

Personifications of Old Age in Medieval Poetry: Charles d'Orléans

In his *Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture*, Professor Ad Putter explored the personifications of Old Age in the poetry of Charles d'Orléans and William Langland. In this edited extract, he discusses the portrayal of Old Age as an opponent in a tennis match.

Introduction

It is statistically likely that more of us will see Old Age than did our ancestors in medieval England. The period after the Black Death, which arrived in 1348 but returned in waves thereafter, was particularly depressing for life expectancy. Records from the city of Florence provide some indicative figures: the life expectancy there was 40 in 1300; in 1375, after the plague, it had gone down to 18.¹ It might be thought, then, that poets from this period would not have much relevant to say about what getting old feels like, especially since they were also writing at a time when personification allegory had become the dominant form. In allegorical fiction, feelings (e.g. Hope, Love, Hate) and abstract concepts (e.g. Youth and Old Age) behave as if they were people (or objects), in obvious violation of the laws of physics. Can we really expect to learn anything about ageing from later medieval allegories?

I would like to consider that question with reference to a ballade by Charles d'Orléans. Charles defied statistical averages: he died in 1465, aged 70. Such longevity was not in fact all that unusual, despite the average life expectancy, which was distorted by the large numbers of childhood deaths in the period. If you survived into adulthood, chances were that you would live for another 30 years or more.²

If Charles d'Orléans had reasons for being conscious about his age, these reasons were altogether different. Marking time for 25 years as a political hostage, he must have felt that his best years were slipping away from him, so the topic of ageing naturally weighed on his mind. He was only 20 when he was captured at the battle of Agincourt and

separated from his wife Bonne d'Armagnac. She died when he was around 40, still stuck in England; he was coming up for 45 when he was finally released. Now the life of a royal hostage like Charles was not like that of modern prisoners, and recent scholarship has discredited the false image of Charles pining away in harsh confinement.³ It is better to imagine Charles as an involuntary guest; he participated in the social life of his custodians and even learned to speak and write English. Yet the revisionist idea of Charles comfortably lodged with cultured and congenial hosts is equally false, for a man who is enjoying himself cannot be held to an extortionate ransom. In Charles's case, the

price of freedom was set at 240,000 *écus*. He paid it willingly.

Vieillesse in Ballade 113

In English captivity Charles wrote his finest poetry about ageing. The ballade I would like to consider, composed by Charles just before his release, is upbeat, if precariously so (see panel).⁴

The unifying conceit here is the game of tennis as it used to be played, without rackets (hence the name *jeu de paume*), without net, and in this period typically with three players on either side.⁵ The scoring was in multiples of 15, i.e. 15, 30, 45 (later abbreviated to 40), and the minimal winning score 60. With the

Ballade 113 (Champion XC)

I'ay tant joué avecques Aage
A la paulme que maintenant
J'ay quarante cinq; sur bon gage
Nous jouons, non pas por neant.
Assez me sens fort et puissant
De garder mon jeu jusqu'a cy,
Ne je ne crains riens que Soussy.

Car Soussy tant me discourage
De jouer et va estouppant
Les cops que fiers a l'avantage.
Trop seurement est rachassant;
Fortune si lui est aidant.
Mais Espoir est mon bon amy,
Ne je ne crains riens que Soussy.

Viellesse de douleur enrage
De ce que le jeu dure tant,
Et dit en son felon langage
Que les chasses dorevanant
Merchera pour m'estre nuisant.
Mais ne me'n chault, je la deffy,
Ne je ne crains riens que Soussy.

L'envoy

Se Bon Eur me tient convenant,
Je ne doubte ne tant ne quant
Tout mon adversaire party;
Ne je ne crains riens que Soussy.

I have been playing tennis with Ageing
For so long that I have now reached
Forty-five; we are playing
For a proper stake, not for nothing.
I feel myself strong and capable enough
To stay in the game until this point,
And I fear nothing apart from Anxiety.

For Anxiety discourages me so
From playing and goes about stopping
All the shots I make to gain advantage.
He is too good at retrieving them,
For Fortune helps him out.
But I have Hope on my side,
And I fear nothing apart from Anxiety.

Old Age is furious with distress
That the game is taking so long,
And says in her spiteful way,
That she will from now on
Mark the chases to harm me,
But I don't care; I defy her,
And I fear nothing apart from Anxiety.

Envoy

If Happiness keeps his promise,
I have no fear whatsoever
Of the entire opposition side,
And I fear nothing apart from Anxiety.

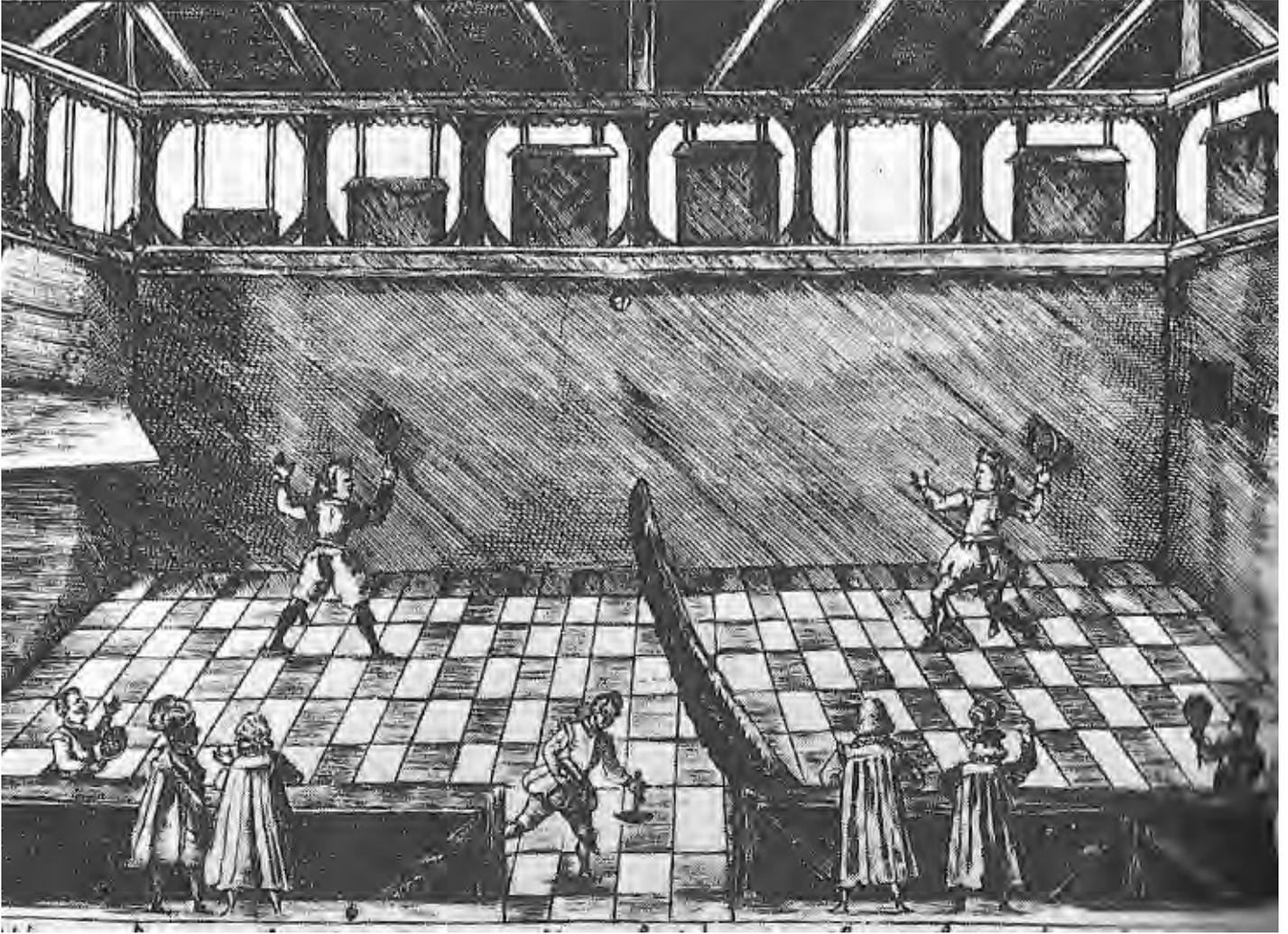


Figure 1. 'Jeu de paume', from a copper engraving, c.1606. The net and rackets are post-medieval, but note that, apart from the players, there is an umpire, ready to 'mark the chases' with a marking implement which he carries by its handle. Reproduced from Gillmeister, Tennis, p. 158.

score at 45, we enter this tennis game at a decisive moment, and in the game of life 45 is also a critical age. As John Burrow has shown, it was common in the Middle Ages to divide the Ages of Man into three (or more) stages: childhood, youth, old age (sometimes followed by a fourth: decrepitude). In that scheme, the crucial division between youth and old age was usually drawn at 45.⁶ In William Langland's *Piers Plowman* Ymaginatif tells Will:

I have folwed thee, in feith, thise fyve and
fourty wynter,
And manye tymes have meved thee to
mynne on thyn ende [mynne reflect]
And how fele fernyeres are faren, and so
fewe to come [fele ... faren many past
years have gone]
And of thi wilde wantownesse tho thou
yong were,

To amende it in thi myddel age, lest myght
the faille

In thyn olde elde ...

(*Piers Plowman* B XII.3-8)⁷

After 45 winters Will, like Charles, stands on the brink of Old Age. The same number occurs in Passus XI of *Piers Plowman*, where the symbolic significance is clearly spelt out:

Coveitise of Eighes conforted me noon after
And folwed me fourty winter and a fifte
moore ...

.....

By wissyng of this wenche I dide, hir wordes
were so swete, [wissyng guiding]

Til I foryat [Y]outhe and yarn into [E]lde
[yarn ran; Elde old age]

(*Piers Plowman* B XI. 46-7, 59-60)

The editor A.V.C. Schmidt does not capitalise
Youthe and Elde, but to make proper sense

of this passage we need to have at least one foot in the allegorical fiction: Will is on the road with Coveitise of Eighes, i.e. blindly following his desires; she does the navigating ('wissyng'). Then, after 45 years, Will forgets to bring Youth along and bumps into Old Age. A literal-minded objection to the allegory would be that we cannot 'forget' our youth as we 'forget' a person or a thing, but there is connection between these two propositions that vindicates Langland's allegory: people take their youth for granted, and, when they realise they have lost it, it is like discovering they have left their house keys behind.

Returning to Charles's ballade, the significance of 45 in medieval thought explains why Soussy (Anxiety) becomes such a nuisance in this poem. At 45, age is not on

your side anymore – hence Age is on the opposing tennis team – and although Charles has been doing fine until now, *jusqu'a cy*, the game is in the balance and there is a lot at stake (for this is really the game of life). Can he hold his nerve at match point? Soussy enters the allegorical frame at precisely that point, as the living embodiment of all the pressures and tensions of the situation.⁸ He is the opponent who frustrates your best efforts, who effortlessly blocks your shots so that you never manage to win *avantage* (pun intended).⁹

Vieillesse, visibly annoyed that Charles is still going strong, is given an interesting role in the allegorical fiction. In this period, too, tennis was usually umpired; but the function of the umpire was not simply to keep the score, as Old Age keeps careful count of our years, but also 'to mark the chases'. As Heiner Gillmeister explains, under medieval rules, a point was not automatically lost if the ball bounced twice in the playing area; rather, the players would try to stop the ball as soon as possible after its second bounce:

The spot where the ball had been blocked was marked and referred to as a chase (French *chasse*). After every chase, the teams changed ends, and in the rally which followed both teams were obliged to win the chase. This meant that the team attacking the chase had to play the ball in such a way as to force it beyond the mark of the previous chase. If they succeeded, the point was theirs, if not, their opponents would be credited with it.¹⁰

For competitive players 'the measuring of the chases was a deadly serious matter', and teams sometimes came to blows over disputed markings.¹¹ With Vieillesse as umpire, we know that the crucial refereeing decisions will be going against Charles. Again the allegory manages to capture what life is like as we get older. We carry on as normal trying to meet the targets we are set, and, though in reality we are the ones who slow down, our perception is that the bar is being unfairly raised, that Old Age is out to make our tasks impossible. And 'marking the chases' may be meaningful in another sense, too. The phrase is listed as proverbial in the

earliest edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'académie française* (Paris, 1694, s.v. *marquer*). The fuller entry from the 1798 edition (s.v. *chasse*) seems particularly relevant: *Marquer ceste chasse* means proverbially or figuratively 'to pick out a word, or to take note of a peculiarity in a situation or in someone's behaviour, that can be turned to your advantage.' This figurative sense provides yet further insight into how Vieillesse operates in real life: she knows your weaknesses and uses them to gain the upper hand.

The details of the ballade, then, are designed to justify the angst that nags away at the speaker's optimistic defiance and that, returning with every refrain, simply refuses to go away. It nags away again in the big 'If' of the Envoy: 'If Happiness (*Bon Eur*) keeps his promise, I have no fear at all.' Of course, Happiness does not keep promises, as is clear from an earlier ballade by Charles, Ballade 82 (Champion CVIII), where Happiness is allegorised as a companion (*Bon Temps*) who promised to help Charles in his fight against Old Age but let him down. Charles's names for Happiness, *Bon Eur* and *Bon Temps*, say it all: Happy Hour and Good Times are by definition temporary; and sooner or later *Bon Heur*, now on Charles's team, will go over to the other side to be with Fortune, who is his mistress.

Notes

- 1 S. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 21.
- 2 J.T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 3.
- 3 See especially William Askins, 'The Brothers Orléans and their Keepers', in *Charles d'Orléans in England* (1415–1440), ed. Mary-Jo Arn (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 27–46. Mary-Jo Arn's 'Bibliographical Supplement' in the same volume (pp. 215–225) updates the bibliography by Deborah Nelson, *Charles d'Orléans: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: MHRA, 1990).
- 4 References to Charles's French poems are to the edition by Jean-Claude Mühlethaler (Paris: Lettres gothiques, 1992), with cross-references to the poems as numbered in the edition by Pierre Champion, *Charles D'Orléans: Poésies, Classiques français du Moyen Age*, 2 vols (Paris: Champion, 1923–7). I have occasionally amended Mühlethaler's text in accordance with my own understanding of the sense.

5 See Heiner Gillmeister, *Tennis: A Cultural History* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 79.

6 J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), especially pp. 69–70, and see also his 'Langland *Nel Mezzo del Cammin*', in P.L. Heyworth (ed.), *Medieval Studies for J. A. W. Bennett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 21–41. For discussion of the French tradition see Jean-Claude Mühlethaler, *Poétiques du quinzième siècle* (Paris: Nizet, 1983), pp. 148–157, and H. Dubois and M. Zink (eds.), *Les Âges de la vie au Moyen-Âge* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1992).

7 This and subsequent citations from *Piers Plowman* are from the second edition of the B-Text by A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 1995); any minor emendations I have made to Schmidt's text are indicated by square brackets. It should be noted that Schmidt disputes the meaning that J.A. Burrow sees in the number of years; his own interpretation can be found in his note to XI. 47. Charles d'Orléans seems to me to provide yet further support in favour of Burrow's view that 45 marks the boundary between middle age and old age.

8 It is possible that Souci in this lyric also had a specific personal meaning for Charles. According to Pierre Champion, Charles wrote this ballade when he had heard his release had been approved, and was worried whether he would be able to raise the ransom: Pierre Champion, *Vie de Charles d'Orléans* (Paris: Champion, 1911), pp. 300–301.

9 As Gillmeister notes, the term was already current in the fifteenth century: *Tennis*, pp. 125–6.

10 Gillmeister, *Tennis*, p. 39.

11 Ibid.

Ad Putter is Professor of Medieval English Literature at the University of Bristol.

His Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture was delivered on 21 October 2011 at the University of Bristol, and again on 17 November 2011 as part of the British Academy's 'Medieval Week' at the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

The full version of this lecture, which looks in more detail at Charles D'Orléans's French and English poetry and at *Piers Plowman* will be published in *The Review of English Studies*. We thank the journal editors for permission to print this extract.
