive the lower and middling ranks of society of the means of keeping their sons in due subjection during the first dangerous years of manhood'.⁵

Not that the attitude to youth was unambiguously repressive. Proverbial wisdom recognized that wild oats had to be sown and that the young must have their fling.⁶ To many, youth

¹ 5 Eliz., c. 4, s. 3. For the law in action see Margaret Gay Davies, *The Enforcement of English Apprenticeship . . . 1563-1642* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), pp. 19 n. 4, 193, 194, 202, 204 n.; F. G. Emmison, *Elizabethan Life: Disorder* (Chelmsford, 1970), pp. 46-7.

² e.g. William Sheppard, *Englands Balme* (1657), pp. 203-4; William Covel, *A Declaration* (1659), p. 17; *Britannia Languens* (1680), in *Early English Tracts on Commerce*, ed. J. R. McCulloch (Cambridge, 1954), p. 353; Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I. x. 2.

³ *Tudor Economic Documents*, I, pp. 354, 356, 358; also P.R.O., SP 12/93/134 ('it tendeth to the good education of youth and to avoid a number of inconveniences that their lawless liberty leads, or rather violently drives, them into').

⁴ *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. G. H. Sabine (Ithaca, N.Y., 1941), pp. 550, 600.

⁵ At higher social levels fathers had 'a hold . . . over their sons . . . by gifts and expectancies'; William Playfair, *A Letter to the . . . Lords and Commons . . . on the Advantages of Apprenticeships* (1814), pp. 11-12. Cf. *English Economic History. Select Documents*, pp. 583, 589.

⁶ M. P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England* (Ann Arbor, 1950), C 337, Y 48; Christopher Fetherston, *A Dialogue agaynst light, lewde, and lascivious Dauncing* (1582), sig. B8v.

symbolized freshness and hope. 'Our younger years', said Sir Walter Raleigh, 'are our golden age.'¹ Yet moralists and theologians constantly denounced youth as the dangerous period, when restraint was most needed. It was 'commonly the unclean part of a man's age'; 'a slippery age, full of passion, rashness, wilfulness'. The young were lascivious and volatile, living in what Aristotle had described as a kind of intoxication. They were 'aguish; their pots are boiling'.² The Old Testament supplied the necessary animal similes; the young were 'like wild asses and wild heifers'; 'like the horse or mule which hath no understanding'; 'like a young colt, wanton and foolish, till he be broken by education and correction'. Youth, in short, was 'yet in the state of nature'.³

These lamentations were reinforced by widespread juvenile delinquency, though seldom of a kind which reached the courts. According to contemporaries, the streets were full of gangs of children: a 'little dirty infantry', throwing stones and squibs, cursing and abusing passers-by.⁴ On Sundays congregations were disturbed by children running up and down the aisles, playing in the churchyard, and climbing over the roofs.⁵ Schoolboy pranks were of a stereotyped kind: raiding orchards and beehives, breaking hedges and walls, throwing stones at windows. In mid-sixteenth-century Durham boys caused havoc on their way to school, 'bursting glass windows, overthrowing milkmaids' pails, pulling down stalls, and crushing

¹ *History of the World*, i. ix. 3. Cf. Steven R. Smith, 'Religion and the Conception of Youth in Seventeenth-century England', *Hist. of Childhood Qrtly.* ii (1975), pp. 501-2.

² Increase Mather, *A Call from Heaven* (Boston, 1679), p. 111; Timothy Rogers, *Early Religion* (1683), sig. (a) 2; William Higford, *Institutions, or Advice to his Grandson* (1658), p. 36.

³ George Fox, *A Collection of Many Select and Christian Epistles*, ii (1698), p. 310; Richard Brathwait, *The English Gentleman* (1630), p. 2; *Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, p. 576; Samuel Lee, in *The Morning Exercises at Cripplegate*, 5th edn., by James Nichols (1844-5), i, p. 150.

⁴ M. N[eedham], *A Discourse Concerning Schools* (1663), p. 2; Samuel Harmar, *Vox Populi; or Glostersheres Desire* (1642), sig. A3^v; T. F[irmin], *Some Proposals for the Imployment of the Poor* (1681), p. 4; C. Wilfrid Scott-Giles and Bernard V. Slater, *The History of Emanuel School* (1966), p. 44.

⁵ *Letters and Papers of John Shillingford*, ed. S. A. Moore (Camden Soc., 1871), p. 101; *Synodalia*, ed. E. Cardwell (Oxford, 1842), i, p. 121; Arthur Hildersham, *CLII Lectures upon Psalme LI* (1635), p. 708; W. Cotton and H. Woollcombe, *Gleanings from the Municipal and Cathedral Records . . . of . . . Exeter* (Exeter, 1877), p. 167; *Minute Book of the Men's Meeting of the Society of Friends in Bristol, 1667-1686*, ed. R. Mortimer (Bristol Rec. Soc., 1971), *passim*.

out the links which were hung forth to give light to the passengers in the streets'.¹ In large towns, like Bristol or Newcastle, the apprentices were a recurring threat to public order. On holidays the city of London imposed curfews and mounted extra guards as the apprentices came out for their traditional misrule: opening the prisons, disrupting the theatres; above all, engaging in the traditional Shrove Tuesday sport of pulling down brothels.² At Shrewsbury in 1665 the apprentices refused to wear their prescribed dress, claimed equality of seating in church with their elders, and planned midnight meetings to plot against their masters.³ At Rochester in 1739 dockyard apprentices roamed the streets, beating people up and calling themselves 'dragons'.⁴ In London pedestrians were menaced by loitering youths and fraternities of aristocratic ruffians: from the 'roaring boys', 'hectors', and 'damned crew' of Jacobethan times to the 'Mohocks' of the early eighteenth century.⁵ Schools, colleges, and Inns of Court had their annual rituals of inversion, when the young took over, 'barring-out' the schoolmaster or electing lords of misrule.⁶ Towns had their traditional 'mischief nights', usually ending in fighting and disorder,⁷ while in the villages it was notorious that peace depended on 'the behaviour of younger persons'.⁸ 'Rough music' against cuckolds, adulterers, and marital quarrellers may have enforced norms to which the whole community subscribed, but it also gave scope for youthful high spirits and the humiliation of unpopular elders.

Contemporaries differed as to the exact timing of youth's most dangerous years,⁹ but they agreed that the strictest control

¹ *Dobsons Drie Bobbes*, ed. E. A. Horsman (1955), p. 14.

² Much material on this subject may be found in *A.P.C.* and *Cal. S.P. Dom.*

³ Michael Peele, 'Shrewsbury Drapers' Apprentices', *Trans. Salop. Archaeol. Soc.* 1 (1939-40), pp. 4-6.

⁴ Daniel A. Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton, 1965), p. 317.

⁵ T. S. Graves, 'Some Pre-mohock Clansmen', *Studs. in Philol.* xx (1923); Burton Milligan, 'The Roaring Boy in Tudor and Stuart Literature', *Shakespeare Assoc. Bull.* xv (1940).

⁶ 'Barring-out' is discussed in my *Rule and Misrule in the Schools of early modern England* (Stenton Lecture, Univ. of Reading, 1976).

⁷ See, e.g., *A History of Shrewsbury School from the Blakeway MSS* (1889), p. 76; James Yonge, *Plymouth Memoirs*, ed. John J. Beckerlegge (1951), p. 79.

⁸ White Kennett, *The Charity of Schools for Poor Children* (1706), p. 19.

⁹ Robert Shelford named the ages of fifteen to sixteen as the 'most dangerous' time; Josiah Woodward agreed. John Aubrey regarded seventeen to twenty as the 'ungovernable age' ('lust does then pullulate'). The shepherd

of youth was necessary. If teenage offenders escaped the gallows, thought Sir Matthew Hale,

the kingdom would come to confusion. Experience makes us know that every day murders, bloodsheds, burglaries, larcenies, burning of houses, rape, clipping and counterfeiting of money, are committed by youths above fourteen and under twenty-one; and if they should have impunity by the privilege of . . . their minority, no man's life or estate could be safe.¹

This was not mere rhetoric: in 1785 the Solicitor-General stated that of every twenty offenders executed in London eighteen were under twenty-one.²

The argument for formal education was not unlike that for the criminal code. The grammar schools offered a regime which many compared unfavourably with Bridewell, while the universities aspired to a moral supervision and control which contrasted markedly with laxer practices on the Continent.³ From the early fifteenth century there was pressure at Oxford to bring all scholars, first into licensed lodgings, later into colleges and halls. In Tudor times there was a great elaboration of disciplinary regulations, involving corporal punishment up to the age of eighteen or twenty. As Dr. Pantin put it, scholars were now treated 'less like clerks, and more like schoolboys'.⁴

When Chancellor of the University in the 1630s, William Laud was haunted incessantly by the spectre of 'the younger

in *The Winter's Tale* (iii. iii) wished 'there were no age between ten and three-and twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting'. For Roger Ascham the years from seventeen to twenty-seven were 'that most slippery time'; Shelford, *Lectures* (1602), p. 38; *Aubrey on Education*, ed. J. E. Stephens (1972), p. 29; Josiah Woodward, *The Young-Man's Monitor* (1706), p. 16; Ascham, *English Works*, ed. W. A. Wright (Cambridge, 1904), p. 222.

¹ *Historia Placitorum Coronae*, ed. G. Wilson (1778), i, p. 25. Similar arguments were used by the judges in 1748 to justify hanging a ten-year-old boy; (M. Foster), *A Report of Some Proceedings on the Commission of Oyer and Terminer* (Oxford, 1762), pp. 70-3.

² *Parliamentary History*, xxv (1815), col. 889, cited by Leon Radzinowicz, *A History of English Criminal Law* (1948-), i, p. 14.

³ Cf. the comments of John Quick in Charles Read, *1564-1621. Daniel Chamier* (Paris, 1858), p. 112.

⁴ Mark H. Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition, 1558-1642* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 34-44; Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden (Oxford, 1936), iii, p. 371; W. A. Pantin, *Oxford Life in Oxford Archives* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 10, 23, 26-7, 61-2, 67, 94.

sort', a phrase which recurs with ominous frequency in his correspondence. He tried to make them wear caps at St. Mary's, to uncover to doctors in the street, to refrain from 'insolencies, and disorders' to the proctors. He worried about alehouses, 'the bane of a great many young men'; and he was perturbed by some suggestions made by 'inconsiderate bold young men'. Right on the eve of the Long Parliament, he was still urging the Vice-Chancellor to take more care over 'the examinations and manners of the younger sort'.¹

Laud's preoccupation with the misdeeds of the young would seem obsessive, had it not been shared by his opponents. William Prynne was equally concerned with 'the dissoluter and younger sort in our universities, being but youths or children . . . and unable to judge of good or evil'.² What were the campaigns for the Reformation of Manners if not attempts to suppress all the great obstacles to the subordination of youth: holidays, when young people were released from their masters' supervision; theatres, to which they flocked to be corrupted; alehouses, which drew them into disorder, there being 'many drunkards short of twenty years old'; gaming, 'a pernicious thing and destructive of youth'; maypoles, which encouraged 'the rout' in their insolency towards 'the ancient and the honourable' and taught 'young people impudency and rebellion'; dancing, for 'where shall young men and maidens meet, if not at the dancing-place?'; sabbath-breaking, by 'servants and . . . the younger sort'; and all the annual rites of misrule when youth temporarily inverted the social order?³

Central to the whole problem was the age of legal adulthood. Traditionally this had come early. For the Anglo-Saxons criminal responsibility began at ten or twelve.⁴ In most medieval towns a burgess's son came of age when he could count, measure cloth, and conduct his father's business, usually between twelve and sixteen. In the countryside tenants in socage or gavelkind

¹ *The Works of . . . William Laud*, ed. W. Scott and J. Bliss (Oxford, 1847-57), v, pp. 72, 82, 195-6, 198, 202, 216, 222-4, 289.

² *Histrion-Mastix*, p. 941.

³ Prynne, *ibid.*, pp. 501-2, 512; Daniel Williams, *The Vanity of Childhood and Youth* (1691), p. 55 ('35'); *The Parliamentary Diary of Narcissus Luttrell, 1691-1693*, ed. Henry Horwitz (Oxford, 1972), p. 76; Thomas Hall, *Funebria Florae, the Downfall of May-Games* (2nd edn., 1661), pp. 14, 15; Fetherston, *Dialogue*, sigs. C8, D1^v (suggesting sermons as an alternative venue for assignments); William Attersoll, *A Commentarie upon the Fourth Booke of Moses called Numbers* (1618), p. 645.

⁴ Ine 7 § 2; II Athelstan 1; II Cnut, 20, 21.

were out of ward at fifteen (later fourteen for socage). Fourteen was a common age of inheritance for copyholders. Fifteen had long been widely recognized as the military age and thus that of effective adulthood. Only for those holding land by knight-service were inheritance and the capacity to make binding contracts (other than for necessities) delayed until the age of twenty-one.¹ This was supposedly because, whereas teenagers could till the land or keep a shop, they were not strong enough to render military service in heavy armour. But it was the weight less of armour than of ancient mental habits, based on a septenary numerology, which made twenty-one, like seven (the end of innocence) and fourteen (the age of discretion), into a point of particular significance in a boy's life. (For girls the reckoning tended to be duodecimal: six, twelve, and eighteen.)²

It is well known how medieval lawyers began a movement to prolong the disabilities of infancy by making the knightly majority of twenty-one standard for everyone. First, the common law courts refused to countenance the early adulthood of burgage tenure. Next, they surrounded the customary rights of heirs at gavelkind, socage, and copyhold with disabilities which made their early inheritance increasingly inoperable.³ Then in 1660, when military tenures were abolished, Parliament took away altogether the customary right of children holding by socage to choose their guardian at fourteen (or twelve in the case of girls). Every father's guardianship of his son until he was twenty-one was subsequently declared by the courts to be 'an original right invested in him by nature'.⁴

¹ *Borough Customs*, ed. Mary Bateson (Selden Soc., 1904-6), ii, pp. 157-60; M. de W. Hemmeon, *Burgage Tenure in Medieval England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1914), p. 18; Glanvill, vii. 9; Bracton, *De Legibus*, ed. G. E. Woodbine (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), ii, pp. 250-1; *Fleta*, i. ix; xi, 4, 5; 34 Edw. I, st. 2 (1306); Coke, *1st Institute*, 78^b-79^b; Coke, *The Compleate Copy-holder* (1641), p. 171; Blackstone, *Commentaries*, i. xvii; Lord Chief Baron Gilbert, *The Law of Tenures*, 4th edn. by C. Watkins (1796), pp. 339-46. See in general Sir F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *The History of English Law* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1911), ii, pp. 436-44.

² The legal age of majority for girls was twenty-one, but in wills eighteen remained a usual age of inheritance. See, e.g., Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1965), p. 597.

³ Robinson, *The Common Law of Kent: or, the Customs of Gavelkind*, pp. 221-5; Britton, ed. F. M. Nichols (Oxford, 1865), ii, p. 9 n.; Fitzherbert, *New Natura Brevium*, 'dum fuit infra aetatem'; Gilbert, *Law of Tenures*, pp. 463-5; Charles Watkins, *A Treatise on Copyholds*, 2nd edn. by R. S. Vidal (1816), ii, pp. 108-9.

⁴ 12 Car. II, c. 24, s. 8; *Modern Reports*, 5th edn. by Thomas Leach, v (1794), p. 224.

The movement to extend the minor's legal disabilities was relentless. Fourteen had long been regarded by the Church as a valid age for making a testament, but by the seventeenth century many common lawyers preferred a higher age: fifteen, seventeen (as proposed by the Rump), eighteen, even twenty-one (as ultimately became the law in 1837).¹ At canon law a boy of seventeen could act as an executor, but various restrictions made it unsafe for him to do so.² Other judicial decisions emphasized that those who traded with youthful shopkeepers did so at their peril, for if they were under twenty-one their contracts were not enforceable, because of their presumed 'imbecility of judgement'.³

Political adulthood was also retarded. Since Anglo-Saxon times twelve had been the age for boys to swear allegiance and be enrolled in tithings, frankpledge, or court leet.⁴ This obligation continued to be fitfully enforced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but in some law books the age of sixteen was silently substituted for that of twelve.⁵ Henry VIII's government envisaged fourteen as the minimum age for taking its oath of succession, but James I's oath of allegiance for recusants was proffered only to those over eighteen;⁶ and that became the usual age for loyalty oaths thereafter.⁷

¹ Edward Vaughan Williams, *A Treatise on the Law of Executors* (4th edn., 1849), p. 15; Francis Hargrave and Charles Butler, *Notes on Lord Coke's First Institute* (1794), sect. 123, n. 83; *Somers Tracts*, ed. Walter Scott (1809-15), vi, p. 196; 1 Vict., c. 26, s. 7. Infants under twenty-one had been declared incapable of bequeathing real estate by 34 & 35 Hen. VIII, c. 5, s. 7 (1542-3).

² Thomas Wentworth, *The Office and Duty of Executors*, ed. H. Curson (1728), pp. 213-19, 339; Thomas Vernon, *Cases* (1726-8), i, p. 326.

³ Croke, *Reports*, ii, p. 494; John Strange, *Reports* (1755), ii, p. 1083; Blackstone, *Commentaries*, i. xvii. Cf. the complaints of John March, *Amicus Reipublicae* (1651), pp. 112-17.

⁴ J. M. Kemble, *The Saxons in England*, ed. W. de Gray Birch (1876), ii, p. 35 n.

⁵ *Court Leet Records*, ed. F. J. C. and D. M. Hearnshaw (Southampton Rec. Soc., 1905-7), p. 321; *Court Leet Records of the Manor of Manchester*, ed. J. Harland (Chetham Soc., 1864), pp. 147-8; (Sir William Scroggs), *The Practice of Courts-Leet, and Courts-Baron* (1701), p. 4 (also in 4th edn. (1728), p. 18).

⁶ *The Letters of Stephen Gardiner*, ed. J. A. Muller (Cambridge, 1933), p. 56; 3 Jac. I, c. 4, s. 8 (1606).

⁷ e.g. the Protestation of 1642, the Engagement of 1650, the oath of allegiance to George I (1 Geo. I, st. 2, c. 13) and the Test oath of 1723 (10 Geo. I, c. 4). A similar upward trend can be seen in the case of liability to military service (fifteen in the thirteenth century; sixteen in the Elizabethan musters; eighteen in George II's militia, as originally proposed in a bill of 1601; Heywood Townshend, *Historical Collections* (1680), p. 329). But the pattern is

The age of religious adulthood also went up. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries confirmation ceased to be a ceremony for infants and became something more like a puberty rite. In the later Middle Ages children had been confirmed during the first few years of life,¹ but the effect of the Reformation was to delay the ceremony until what the Prayer Book called 'years of discretion', when the child could recite the Catechism. No numerical age was specified and practice varied widely. But some Elizabethan bishops favoured twelve or thirteen, while by the early eighteenth century a minimum of fourteen was often specified.² The right to communicate was also taken away from infants. Since 1215 it had in theory been confined to those who had attained 'years of discretion', but this had not stopped young children from being allowed to receive.³ With the Reformation the age of first reception was everywhere pushed up. Elizabethan bishops prescribed various ages between twelve and fourteen, while the Canon of 1604 established sixteen as the age at which communion was compulsory; some clergy took this to be a minimum as well.⁴ The canons also made thirteen the age of compulsory church attendance, but in the recusancy statutes the age was sixteen.⁵ In an effort to eliminate child godparents it was further ordered that no one should act as sponsor at baptism who was not already a communicant.⁶ confused, since the ages of sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen were all invoked at one time or another.

¹ *Councils and Synods*, ed. F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney, ii (Oxford, 1964), *passim*; J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation* (1965), pp. 122-3, 135-6; (W. Harrington), *In this Boke are conteyned the Commendacions of Matrymony* (1528), sig. Eii; A. G. Dickens, 'Robert Parkyn's Narrative of the Reformation', *Eng. Hist. Rev.* lxii (1947), p. 76; Henry Holloway, *The Confirmation and Communion of Infants and Young Children* (1901), p. 44.

² S. L. Ollard in *Confirmation*, i (1926), pp. 87, 197; Hamon L'Estrange, *The Alliance of Divine Offices* (Oxford, 1846), p. 408; Sykes, *Church and State*, pp. 120-1; Sykes, *William Wake* (Cambridge, 1957), i, p. 222. But for a ten-year-old minimum in 1700 see *Diary of Francis Evans*, ed. D. Robertson (Worcs. Hist. Soc., 1903), p. 17.

³ Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, pp. 105-6.

⁴ John Strype, *Annals of the Reformation* (2nd edn., 1725), i, p. 323; appx., p. 94; W. M. Kennedy, *The 'Interpretations' of the Bishops* (Alcuin Club, 1908), p. 32; *Visitation Articles and Injunctions*, ed. W. H. Frere and W. M. Kennedy (Alcuin Club, 1910), iii, pp. 259, 306; W. M. Kennedy, *Elizabethan Episcopal Administration* (1924), pp. 94, 114, 146, 223; *Synodalia*, i, p. 120; Canon 112 of 1604; *Parly. Papers*, 1867-8, xxxviii, pp. 459, 583.

⁵ Canon 114; 23 Eliz., c. 1, s. 4 (1581). In 1554 it had been 12; John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, ed. J. Pratt (1877), vi, p. 429.

⁶ *Visitation Articles and Injunctions*, iii, pp. 176, 277-8, 306, 334, 378; Canon 29.

The logical outcome of this general upward movement was the Anabaptist view that even baptism should be delayed until years of discretion. One fifteenth-century heretic urged baptism at fourteen, but several groups of Elizabethan sectaries followed their continental counterparts in holding that no one should be christened until he was thirty, as Christ had been.¹ The full Christian life was not for adolescents.

Neither was marriage. There was nothing new about a separation between physiological puberty and social puberty so far as men were concerned, but the postponement of the usual marriage of women to the mid-twenties was a more novel development, though one whose causes and chronology remain perplexing.² The change has been rashly taken by some historians to indicate that girls were physically maturing later than in the past, a suggestion for which there is as yet no convincing evidence.³ More plausibly, it can be related to shrinking opportunities of inheritance and employment; delayed marriage was a response to the pressure of population on subsistence. As such, it fitted in well with changing cultural assumptions about the proper time to marry. Youthful marriages not only multiplied

¹ *Camden Miscellany*, xxiv (Camden ser., 1972), p. 221; St. G. K. Hyland, *A Century of Persecution* (1920), pp. 108, 111; J[ohn] R[ogers], *The Displaying of an Horrible Secte of . . . Heretiques* (1578), sig. Kijj. Cf. G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (1962), pp. 173, 175, 303, 313, 317-18, 414.

² Some figures are given by Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, appx. xxxiii; E. A. Wrigley in *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. xix (1966), pp. 86-8; Peter Laslett, *The World we have Lost* (2nd edn., 1971), pp. 84-91, 284; and R. B. Outhwaite, 'Age at Marriage in England from the Late Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century', *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser. xxiii (1973). But little progress in dating or explaining the change has been made since J. Hajnal's pioneering discussion in *Population and History*, ed. Glass & Eversley, chap. 6.

³ The idea of a retardation in the age of menarche in the early modern period was put forward by Gaston Backman, 'Die beschleunigte Entwicklung der Jugend', *Acta Anatomica*, iv (1947-8), and has been endorsed by Ragnhild Hatton, *Europe in the Age of Louis XIV* (1969), pp. 12-13. It is not supported by the testimony of contemporary doctors, most of whom continued to put the onset of menstruation at or around Aristotle's age of fourteen (*Hist. An.*, 581^a; Helkiah Crooke, *Μικροκοσμιογραφία. A Description of the Body of Man* (2nd edn., 1631), p. 261; Nicholas Culpeper, *A Directory for Midwives* (1651), p. 86; James Primerose, *De Mulierum Morbis* (Rotterdam, 1655), p. 4), and is not suggested by the figure of 14.6 for middle-class girls in Manchester in 1820 (J. M. Tanner, *Growth at Adolescence* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1962), p. 152), particularly when allowance is made for the weighting of such statistics by cases of delayed menstruation caused by tuberculosis or nutritional deficiencies (see P. E. Brown, 'The Age at Menarche', *Brit. Journ. Preventive and Soc. Medicine*, xx (1966)).

the pauper population; they also led to undue propinquity of years between parents and children, thus diminishing deference; they flouted Aristotle's warning that the copulation of the young shortened their lives and produced stunted offspring;¹ and they conflicted with the growing middle-class ideal of marriage as a mature emotional relationship, voluntarily entered upon.²

Combined with a strict prohibition on alternative forms of sexual activity, late marriage was the most obvious way in which youth was prolonged. For marriage was the surest test of adult status and on it hinged crucial differences in wages, dress, and economic independence. 'We do not call any a "yeoman"', observed Sir Thomas Smith, 'till he be married and have children and have as it were some authority among his neighbours.' The Gloucestershire village which in 1542 made the parishioners' precedence at church depend on the date of their weddings was merely giving visible expression to a universal assumption.³ Yet all efforts to change the law allowing boys of fourteen and girls of twelve to make binding marriage contracts proved unavailing. In 1571 the Church tried briefly to raise the minimum ages of marriage to sixteen and fourteen; and those were the ages temporarily enacted in the civil marriage ordinance of 1653 (itself a climb-down from the Rump committee's original proposal of seventeen and fifteen).⁴ Otherwise the long stream of proposals for a higher legal minimum proved ineffective.⁵

¹ Aris., *Hist. An.* 582^a; Raleigh, *History of the World*, i. v. 5; Fynes Moryson, *Shakespeare's Europe*, ed. C. Hughes (1903), p. 296; James Hart, *KAINIKΘ, or the Diet of the Diseased* (1633), p. 326; J. B[ulwer], *Anthropometamorphosis* (1653), pp. 506-7; Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, pp. 656-7. The belief was still held by Lord Barrington in 1753; *Parliamentary History*, xv (1813), col. 28.

² For representative opinions on the proper age to marry see John Case, *Sphaera Civitatis* (Frankfurt, 1589), pp. 376-7; Sir Walter Raleigh, *Instructions to his Son*, ed. C. Whibley (1927), p. 24; Joseph Swetnam, *The Araignment of Lewde . . . Women* (1615), p. 46; Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), 'To the Reader'; William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (3rd edn., 1634), pp. 180-1; Thomas Hilder, *Conjugall Counsell* (1653), p. 45; Samuel Lee, in *Morning Exercises at Cripplegate*, i, p. 148; *The Life and Errors of John Dunton* (1705), p. 45; (Robert Wallace), *Various Prospects of Mankind, Nature and Providence* (1761), pp. 44-5.

³ *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. L. Alston (Cambridge, 1906), p. 45; *Trans. Bristol and Glos. Archaeol. Soc.*, xlvi (1926), pp. 277-8.

⁴ *Synodalia*, i, p. 122; *Somers Tracts*, vi, p. 181. Cf. Kennedy, *Elizabethan Episcopal Administration*, p. 194. A minimum age of fifteen for girls was proposed in the Convocation of 1563; *Synodalia*, ii, pp. 514 n.-515 n.

⁵ For some attempted legislation see *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, ix, 725; *Commons Journals*, i, pp. 229, 232; *H.M.C., House of Lords, 1678-1688*, pp. 276-7; 1689-90, pp. 267-72; 1690-1, pp. 253-60.

Only in 1753 did Hardwicke's Marriage Act nullify marriages made by teenagers without parental consent.¹ Until then the ancient clerical doctrine that it was better to marry than to burn repeatedly triumphed over the desire of parents to control their offspring and safeguard their inheritances.

With the pressure to postpone marriage well into the twenties went the suggestion that even the knightly age of majority at twenty-one was too low. Literary conventions about the 'ages of man' already pointed in this direction, for, although some English writers on this theme deemed 'adolescence' to end at twenty or twenty-one, most followed the bulk of learned opinion in putting the break at twenty-two, twenty-five, or even twenty-eight.² The most favoured alternative legal age of adulthood was twenty-four complete, probably because this was (wrongly) thought equivalent to the Roman Law majority of twenty-five. Twenty-four was a much invoked age, and not just for apprentices. It was adopted by the Henrician visitors of the monasteries as the lowest age at which a man might become a monk;³ it was sometimes specified as the minimum age for school governors;⁴ and in the Church it was the lowest age for admission to the priesthood (some Reformers would have preferred the primitive Church's age of thirty, but accepted the lower figure because Tudor education was supposedly 'much more quick and compendious than in former times').⁵ Two Acts of Parliament allowed the heirs of Henry VIII to repeal any statutes passed

¹ As originally proposed in 1552; *The Reformation of the Ecclesiastical Laws*, ed. E. Cardwell (Oxford, 1850), p. 41.

² e.g. Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Castell of Helth* (1534), fol. 10^v; (Thomas Cogan), *The Haven of Health* (1589), p. 191; *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*, ed. J. M. Osborn (1962), p. 66; Andreas Laurentius, *A Discourse of the Preservation of Sight*, trans. R. Surphlet (1938 edn.), p. 173; *The Office of Christian Parents* (Cambridge, 1616), p. 44; William Vaughan, *Directions for Health* (5th edn., 1617), p. 214; Samson Price, *The Two Twins of Birth and Death* (1624), p. 9; Henrie Cuffe, *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life* (1607), p. 118; Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, p. 533; *Aubrey on Education*, p. 143; Waterhous, *Fortescutus Illustratus*, p. 367; Richard Steele, *A Discourse concerning Old-Age* (1688), p. 5; E. Chambers, *Cyclopaedia* (1728), s.v. 'age'; N. Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730), s.v. 'adolescence'.

³ David Wilkins, *Concilia* (1737), iii, p. 791. Professor David Knowles attributed this 'revolutionary' doctrine to Erasmian influence; *The Religious Orders in England*, iii (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 276-7.

⁴ Nicholas Carlisle, *A Concise Description of the Endowed Grammar Schools* (1818), ii, p. 809; Margaret M. Kay, *The History of Rivington and Blackrod Grammar School* (Manchester, 1966), p. 165.

⁵ Thomas Cranmer, *Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. J. E. Cox (Parker Soc., 1846), p. 39; Thomas Starkey, *A Dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas*

before they were twenty-four, on the grounds that until then rulers could have 'small knowledge and experience of their affairs'. Opponents of the Edwardian regime took this principle further by refusing to recognize any new law made before the king was twenty-four.¹ A hundred years later the Barebones Parliament was urged to forbid young men to enter alehouses until they had attained 'twenty-five or some certain years of discretion'.² The age of inheritance envisaged by will-makers for their sons varied considerably and cries out for more investigation, but again a tendency can be detected among the well-to-do to make twenty-four or more the chosen age.³ The risks involved in entrusting landed estates to boys of twenty-one were notorious. 'The Civil Law limiting the majority of males at twenty-five', wrote William Higford, 'better provideth for the security of estates than the common law of our land which appointeth the full age at twenty-one. More families, I dare say, have decayed or at least received the deadly wound in this interval, which is but four years, than in all other years of man's life.' The same argument for the Roman majority was repeated in the mid eighteenth century by Chief Justice Sir John Eardley Wilmot: 'I have known more people ruined in the first five years of their majority . . . in becoming bound and bail for other people, than from any other source of indiscretion'.⁴

Inevitably there were allied proposals to keep youth away from politics and public affairs. Of the utopians, Gerrard Winstanley, whose distrust of the young went unusually deep,

Lupset, ed. K. M. Burton (1948), p. 181; Edmund Gibson, *Codex Juris Ecclesiastici Anglicani* (1723), p. 167.

¹ 28 Hen. VIII, c. 17 (1536); 1 Edw. VI, c. 11 (1547); J. A. Muller, *Stephen Gardiner and the Tudor Reaction* (1926), pp. 160, 164-5, 190, 196; Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, vi, pp. 7, 9.

² Nickolls, *Original Letters*, p. 101.

³ e.g. *Calendar of Letter-Books . . . of the City of London*, ed. R. R. Sharpe (1899-1912), 'L', pp. 54, 62, 63, 72; J. M. W. Bean, *The Decline of English Feudalism, 1215-1540* (Manchester, 1968), p. 275; *Wills and Inventories*, ii (Surtees Soc., 1860), pp. 17, 143 n.; *Wills and Administrations from the Knaresborough Court Rolls* (Surtees Soc., 1902-5), i, p. 88; ii, pp. 101, 123; *Sales of Wards in Somerset, 1603-1641*, ed. M. J. Hawkins (Somerset Rec. Soc., 1965), p. 71; *Continuity and Change*, eds. Rosemary O'Day and Felicity Heal (Leicester, 1976), p. 91. Cf. Thomas Shadwell, *The Woman-Captain* (1680), act i.

⁴ Higford, *Institutions*, pp. 6-7; John Wilmot, *Memoirs of the Life . . . of . . . Sir John Eardley Wilmot* (2nd edn., 1811), pp. 142-3. For other proposals for twenty-five as the age of majority see Charles George Cock, *English-Law* (1651), p. 146, and H. C. Foxcroft, *The Life and Letters of Sir George Savile, Bart., first Marquis of Halifax* (1898), ii, pp. 474-5.

desired no public officer under forty and would have made the over-sixties into a class of general overseers; so, following him, would have John Bellers. The royalist visionary, Arise Evans, wanted both king and members of Parliament to be over fifty.¹ Writers in the classical tradition were equally gerontocratic. Machiavelli himself had disputed the relevance of age to office-holding,² but most of his English followers reverted to the age-preferences of antiquity. A sequence of minimum ages for office-holders, they thought, would give everyone a turn at the top, while ensuring that no one was there too long. This, the supposed secret of Venetian stability, was reflected in Harrington's proposal that no one under thirty be admitted to the franchise. It may also have influenced the idea, attributed to the first earl of Shaftesbury, that 'forty years, whereof twenty-five are generally spent in childhood and vanity', should be the minimum qualification for an 'English senator'. Later the first marquis of Halifax suggested that Members of Parliament should be at least thirty.³ We recall the readiness of James Mill to confine the franchise to the over-forties, on the optimistic grounds that it was hard to envisage a law which would benefit them without also benefiting the rest of the community.⁴

The premature advancement of the well-connected young thus came to look increasingly anomalous. The Protestant Reformers denounced the dispensations which had set aside age-regulations for the medieval clergy in the interests of aristocratic youth.⁵ There was fresh legislation about minimum ages

¹ *Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, pp. 515, 543, 551, 577, 596; A. R. Fry, *John Bellers, 1654-1725* (1935), p. 46; Arise Evans, *A Rule from Heaven* (1659), pp. 29, 30.

² *Discorsi*, i. 60.

³ Harrington, *Works*, ed. J. Toland (Dublin, 1737), pp. 204, 206, 437; *Somers Tracts*, viii, p. 401; Foxcroft, *Life and Letters of Sir George Savile*, ii, p. 474. Cf. Andrew Fletcher, *Political Works* (1732), p. 380 ('The art of government has been looked upon as a kind of knowledge dangerous to be learned, except by those who are advanced in years').

⁴ *Essays on Government* (1825; reprint, New York, 1967), pp. 21-2. Even at the beginning of the present century some Liberal politicians favoured raising the age of citizenship to twenty-five, so as to exclude younger men whose judgement would be 'immature' and whose influence 'dangerous'; Herbert Samuel, *Liberalism* (1902), pp. 242-3 n. (kindly shown me by Dr. Ross McKibbin).

⁵ *Documents illustrative of English Church History*, ed. H. Gee and W. J. Hardy (1896), pp. 150, 434; *Puritan Manifestoes*, ed. W. H. Frere and C. E. Douglas (1907), p. 33; Sir Simonds D'Ewes, *The Journals of all the Parliaments during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (1682), p. 157.

and dispensations for age were ultimately confined to would-be deacons.¹ But youthful clergy were not easily eliminated. Grammar schoolboys still serviced some Elizabethan churches, while the Puritan organizer, John Field, was but one of many clergy to be ordained under canonical age. Even in the eighteenth century they still slipped through.² It also took time to implement the new rule that parish clerks should be 'twenty at least'; at Holme Cultram, Cumberland, in 1715, a schoolboy functioned as clerk and schoolmaster, 'though contrary to the canon by reason of youth. But, he acting so prudently in the place of a clerk, the inhabitants are therewith very well satisfied and though he be of but little stature, yet by the course of nature hope he will improve.'³

In the universities there was a parallel reaction against young students. Professor Stone has shown how at Oxford the median age of entry rose from 16½ in 1600 to 18½ in 1800. The precocious undergraduate became exceptional. When Seth Ward went up to Cambridge in 1632 at the tender age of fourteen, in the streets 'doctors and other grave men would frequently lay their hands up on his white head, for he had very fair hair, and ask him of what college he was and of what standing and such like questions, which was so great a vexation to him that he was ashamed to go into the town'. By 1686 students of fourteen and under, who had been 18 per cent of all Oxford entrants a century earlier, had dwindled to a mere 2 per cent.⁴ Universities

¹ *Documentary Annals*, ed. E. Cardwell (Oxford, 1839), i, pp. 414-15; *Synodalia*, i, pp. 133, 140, 148; Kennedy, *Elizabethan Episcopal Administration*, p. 197; 13 Eliz., c. 12 (1571); G. D'Oyly, *The Life of William Sancroft* (1821), i, pp. 213-14; Gibson, *Codex*, p. 167. The Faculty Office Muniment Books in Lambeth Palace Library suggest that dispensations for under-age clergy became rare after 1572.

² Albert Peel, 'A Puritan Survey of the Church in Staffordshire in 1604', *Eng. Hist. Rev.* xxvi (1911); F. O. White, *Lives of the Elizabethan Bishops* (1898), p. 123; Patrick Collinson in *Elizabethan Government and Society*, ed. S. T. Bindoff, J. Hurstfield, and C. H. Williams (1961), p. 129; *The Commission for Ecclesiastical Causes . . . 1574*, ed. F. D. Price (Bristol and Glos. Archaeol. Soc., 1972), p. 41 n.; *H.M.C., Cowper*, ii, pp. 199, 200; Sykes, *Church and State*, pp. 104-5, 113, 114, 201.

³ Canon 91 of 1604 (some bishops took this to mean 21; *Partly. Papers, 1867-8*, xxxviii, pp. 618, 659, 672, 679); *The Register and Records of Holm Cultram*, ed. F. Grainger and W. G. Collingwood (Cumbs. and Westld. Antiqn. and Archaeol. Soc., 1929), p. 254. For other child clerks see *Select XVI Century Causes in Tithe*, ed. J. S. Purvis (Yorks. Archaeol. Soc., 1949), p. 134; *A Hampshire Miscellany*, ed. A. J. Willis (Lyminge, 1963-7), i, p. 41.

⁴ Walter Pope, *The Life of Seth Lord Bishop of Salisbury*, ed. J. B. Bamborough (Luttrell Soc., 1961), pp. 8-9; Stone, *The University in Society*, i, pp. 32-3, 97.

were moving to a system of stratification by age. In the schools, however, the process of assimilating forms to age-groups took longer to accomplish and was far from complete in the mid-nineteenth century.¹ The received educational doctrine was that the 'dullards and negligent may not hinder nor hold back the diligent and forward'. When Thomas Raymond started school around 1620, he was humiliated to find himself placed in the form below his younger brother, while at Eton in 1601 John Wilson was a praepostor, 'though the smallest boy in the school'.²

In Parliament the campaign to exclude infant M.P.s began in the reign of James I. A royal proclamation expressed the hope that the electors would return no 'young and unexperienced men that are not ripe and mature for so grave a council'; and there was much support for a Bill of 1621 which would have kept out infants altogether.³ In 1646 William Prynne produced a characteristically well-documented diatribe entitled *Minors no Senators*. But, outside the constitutions of the Interregnum, there was no legislation until 1696, when infants were at last declared ineligible;⁴ and in practice they continued to be returned for another century, their presence accepted by a docile House.

The exclusion of children from military commissions was also a slow business. Since 1711 there had been a rule that army officers should be at least sixteen, but not before the reign of George III was it seriously enforced and even then exceptions were made.⁵ In the Navy the officer cadets ('volunteers') had from 1677 to be at least sixteen, while a minimum age of twenty was established for lieutenants. The evasion of these age-limits in the eighteenth century is notorious.⁶

¹ See, e.g., *Schools Inquiry Commission* (1868), vi, pp. 24-7; T. W. Bamford, *Rise of the Public Schools* (1967), p. 64.

² Kay, *History of Rivington and Blackrod Grammar School*, p. 184; *Autobiography of Thomas Raymond*, ed. G. Davies (Camden ser., 1917), p. 19; H. C. Maxwell Lyte, *A History of Eton College* (1875), p. 191.

³ *Stuart Royal Proclamations*, ed. J. F. Larkin and P. L. Hughes (Oxford, 1973-), i, p. 494; Porritt, *Unreformed House of Commons*, i, pp. 224-34; *Commons Debates, 1621*, ed. W. Notestein, F. H. Relf, and H. Simpson (New Haven, 1935), ii, p. 460; iv, p. 446; v, p. 221; vi, p. 205.

⁴ 7 & 8 Gul. III, c. 25, s. 7. The Lords passed a standing order to similar effect in 1685; Hatsell, *Precedents*, ii, p. 11.

⁵ R. E. Scouller, *The Armies of Queen Anne* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 77-8; Eric Robson, 'Purchase and Promotion in the British Army in the eighteenth century', *History*, xxxvi (1951), pp. 69-70; C. M. Clode, *The Military Forces of the Crown* (1869), i, p. 373; ii, pp. 91, 609-10.

⁶ *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Naval Manuscripts in the Pepysian Library*, ed. J. R. Tanner (Navy Rec. Soc., 1903-23), i, p. 204; *The Flemings in Oxford*,

Patronage and inheritance thus continued to dispense a minority of privileged youth from the normal rules of seniority. Meanwhile the expansion of the economy had begun to lighten the situation of their social inferiors. The length of apprenticeship had always varied according to local conditions and the age of twenty-four proved less durable than the seven-year term. When opportunities were abundant, boys could be speedily released. ('There is no age of adolescence here', wrote a Barbados colonist in 1710, 'they are either children or men').¹ In the later seventeenth century many trading companies reduced the age of emancipation to twenty-one.² Subsequently, pressure mounted to do the same for parish apprentices. 'Times are altered from Queen Elizabeth's days', declared Jonas Hanway in 1766, 'it is our interest to encourage early marriage.' The age-limit was duly reduced after a House of Commons committee had agreed that twenty-four was too high because 'it checks marriage and discourages industry'—reasoning which would have seemed extraordinary to Tudor legislators.³ With the growth of industrialism youth no longer needed to be such a period of self-denial. In 1776 Major John Cartwright even anticipated more recent developments by proposing the vote for all eighteen-year-olds.⁴ Remarkable enough in its time, the suggestion would have been inconceivable a century earlier.

ed. J. R. Magrath (Oxford Hist. Soc., 1904–24), iii, p. 46; *Queen Anne's Navy*, ed. R. D. Merriman (Navy Rec. Soc., 1961), pp. 310, 319; Baugh, *British Naval Administration*, p. 109; G. J. Marcus, *Heart of Oak* (1975), p. 98.

¹ 'T. Walduck's Letters from Barbados, 1710', *Journ. of the Barbados Museum and Hist. Soc.* xv (1947–8), p. 48.

² O. J. Dunlop and R. D. Denman, *English Apprenticeship and Child Labour* (1912), p. 167.

³ Hanway, *An Earnest Appeal for Mercy to the Children of the Poor* (1766), sect. xii; R. H. Nichols and F. A. Wray, *The History of the Foundling Hospital* (1935), pp. 76, 182; Dorothy Marshall, *The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century* (1926), p. 205.

⁴ *The Legislative Rights of the Commonalty Vindicated; or, Take your Choice!* (2nd edn., 1777), pp. 147–8 (urging that at eighteen 'a man is a sufficient judge between palpable right and wrong' and pointing to the convenience of militia lists for use as electoral rolls). Dr. Alison G. Olson, *The Radical Duke* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 48–9, states that the eighteen-year-old qualification was embodied in the Duke of Richmond's proposed Bill of 1780, but this was not so, as can be seen from *Parlty. Hist.* xxi (1814), col. 687, and *An Authentic Copy of the Duke of Richmond's Bill for a Parliamentary Reform* (1783), p. 14. The vote for 'everyone above the age of twenty (except servants, beggars, or criminals)' was demanded in the *Leveller Remonstrance of Many Thousands of the Free People of England* (21 Sept. 1649), p. 6, but the claim was inconsistent

IV

All this pressure to subordinate the young might reasonably be thought to have implied an attitude which favoured the elderly. Modern sociologists often speak nostalgically of the treatment of the aged in pre-industrial times. 'An individual', says one, 'might anticipate old age with pleasure, as a time when declining physical energy would be compensated by social esteem for experience.'¹

Before the Industrial Revolution [writes a leading gerontologist] almost without exception the aging enjoyed a favourable position. Their economic security and their social status were assured by their role and place in the extended family . . . the balance of prerogatives of property, power, and decision-making belonging to the aging. This Golden Age of living for older persons was disturbed and undermined by the Industrial Revolution.²

If we set aside the reference to the extended family, this optimistic view is by no means implausible. For the old, unlike the young, had a scarcity value. Contemporaries had no exact figures, but they knew that the chances of living to be sixty were poor. Only one in 500 reached that age, thought William Bradshaw; seventy years later Oliver Heywood put it at one in a thousand.³ In very few communities can the over-sixties have been more than 8 per cent or 9 per cent of the population.⁴

Today, when they are nearly 20 per cent, it is easy to believe that in the past they enjoyed a greater *cachet*. They were, after all, the chief custodians of what Bishop Hall called 'experimental knowledge'.⁵ In a semi-literate society, still much dependent on

with all other Leveller writings, which put the age at twenty-one, save for university voters in the 2nd Agreement of the People (A. S. P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty* (1938), p. 357).

¹ Bryan Wilson, *The Youth Culture and the Universities* (1970), p. 219.

² Ernest W. Burgess (chairman, American branch of the Intl. Assoc. of Gerontology) in *Social Welfare of the Aging*, ed. Jerome Kaplan and G. J. Aldridge (Procs. 5th Congress of Int. Assoc. of Gerontology, New York, 1962), p. 350.

³ William Bradshaw, *A Meditation of Mans Mortalitie* (1621), p. 40; Oliver Heywood, *Autobiography, Diaries, Anecdote and Event Books*, ed. J. Horsfall Turner (Brighouse and Bingley, 1882-5), iii, p. 239.

⁴ As is shown by the tables annexed to chapter 5 of Peter Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* (Cambridge, 1977) (I am very grateful to Mr. Laslett for allowing me to read this chapter before its publication). If allowance is made for likely exaggerations in contemporary statements of age the percentage becomes even lower.

⁵ *The Works of . . . Joseph Hall*, ed. P. Wynter (Oxford, 1863), vii, p. 91.

oral tradition, it was the old who controlled access to the past. They were the repositories of local history and custom, of pedigree and descent. When the Devonshire yeoman Robert Furse compiled his family pedigree, he used not just written evidence but also the 'report of old ancient men'; the author of the *Discourse of the Commonweal* invoked old 'ancient men' to prove that the volume of treasure in circulation had increased; William Harrison did the same to demonstrate the Elizabethan improvement in living conditions. When Garter King of Arms, Dugdale settled a dispute about the pedigree of the Percy family after hearing evidence from 'divers aged people living in Alnwick'. As a boy, John Aubrey 'did ever love to converse with old men as living histories', oral history being a less novel technique than is sometimes suggested.¹ In contemporary lawsuits the oldest inhabitant could be the crucial figure. Whether the issue concerned tithes, parish boundaries, manorial customs, electoral procedure, or civic ceremonial, it was the old to whom litigants appealed, perhaps, as in a Leicestershire boundary case of 1586, producing as their trump card a witness aged 120, or, as at Godalming in 1578, threatening to bring up a whole wagonful of decrepit inhabitants to establish the vicar's right to his house.² Hence the consternation in some Oxfordshire villages in 1643, when an epidemic carried off all the old folk, so that 'there scarce remained alive any for upholding the customs and privileges of the parish'.³

This prestige attaching to great age explains the remarkable number of supposed centenarians. In the London parish of St. Botolph's-without-Aldgate twelve were buried between 1583 and 1599 alone.⁴ The national record was held by Henry Jenkins, who died in 1670, supposedly aged 169 and claiming to remember being sent as a boy to get a load of arrows for the battle of Flodden.⁵ Such ages were accepted uncritically by most

¹ H. J. Carpenter, 'Furse of Morsehead', *Report and Trans. Devon. Assoc.*, xxvi (1894), p. 170; *Tudor Economic Documents*, iii, pp. 310, 69-70; *Collectanea Topographica & Genealogica*, ii (1835), pp. 63-4; Michael Hunter, *John Aubrey and the Realm of Learning* (1975), pp. 39-40.

² Maurice Beresford, *History on the Ground* (revd. edn., 1971), p. 50; Hyland, *Century of Persecution*, p. 419.

³ (Thomas Willis), *The London Practice of Physick* (1685), p. 607.

⁴ T. R. Forbes, *Chronicle from Aldgate* (New Haven, 1971), p. 108.

⁵ *D.N.B.*, and *Evidences of the Great Age of Henry Jenkins* (Richmond, 1859). (I assume him to be the '173'-year-old mentioned in *The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg*, ed. and trans. A. R. and M. B. Hall (Madison, Milwaukee, and London, 1965-), vii, pp. 510-11.) An alternative contender for the

contemporaries, even the great William Harvey being called in to dissect the body of Old Parr, who boasted that he was 152 and had done penance for adultery at the age of 105. Members of the Royal Society, for whom longevity was an important scientific aspiration, tended not to question the figures, but to argue whether they should be attributed to the salubrity of air or of diet.¹ Scepticism was left to laymen, like Thomas Fuller, who remarked that 'many old men . . . set the clock of their age too fast when once past seventy, and, growing ten years in a twelvemonth, are presently fourscore; yea, within a year or two after, climb up to a hundred'; or the Duchess of Newcastle, who commented on one centenarian that 'I believe he made himself older . . . than he was, being a poor man, and got money by showing himself'.² Only in the nineteenth century did tough-minded investigators get down to the task of exposing these bogus claims, showing their basis in mistranscription, misunderstanding, unsupported assertion, or entries in baptismal registers relating to ancestors with the same Christian name.³ The infrequency of centenarians today is a sign of improved vital registration, but it also suggests the greater status of old age in the past.

For women, in particular, age could sometimes mean a rise in authority. Women matured earlier than men, but they also aged sooner. At forty they were exempt from compulsory service under the statute of artificers. Thereafter they could gain in status what they lost in sexual allure. So long as their husbands lived, age was largely irrelevant to their subordination, for, though moralists recommended that husbands should be older than their wives, they were quick to emphasize that even if (as often happened) the wife was the older partner, her duty of

title is Thomas Carn, whose burial in 1588 at the age of '207' is said (Thomas Bailey, *Records of Longevity* (1857), p. 104) to be entered in the parish register of St. Leonard's Shoreditch. But the Guildhall Library kindly informs me that this is a mis-reading for '107'.

¹ There is much on this subject scattered through the *Philosophical Transactions* and *The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg*.

² Fuller, *The Historie of the Holy Warre* (Cambridge, 1647), p. 261; Newcastle, *CCXI. Sociable Letters*, p. 401.

³ W. J. Thoms, *Human Longevity* (1873); T. E. Young, *On Centenarians* (1899). Sir Edwin Chadwick, however, remained naïvely puzzled by the 'singular fact, as yet unexplained, that the greatest proportion of centenarians are of the labouring classes', often 'in some of the worst neighbourhoods in London, where the average duration of life is the lowest'; *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population* (1842), ed. M. W. Flinn (Edinburgh, 1965), p. 242 n.

obedience was unaffected.¹ But a husband's death removed a woman's legal disabilities. To a poverty-stricken widow laden with young children, this can have been of little consolation. But middle-class widows often gained a new independence when they took over their husbands' businesses and ran them in their own name. As the biblical commentators observed, it was in old age that the Jews had deemed a woman to come nearest the value of a man.² Elderly females had their advantages. In 1699 the founder of an almshouse at Shepton Mallet prescribed that 'one sober ancient woman' should live with the almshouses because old men could not 'so well provide for themselves as women'.³

But the greatest advantage of the elderly of this period, it might be thought, was that, unlike today, they were not compelled to disengage themselves from active life, merely because they had reached some fixed numerical age. So long as a man was capable, he could go on for as long as he liked. Indeed it was widely assumed that his continuing involvement would prolong his life.⁴ Of course, the idea of retirement as such was familiar. In rural society it was common for farmers to set up their sons and content themselves with a smaller holding, or to live on interest, or to hand over altogether in return for house-room and maintenance.⁵ Old age was an acceptable excuse for declining local office, for non-appearance in court, for clerical

¹ e.g. Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, pp. 189, 274-5; Nicholas Byfield, *A Commentary upon . . . Peter* (1637), p. 580; *The Works of . . . Tho. Gouge* (1706), p. 307.

² Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations upon the Five Bookes of Moses* (1627), iii, p. 177. Cf. Hilda Kuper, *An African Aristocracy: Rank among the Swazi of Bechuanaland* (1947), p. 117 ('with increasing age the inferiority of women is lessened'); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris, 1975), p. 287 ('La ménopause est multiplicatrice de pouvoir').

³ *Appendix to Report of the Commissioners on Charities (Parly. Papers, 1820, iv)*, p. 214.

⁴ Laurentius, *Discourse of the Preservation of the Sight*, p. 177; *Hermippus Redivivus* (2nd edn., 1749), p. 55 n.; Foss, *Judges*, viii, p. 17. The pros and cons of retirement are interestingly discussed in Clarendon's 'Dialogue of the Want of Respect due to Age', in his *Miscellaneous Works* (2nd edn., 1751).

⁵ Mr. Laslett describes such arrangements as 'hard to find in the sixteenth century and later'; *Journ. of Soc. Hist.* iv (1970), p. 77 n. 3. It is true that they have been less discussed than their medieval counterparts, but they can be found in manorial court rolls and deeds (e.g. W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant* (1957), pp. 201-2; Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 162); they can be inferred from inventories (e.g. *Devon Inventories of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. M. Cash (Devon and Cornwall Rec. Soc., 1966), p. xii; Hoskins, op. cit., p. 189); and they are

non-residence, for withdrawing from public life, and for the non-performance of duties of every kind. Sometimes evidence of infirmity was also required; sometimes the exemption was automatic, as at Lincoln cathedral, where prebendaries over sixty no longer had to preach.¹ Indeed sixty had long become stylized as the age of incipient decrepitude. At sixty a man ceased to be liable to compulsory service under the labour laws or to prosecution for vagrancy;² he was no longer obliged to attend the court leet or to do military service.³ Since the thirteenth century an upper limit of seventy had been set for jury-men, but pressure to excuse the over-sixties from serving as sheriff or coroner had been continuous.⁴ In the customs service sixty was fixed in the later eighteenth century as the minimum age for a pension; in 1810 it became the accepted civil service age of retirement.⁵ Seldom discussed, leave alone justified, the enduring choice of sixty shows how inherited numerology continued to affect men's lives.

But although retirement was usually optional, it would be wrong to regard its purely voluntary status as evidence of any great respect for the elderly or even of a desire to safeguard their freedom of choice. On the contrary, what it suggests is an underlying hostility towards those who opted out of the economic process and a reluctance to devote much of society's limited resources to their maintenance. It shows the weakness of old age, not its strength.

often mentioned in biographical material and family correspondence (e.g. *The Diary and Letter-Book of the Rev. Thomas Brockbank*, ed. R. Trappes-Lomax (Chetham Soc., 1930), p. 17; *The Topographer and Genealogist*, ii (1853), p. 459). Transfers from father to son were sufficiently familiar for a preacher to use them metaphorically to illustrate man's relationship to God; Tobias Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted* (5th edn., 1816), i, pp. 274, 318.

¹ J. H. Strawley, *Michael Honywood, Dean of Lincoln (1660-81)* (Lincoln, 1950), p. 12.

² 23 Edw. III, c. 1 (1349); 19 Hen. VII, c. 12, s. 8 (1504); 5 Eliz., c. 4, s. 5 (1563).

³ In the eighteenth century the upper age for militiamen was reduced, first to fifty (31 Geo. II, c. 25 (1757)), then to forty-five (2 Geo. III, c. 20, s. 42 (1762)).

⁴ Stat. of Westminster II (1285), c. 38; *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, iii, p. 22a; *H.M.C., Cowper*, ii, p. 454. The retirement of judges at sixty was proposed by a reformer in 1651; Cock, *English-Law*, p. 136.

⁵ Though raised to sixty-five between 1822 and 1859; Marios Raphael, *Pensions and Public Servants* (Paris and The Hague, 1964), pp. 114-19, 140-1, 159. There was some biblical authority for choosing the age of sixty; *Leviticus* 27: 7; 1 *Timothy* 5: 9.

For a man took risks when he divested himself of his responsibilities and became a 'tabler' or 'sojourner' with his children. His formal demotion was often enshrined in a legal agreement like the one in which Sir Robert Plumpton surrendered to his son William the ordering and charge of the household while he and his wife took 'their ease and rest'.¹ Such documents would often specify the exact rights of the elderly in meticulous detail, eloquent of the tension to which such handovers could give rise.

Hath any man ever seen a poor aged man live at courtesy in the house of his son with his daughter-in-law? [asked a Jacobean preacher.] Doth not the good father in a short time, either by his coughing or spitting or testiness or some . . . untowardness or other become troublesome either to his own son or to his nice daughter-in-law, with continuing so long chargeable and so much waited-on, or to the children, with taking up their room at the fire or at the table, or to the servants, while his slow eating doth scant their reversions?²

A popular story told of the old man of Monmouth who gave his estate to his son and went to live with him:

After the deed of gift was made, awhile the old man sat at the upper end of the table; afterwards, they set him lower, about the middle of the table; next, at the table's end; and then among the servants; and, last of all, they made him a couch behind the door and covered him with old sackcloth, where, with grief and sorrow, the old man died. When the old man was buried, the young man's eldest child said unto him: 'I pray you, father, give me this old sackcloth.' 'What wouldst thou do with it?' said his father. 'Forsooth', said the boy, 'it shall serve to cover you as it did my old grandfather.'³

Whether or not *King Lear* was inspired by the actual case of Sir Brian Annesley and his daughter Cordell,⁴ the play exemplifies calculative family relationships which contemporaries regarded as normal. In 1648 Sir William Lisle died 'in a nasty chamber, being all his son would allow him for his men, horses, dogs, provisions, and for the cooking of them'.⁵ In July 1667 Pepys was disgusted to find the King and Council spending nearly

¹ *Plumpton Correspondence*, ed. T. Stapleton (Camden Soc., 1839), pp. cxxiii-cxxv.

² Foulke Robartes, *The Revenue of the Gospel is Tythes* (Cambridge, 1613), pp. 114-15.

³ *Pasquils Jestes* (1604), in *Shakespeare Jest-Books*, ed. W. C. Hazlitt (1864), pt. 3, ii, p. 61. Emily Thomas points out to me that the same theme occurs in *The Old Man and his Grandson* by the brothers Grimm.

⁴ *H.M.C., Salisbury*, xv, p. 266.

⁵ *A Royalist's Notebook*, ed. F. Bamford (1936), pp. 124-5.

two hours on a complaint by an old man against his son for not allowing him enough to live on.¹

The conventional wisdom was therefore that of *Ecclesiasticus*: 'As long as thou livest and hast breath in thee, give not thyself over to any. For better it is that thy children should seek to thee, than that thou shouldst stand to their courtesy.' A man should make some bequests in his lifetime, to prevent his children wishing for his death; but he should do it in such a way that they remained beholding to him, not he to them.² Arrangements for boarding in a child's house should be avoided, thought the elderly Daniel Rogers in 1642: for a time the old people might justify their keep by acting as servants and household drudges. But 'when all strength and ability is gone, then they are no longer set by, but . . . despised, counted as burdens'. 'Be wise, you parents', he warned, 'yield not yourselves captives and prisoners to your children; no prison can be more irksome to a parent than a son or daughter's house.'³ When Queen Christina of Sweden told Bulstrode Whitelocke of her intention to abdicate, the English envoy rehearsed the cautionary tale of the old man who planned to hand over to his son; while the lawyer was preparing the deed the old man began to chew tobacco, whereupon his son asked him to do his spitting in the kitchen because there was company in the parlour. The father obeyed, but then refused to sign the deed, saying he had changed his mind, 'because he was resolved to spit in the parlour as long as he lived'.⁴ The pre-mortem transmission of property, say the anthropologists, weakens the authority of the senior generation.⁵ Contemporaries knew this very well.

Prudence made landowners reluctant to retire. Among the lower classes it was sheer necessity. In the absence of state pensions, nearly two-thirds of men over sixty-five were still

¹ *Diary*, 3 July 1667. Cf. *A.P.C.*, 1621-3, p. 368; *Middlesex County Records. Calendar of Sessions Rolls* (typescript, 1927-33), 1611, i, p. 137 (21 May).

² *Ecclesiasticus*, 33: 20-1; Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Piety* (1708 edn.), p. 366.

³ Daniel Rogers, *Matrimonial Honour* (1642), p. 92.

⁴ Whitelocke, *A Journal of the Swedish Embassy*, ed. H. Reeve (1855), i, p. 352. Cf. Daniel Defoe ('Andrew Moreton'), *The Protestant Monastery . . . with a Caution to People in Years, how they give the Staff out of their own Hands, and leave themselves at the Mercy of Others* (1727).

⁵ Cf. Jack Goody, 'Aging in Non-industrial Societies', *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences* (vol. i of the forthcoming *Handbooks of Aging Series*, ed. J. E. Birren) (which Professor Goody very kindly allowed me to read in typescript).

employed in 1900.¹ In earlier times most had no choice but to struggle on as best they could. At Norwich in 1570 there were octogenarian women still spinning, while in 1679 Oliver Heywood was pleased to hear that a man of ninety-four and his wife of 104 had been seen carding in front of their house. Ralph Thoresby cited the equally inspiring example of Lawrence Benson of Leeds, who one afternoon reaped half an acre of wheat, ground it at the mill, made a cake with the flour, and ate it for his supper, all at the age of ninety-one.²

But for most manual workers old age meant, first, a move to lighter (and lower-paid) work, then a decline to abject dependence. Every contemporary list of paupers contains a proportion described as 'ancient and decrepit', 'aged and past work', 'old and her work done'.³ For miners, tailors, and metal-workers this stage could come very quickly.⁴ Almshouses did not take those capable of working, yet the minimum age of admission was sometimes as low as forty. For literary commentators fifty was usually the point when old age began: 'at fifty', said Bishop Babington, 'we go down the hill again and every day grow weaker and weaker'.⁵ When old age pensions were first proposed, by Defoe in the 1690s, and by Dowdeswell in 1772, fifty was the age at which they were to be payable. On this point Burke agreed with Paine: from the age of fifty a workman's decline became 'every year more sensible'.⁶

¹ *Report of the Committee on the Economic and Financial Problems of the Provision for Old Age* (Cmd. 9333, 1954), table ix.

² *Norwich Census of the Poor, passim*; Heywood, *Autobiography*, ii, p. 165; Thoresby, *Ducatus Leodiensis* (1715), p. 621. Cf. A. P. Wadsworth and J. de L. Mann, *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire, 1600-1780* (Manchester, 1931), pp. 327, 332-3.

³ See, e.g., the Linton list of 1693 given in E. M. Hampson, *The Treatment of Poverty in Cambridgeshire, 1597-1834* (Cambridge, 1934), pp. 178-9.

⁴ The premature ageing in certain occupations described by C. Turner Thackrah, *The Effects of the Principal Arts, Trades, and Professions . . . on Health and Longevity* (1831) may be reasonably projected back into the early modern period. John Graunt commented on the low life-expectancy of metal-workers; *The Economic Writings of Sir William Petty*, ed. C. H. Hull (Cambridge, 1899), ii, p. 350. Bern. Ramazzini, *A Treatise of the Diseases of Tradesmen* (Eng. trans., 1705) relates to analogous Italian conditions.

⁵ *Works of Gervase Babington*, ii, p. 15. Cf. Cogan, *Haven of Health*, p. 192; Laurentius, *Discourse of the Preservation of Sight*, p. 174; Cuffe, *Differences of the Ages of Mans Life*, p. 120; John Donne, 'The Autumnall'; Steele, *Discourse Concerning Old-Age*, p. 9.

⁶ Daniel Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects* (1697), p. 146; *Parlty. Hist.*, xvii (1813), col. 639; Burke, *Works* (Bohn edn., 1854-69), v, p. 91; Paine, *Rights of Man* (1792), ii, p. 70.

The maintenance of elderly employees was a moral responsibility but not a legal one. Some large concerns—the Mineral and Battery Company, the Crowley Ironworks, the naval dockyards—made it a regular practice to support them.¹ Other employers deliberately avoided taking on older men.² Moralists unceasingly complained that masters would work out their servants ‘and then, when age cometh . . . they turn them out of the doors, poor and helpless . . . to shift for themselves’.³ When they became unable to work any longer their children (if they had any still living) were morally and legally obliged to support them, but for a variety of reasons, of which poverty is the most obvious, the duty appears to have been erratically discharged. The citation of ‘judgements’ on ‘unnatural’ children tells its own story.⁴ Children were the staff of old age, said a preacher, ‘but God sometimes beats men with these staves instead of supporting them thereby’.⁵

No wonder that people lived ‘in fears and distrust in regard of the time to come, how they shall do when they are old and not able to work’.⁶ Dudley North denounced the Poor Law because it threatened to take away that essential prop to industry, ‘the terror of starving in old age’.⁷ But the Poor Law never solved the problem of aged poverty. Private charity did more to help, but it too fell far short of actual needs, as benefactors were seldom exclusively interested in the plight of the elderly.⁸ A quick reckoning of the accommodation available in almshouses shows that they could have catered for only a minute

¹ Donald, *Elizabethan Monopolies*, p. 104; M. W. Flinn, *Men of Iron* (Edinburgh, 1962), pp. 228–32; Baugh, *British Naval Administration*, p. 320.

² A policy recommended by Dudley, 4th Lord North; *Observations and Advices Oeconomical* (1669), pp. 43, 51–2.

³ John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (1618 edn.), p. 222; Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. E. Surtz and J. H. Hexter (New Haven, 1965), p. 240; William Hinde, *A Faithfull Remonstrance of the . . . Life . . . of Iohn Bruen* (1641), p. 61; Thomas Fuller, *The Holy State* (Cambridge, 1648), p. 16; John Conant, *Sermons*, v (1708), p. 23.

⁴ e.g. *The Unnatural Daughter, being a true, but dismal relation of a certain victular's Daughter . . . who in a most cruel and inhumane manner turn'd her own Aged Father out of Doors after he had Settled her in his House; forcing him to live upon the Charity of others; who Earnestly Pray'd that God would send a Judgment upon her for her base Cruelty. And accordingly . . . she was brought to bed of a Strange Monster in the shape of a Serpent . . .* (1709).

⁵ Samuel Shaw, *The True Christians Test* (1682), p. 123.

⁶ Bradshaw, *Meditation of Mans Mortalitie*, p. 18.

⁷ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 32522, fol. 22.

⁸ W. K. Jordan, *Philanthropy in England, 1480–1660* (1959), p. 42.

fraction of the elderly population.¹ Reformers like Samuel Hering urged that more houses be built 'for old people to be cherished in and fitted for heaven'.² But contemporaries were not enthusiastic about segregating the aged in geriatric institutions. Outside their own families, the relief of the elderly poor was a low priority; and in the villages it could be bitterly resented.

At higher social levels retirement pensions were haphazard. Some government departments had charity funds for the aged and indigent, while annuities and sinecures could be obtained through special influence. But normally it was up to the officeholder to strike a bargain with his would-be successor. The principle that pensions should be a collective responsibility has been traced back to the superannuation fund established for customs officers in the reign of Anne. But it was not generally accepted by the Civil Service until 1810.³ There were isolated pension schemes: naval warrant officers had one in 1672.⁴ But frequently men clung to posts they could no longer efficiently discharge, yet could not afford to relinquish. Aged clergy seldom retired, especially after the Elizabethan statute which, by forbidding conditional resignations, ended the practice of negotiating surrenders in return for a pension.⁵ Bishops were virtually forbidden to resign, as the aged Zachary Pearce found when he unsuccessfully tried to give up the see of Rochester in the 1760s.⁶ Schoolmasters sat tight until the trustees could devise means of buying them out. Naval officers did not formally retire, but lived on half-pay, sometimes emerging in their dotage to command ships. In 1744 the Channel Fleet preparing to meet the French was commanded by Sir John Norris, then aged about eighty-four.

So if the elderly sometimes remained in positions of authority, they often did so reluctantly, and in face of much contemporary

¹ Laslett, *The World we have Lost*, p. 262 (Mr. Laslett slightly understates Professor Jordan's figures for London, but the point still stands). In the eighteenth century non-resident charities for the aged increased, but the number of new almshouses declined; David Owen, *English Philanthropy, 1660-1960* (1965), p. 74.

² Nickolls, *Original Letters*, p. 100.

³ Raphael, *Pensions and Public Servants*, *passim*.

⁴ *Descriptive Catalogue of the Naval MSS. in the Pepysian Library*, i, p. 148.

⁵ 31 Eliz., c. 6; see Kathleen Major, 'Resignation Deeds of the Diocese of Lincoln', *Bull. Inst. Hist. Res.* xix (1942), p. 63.

⁶ See the account of his life prefaced to his *A Commentary with Notes on the Four Evangelists* (1777), i, pp. xxvi-xxviii.

hostility. For all the gerontocratic language of the time, it was relatively unusual to appoint persons in their sixties or above to posts of importance. But it could be difficult to get them to go.

The impatience of their would-be successors was not the only irritation the aged had to bear. Like the young, they were subject to irksome constraints stemming from accepted notions about what was proper behaviour for particular age-groups. The old, 'especially those in a retired way', were supposed to maintain a dignified exterior. Their clothes were to be sober, their manners grave: 'those garments are unfitting for men of years which were not unbecoming them when they were youthful'. 'Curled grey hair' was 'not comely'; an old woman who dressed as a girl of fifteen was like 'a wanton song at a funeral'.¹ The essential point was that the aged were to refrain from sexual competition with their younger. Lust in the elderly was an infallible occasion for ridicule and censure.² Even sexual relations between married couples too old to conceive children were regarded as harmful by doctors and of doubtful morality by some divines. 'This rejoicing and delight of married persons in each other', thought William Perkins, was permitted 'more in their young years than in their old age'.³

Suspicion surrounded the marriage of the elderly. Unions between men over sixty and women over fifty were not unlawful, said a leading canon lawyer, but they could hardly be described as comely. Thomas Tryon wanted them absolutely prohibited. If poor women of sixty marry, said Richard Bernard, 'we dislike it and speak against it'.⁴ The marriage or remarriage of the old could be justified by the Protestant doctrine that the end of matrimony was not just procreation, but 'comfortable society'. Yet prejudices lingered, particularly when the union was of

¹ John Edwards, *Sermons on Special Occasions* (1698), p. 281; *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, ed. J. Ayre (Parker Soc., 1844), p. 375; *The Works of John Robinson*, ed. R. Ashton (1851), i, p. 253; Hannah Woolley, *The Gentlewomans Companion* (1675), p. 61.

² Much of the section on old age in John Cotgrave, *The English Treasury of Wit and Language* (1655), is devoted to the impotent lechery of old men.

³ Perkins, *Workes* (Cambridge, 1616-18), iii, p. 691. Cf. Hart, *KAINIKO*, p. 326; Joseph Bentham, *The Christian Conflict* (1635), p. 295. But for justification of elderly marital love see Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, p. 226; Rogers, *Matrimoniall Honour*, p. 163.

⁴ Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals* (1686), pp. 46, 50; A. Gordon, 'A Pythagorean of the Seventeenth Century', *Procs. Lit. and Philos. Soc. of Liverpool*, xxv (1870-1), p. 316; Richard Bernard, *Ruths Recompence* (1628), p. 65. Sir Thomas Overbury's 'Ordinary Widow' remarried, but not his 'Virtuous Widow'; *Characters*, ed. E. F. Rimbault (1856).

a January-and-May variety, and even more so if January was the woman. Such marriages had long provided young men with a recognized mode of advancement, whether to the tenancy of a holding or a business career; indeed age disparities between marriage partners were very common.¹ But they remained controversial; no wonder Thomas Cromwell was urged to make a law against them.² For the old, as for the young, sexual activity was unfitting.

For all these reasons we need not wonder that the picture of old age yielded by contemporary literature is frankly pessimistic. Most writings addressed to the aged took it for granted that their readers were persons to whom life had become a burden. No one doubted that old age was a wretched time of physical deterioration. 'All men agree in this point that old age is miserable, being as it were the very sink of all extreme miseries.'³ It was notoriously 'itself a disease', 'a perpetual sickness', 'the dregs . . . of a man's life'.⁴ True, the first phase, 'green old age', was often said to be the best part of life, when the passions had cooled, but the mind remained sharp. But as the physical decay set in which contemporary medicine was powerless to avert, moral deterioration followed. In literary tradition the old were peevish, forgetful, covetous, garrulous, and dirty.⁵ Old men bored their juniors by harking back to the good old days of their youth. Old women went 'tattling from one house to another, telling this

¹ I calculate that, of 454 married couples whose ages are given in the Norwich census of the poor in 1570, the wives were older in 127 cases and in sixty-four instances older by ten years or more. At Colyton, Devon, between 1647 and 1719, 55 per cent of brides were older than their husbands; E. A. Wrigley in *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. xix (1966), p. 88.

² *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, ix. 725. Cf. L. Vives, *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, trans. R. Hyrde (1541), sigs. Oii^v-iv^r; Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, iii. 3. 4. 2; Bernard, *Ruths Recompence*, p. 289; Hilder, *Conjugal Counsell*, pp. 44-6; (S. Bufford), *A Discourse against Unequal Marriages* (1696), chap. ii; Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 39-40. But for a not-altogether flippant defence see A. B., *Learn to Lye Warm, or an apology for the proverb, Tis good sheltring under an old hedge; containing reasons, wherefore a young man should marry an old woman* (1672); and for a remarkable exception to the general condemnation of elderly love see Rochester's 'A Song of a Young Lady to her Ancient Lover'; *Complete Poems*, ed. D. M. Vieth (1968), pp. 89-90.

³ (Symon Goulart), *The Wise Vieillard*, trans. T. W. (1621), pp. 44-5.

⁴ Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde* (1604), p. 39; Tilley, *Dictionary of the Proverbs*, A 73; John Smith, *The Pourtract of Old Age* (2nd edn., 1666), p. 13; Price, *Two Twins of Birth and Death*, p. 9 (following Seneca, *Ep.* 58).

⁵ The texts most frequently drawn upon were Aris., *Rhet.* 1389^b-1390^a; Horace, *Ars Poet.* 169-76; Juvenal, *Sat.* x. 188-272.

story of this body and the other of that body'.¹ As their faculties declined, the old became suspicious, querulous, and fearful. At first they might try to conceal their age, dying their beards in an effort to hide those grey hairs which were 'a manifest sign of a decay of the generative faculty'.² But gradually they lapsed into helplessness, 'afraid of dogs suddenly rushing out',³ jostled by passers-by in the street. Ultimately they fell into a second childhood, but one which was valued less than the first. 'Mothers and nurses have pleasure in infants', said a preacher, 'but old people are burdensome to all; neither their talk nor company is acceptable.' 'Less care is commonly taken of aged persons', agreed Bishop Tillotson, 'and less kindness showed them than to children.' 'They that can brook the peevishness and the uncleanliness of their children', said another, 'cannot bear it in their parents.'⁴

There is, therefore, no reason to look back wistfully at the aged in this period. 'For any to have their understanding good, their memories and sense tolerable, their conversation acceptable, their relations kind and respectful . . . this', thought John Shower in 1698, 'is a rare case and happens seldom to old people.'⁵ The verbal persecution of the elderly is explicit in proverbial lore about old trots and old shrews: there was no fool like an old fool and nothing worse than an 'old woman'.⁶ Schoolmasters constantly forbade their charges to mock the elderly, but the effect of such prohibitions must have been diminished by the presence in Tudor textbooks of such sentences for translation as 'This dotard waxeth a child again'.⁷ In Restoration drama hostility to the aged assumed unusual proportions, superannuated rakes and belles being portrayed

¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Four Books on the Eleventh of Matthew* (1659), ii, p. 104.

² Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis*, p. 212.

³ Thomas Granger, *A Familiar Exposition or Commentarie on Ecclesiastes* (1621), p. 321.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 323; Tillotson, *A Sermon Preached at the Funeral of the Reverend Benjamin Whichcot* (1683), p. 20; Steele, *Discourse Concerning Old-Age*, pp. 171-2. Cf. H[umphry] M[ill], *Poems* (1639), sig. M8 ('Old men are children, if they live but long, / They to themselves are burthens: for the young / Their spittings, coughings, froward dispositions, / So irksome are . . .').

⁵ John Shower, *Of Long Life and Old Age* (1698), pp. 30-1 (plagiarizing Tillotson, *Sermon*, p. 19).

⁶ Tilley, *Dictionary of the Proverbs*, F 506, O 38; *Oxford Eng. Dicty.*, s.v. 'old'; Defoe, *Protestant Monastery*, p. 3 ('if any person is awkward at his business or anything else, he is called an *Old Woman*').

⁷ Horman, *Vulgaria*, fol. 52^v.

as loathsome and ridiculous.¹ 'Young people', wrote Defoe in 1727, 'look upon their elders as a different species . . . they ascribe no merit to the virtue and experience of old age, but assume to themselves the preference in all things.' Many contemporaries congratulated themselves on their superiority to those 'inhuman and barbarous' people who simply put the elderly to death. It took Defoe to point out that their own treatment of the aged was 'directly opposite to the dignity and decency of human nature'.²

It is therefore wrong to regard the depreciation of old age as a recent affair. Throughout history the elderly have always suffered from changes which make their experience outmoded.³ In the early modern period there was innovation in every sphere of life, from agriculture to cooking. The spread of education, as Ascham remarked, made it possible for a boy to learn more in a year than experience could teach him in twenty. Successful children despised their homely parents as rustic and old-fashioned: 'if the parent mistake in a phrase or term, they will laugh at it in them'. Henry Peacham recalled the schoolmaster at St. Albans who

by no entreaty would teach any scholar . . . further than his father had learned before him, as, if he had only learned but to read English, the son, though he went with him seven years, should go no further. His reason was they would prove saucy rogues and control their fathers.⁴

He was right, for it was the growing assumption of intellectuals that knowledge was to be advanced rather than hoarded which was to make inherited wisdom obsolete. By the invention of writing and printing, observes Lord Kames, old men lost much of their earlier importance;⁵ maps and written records would make the evidence of aged inhabitants unnecessary. Among scholars the new science, with its hostility to the ancients, was

¹ See Elisabeth Mignon, *Crabbed Age and Youth. The Old Men and Women in the Restoration Comedy of Manners* (Durham, N.C., 1947).

² *Protestant Monastery*, pp. 20, 1; *The Works of Symon Patrick*, ed. A. Taylor (Oxford, 1858), iii, p. 611; John Aubrey, *Remains of Gentilisme*, ed. J. Britten (Folk-Lore Soc., 1881), p. 19.

³ Cf. K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 106-7.

⁴ Ascham, *English Works*, p. 214; Paul Bayne, *An Entire Commentary upon the whole Epistle . . . to the Ephesians* (1647), p. 682; Peacham, *The Complete Gentleman* (1634), ed. V. B. Heltzel (Ithaca, N.Y., 1962), p. 38.

⁵ Henry Home of Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* (Glasgow, 1817), ii, p. 38 n.

to produce the dogma that only the young could make intellectual discoveries. In the later seventeenth century proverbs, once the inseparable accompaniment of learned discourse, began to disappear from polite conversation; the encapsulated wisdom of the past was something which the élite had come to despise.¹

Religious change was equally subversive. First it was the Lutheran children who mocked their Catholic parents: 'my father is an old doting fool and will fast upon the Friday; and my mother goeth always mumbling on her beads. But you shall see me of another sort, I warrant you.'² Later it was the Puritans and sectaries who revolted against their elders. To argue that 'thus have I always done and my father before me', said the preachers, was 'a vain and hellish speech'; the older the man the older in sin.³ In the diocese of Lincoln a Jacobean cleric was accused of preaching that all old men were damned, a doctrine later reiterated from his Dorset pulpit by John Wesley's grandfather, with particular reference to the over-sixties.⁴ 'If there were any good to be done in these days', said the Elizabethan minister, Henry Smith, 'it is the young men that must do it, for the old men are out of date.' Every dissident sect would use language of this kind, Catholics included.⁵

In such conditions of ideological disunity and social change old age could never in itself command respect. If some of the elderly retained authority, it was because of the material resources at their disposal. 'Old people commonly are despised', said Richard Steele, adding the significant qualification, 'especially when they are not supported with good estates'. The old man spitting at the fireplace was disregarded, but if he 'hath estate of his own to maintain himself and to pleasure his children, oh, then he is had in estimation, his age is honoured, his

¹ F. P. Wilson, *The Proverbial Wisdom of Shakespeare* (1961), p. 2.

² John Christoferson, *An Exhortation* (1554), sig. Tij^v. Cf. *The Works of James Pilkington*, ed. J. Scholefield (Parker Soc., 1842), p. 486.

³ Samuel Trickett, *Sermons*, ed. J. E. Blakeney (1863), pp. 173-4.

⁴ *The State of the Church*, ed. C. W. Foster, i (Linc. Rec. Soc., 1926), p. xviii; P.R.O., SP 29/30/32 (charges against John Wesley, vicar of Winterbourn Whitchurch, Dorset; printed by G. J. Davies in *Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset*, xxx (1974), p. 60).

⁵ *The Works of Henry Smith* (Edinburgh, 1866-7), i, p. 228. The appeals to youth by Interregnum radicals (Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 152; John Saltmarsh, *Smoke in the Temple* (1646), p. 22) may be compared with the Catholic Robert Southwell's justification of his attempt to convert his Protestant father; *Two Letters and Short Rules of a Good Life*, ed. N. P. Brown (Charlottesville, Va., 1973), pp. 5-6.

person is revered, his counsel is sought, his voice is obeyed'.¹ For the old, wealth was frequently the only source of respect, once health and mind had started to decay. Given care, an elderly *rentier* could still retain his authority and be venerated for his wisdom and experience. But for those whose earning capacity depended on their physical strength, old age had little to commend it.

V

In recent times there have been many protests against the dominance of numerical age. After childhood, it is urged, age should become increasingly irrelevant in judging an individual's worth.² In the United States an act was passed in 1967 'to prohibit arbitrary age discrimination in employment' and to 'promote employment of older persons based on their ability rather than age'.³ This is a reaction against a process which reached its culmination in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the legal and social incapacity of infants was most extensively defined, when retirement at a stated age became mandatory for most people, and when bureaucracies, preferring the safety of formal rules to the invidiousness of individual judgements, made universal the ideal of the 'career', that age-graduated succession of jobs and rewards following a predictable pattern. Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries English society moved steadily in this direction. Stratification by age increased, the anomalies of youthful advancement were reduced, and the redundancy of the elderly was increasingly emphasized. Culturally inherited milestones like the two key ages of twenty-one and sixty took on a new importance. Indeed it could be said that full humanity was often confined to persons between those two ages. The trend was already implicit in the plea made to an Elizabethan archdeacon's court to disregard the evidence of two witnesses.⁴ One was a youth of eighteen, the other was a man of eighty. Both, it was urged, lacked discretion. The one was too young; the other too old.

¹ Steele, *Discourse concerning Old-Age*, p. 171; Robartes, *The Revenue of the Gospel*, p. 115. Richard Bernard commented on 'sauciness' to parents-in-law, 'especially if they be poor'; *Ruths Recompence*, p. 133. For a piquant story showing how the treatment of elderly parents depended upon their supposed wealth or lack of it, see *Middle English Sermons*, ed. W. O. Ross (Early Eng. Text Soc., 1940), pp. 89-90.

² F. Musgrove, *Youth and the Social Order* (1964), p. 157.

³ U.S.A., Public Law 90-202 (15 Dec. 1967).

⁴ Bucks. Record Office, D/A/C/23, fols. 11, 46; cited by Hugh Hanley in *Local Populn. Studs.* xv (1975), p. 33.