L U C I E   D O L E Ž A L O V Á

Nemini vetula placet?
In search of the positive representation of old women in the Middle Ages[*]

Hugh of Folieto, in his short treatise *De nuptiis* (On marriage) discouraging men from marriage, stresses that none of the two options awaiting a married man is desirable:

> *Mulier omnis aut in juventute morietur, aut erit anus. Si moritur, sequitur dolor, si eam diligis; si anum exspectas, nemini vetula placet. Non igitur amandum quod tam cito displicet, aut tam leviter dimittitur. Illa quae verticis crines aurea dividit acu, quae frontem pingit, faciem colorat, gemmis digitos exornat, erit esca vermium, erit colubri cibus. Hujus collum coluber ambiet, anget anguis ubera. Et quanto pulchrior atque tenerior fuerit caro, tanto velocius putrefacta vertetur in saniem. Haec in terra patietur. Sed quid in inferno erit?*[1]

> [Every woman will either die in her youth, or she will become old. If she dies, there comes the pain if you love her; if you await an old woman, nobody likes a *vetula*. So, such a thing, which either becomes unpleasant so quickly or is taken away so rapidly, should not be loved. The one who divides her golden hair on her neck with a comb, who paints her forehead and her face, decorates her fingers with precious stones, will be food for the worms, the meal of the snakes. A snake will encircle her neck, it will squeeze her shoulders. And the more beautiful and tender the flesh used to be, the faster its rotten remains will turn into poison. Such things are suffered on earth. But what will be in hell?]

[1] De nuptiis. In: Patrologia Latina 176, col. 1208, written by Hugh of Fouilloy (Hugo de Folieto; died ca. 1172). The English translation is mine.

This view is no exception. Medieval literary representations of old women, *vetulae*, tend to be primarily negative. Old women are ugly, greedy, corrupted, and vile. They are either ridiculous or repulsive, or both at the same time. They are not wise but wicked. If they possess some knowledge (usually medical[2]), it is natural, not intellectual, closer to witchcraft than to art, and thus always potentially dangerous.[3] They are bitter, jealous, bossy, immoral, often drunk,[4] and repeatedly trying to seduce young guys (since they desire sex all the time).

The conclusion of Jan Ziolkowski fits this image: old women are important for the primary education of children, which is, however, brought "up" to the male level, as soon as the children grow a bit, and the "old wives' tales" are then substituted with "real" and "serious" ones.[5] Old women are associated with the native, the oral, and vernacular; they are even, as Ziolkowski claims, the typical speakers of obscene language.[6]

Such obscene *vetulae* are stock characters in medieval drama.[7] For example, in an Old Czech Easter Drama fragment Mastičkář[8] (*Unguentarius* or *Mercator* in the so called "Salbenkrämerspiel") from the 14th century, the

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[2] Cf. Jole Agrimi, and Chiara Crisciani, Savoir médical et anthropologie religieuse: les répresentations et les fonctions de la vetula (XIII–XV siècle). In: Annales ESC: économies, sociétés, civilisations (later: Annales – Histoire, Sciences Sociales) 48/5 (1993) 1281–1308.

[3] This ambiguity is discussed with reference to a particular literary example by Anne Paupert-Bouchiez, 'Sages femmes' ou sorcières? Les vieilles femmes des 'Evangiles aux Quenouilles'. In: Vieillesse et vieillissement au Moyen Age. Communications présentées au XIe Colloque du C.U.E.R.M.A., Aix-en-Provence, 1986 (Sénéfiance 19) Aix-en-Provence 1987, 265–282.

[4] Cf. e.g., Werner J. Schneider, Metamorphose einer anus ebria. Anthologia Palatina 11.409.5. In: Philologus: Zeitschrift für antike Literatur und ihre Rezeption 143 (1999) 87–100, who examines the theme of the drunken old woman in Greek and Latin epigrams.

[5] Jan M. Ziolkowski, Old wives' tales: classicism and anti-classicism from Apuleius to Chaucer. In: Journal of Medieval Latin: A Publication of the North American Association of Medieval Latin 12 (2002) 90–113.

[6] Jan M. Ziolkowski, The obscenities of old women: vetularity and vernacularity. In: Jan M. Ziolkowski (Ed.) Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages (Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions 4) Leiden 1998, 73–89.

[7] They appear in comedies from Antiquity, too, and thus the usual question, whether there is continuity between the Ancient and medieval drama, or whether the character – *vetula* in this case – was just such a good topic for mockery that it was included independently in both, becomes relevant here, too.

[8] A thorough study of this extraordinary text including its English translation is Jarmila F. Veltrusky, A Sacred Farce from Medieval Bohemia Mastičkář. Ann Arbor/MI 1985.

ointment seller has such a wife. When the three Maries come to him to buy from him ointments in order to anoint the body of Jesus, and the merchant, seeing their great grief, wants to give them a discount, his wife interferes, angry that her husband is easily seduced by their pretty faces, and insists on the original price. On the merchant's harsh and violent reaction, she decides to leave him.[9] The very same scene of the three Maries buying ointments includes, in a different version found in a manuscript from Melk, another *vetula* – she is coming to the merchant to buy ointments in order to make herself look beautiful.[10] In both cases, *vetula* is primarily ridiculous, the episode is added to make people laugh.

Also medieval *exempla* show old women as mainly wicked. The exceptions are rare. For instance, in Petrus Alfonsi's *Disciplina clericalis*,[11] an ex-

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[9] The scene reads: Merchant's Wife, facing him, says: "Why, my dear husband, what do you mean by aiming to please these young harlots by offering such an ointment for two talents of gold? Why, what are you doing to yourself, and to me, poor woman that I am? That is why you are groaning with poverty, and so am I, miserable wench, with you! For it is all my work, and I laid out my wealth for it. And so those ladies will not take it away before they give me three talents of gold."

Merchant says: "Many women have this habit: when they get drunk they hold forth a lot. So this uncomely wretch, too, is always talking empty words. Since you got drunk you talk too much. And now you will suffer for it! For what business is it of yours to keep correcting me so much? I would advise you to stop, to let me be in peace. And if you do not stop it, maybe you will rise and go away from me in tears. Busy yourself with your distaff at once, or I will punch you in the face!"

Wife shouts: "Is this my new gown for the feast that you thump me behind the ear? For my long-standing goodness you give me blows instead of clothes. For my ever-good counsel you have beaten my head like a snake's. And so now I will separate or part from you, and commend you to all the devils" (Veltrusky, A Sacred Farce 353–355; the whole is in rhymed verses in Old Czech).

[10] František Svejkovský, Vetula-Episode im Melker Salbenkrämerspiel. In: Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie 87 (1968) 1–16. This episode alludes to a similar one in a French version where it is Mary Magdalene who is occupied with her own beauty and buys ointments to make herself look better before Jesus shows up to her and she is finally converted.

[11] Petrus Alfonsi (1062–1110) was originally a Jew (Moses Sephardi) at the court of King Alfonso VI of Castile who converted to Christianity. His collection of *exempla* largely inspired by Arabic culture became very popular throughout medieval Europe. Most of the stories were taken over in *Gesta Romanorum*, edited by Alfons Hilka and Werner Söderhjelm, Die Disciplina clericalis. Heidelberg 1911. English translation by Joseph Ramon Jones and John Ester Keller, The Scholar's Guide: A Translation of the twelfth century 'Disciplina clericalis' of Pedro Alfonso. Toronto 1969; and by Eberhard Hermes, Petrus Alfonsi. Disciplina clericalis. London 1977.

ample of a positive *vetula* follows several negative ones: it is narrated how a *vetula*, by a clever trick, helps a man who was cheated out of his money. But there are two aspects to be noted about this story: the *vetula's* trickery in this episode is of the very same type as the 'negative' trickeries preceding it (such as the well-known example of the old woman with the weeping puppy), only, in this case, it serves a 'good' purpose. In addition, the episode is (like most of the *exempla* in the text) introduced by a short dialogue between the master and the pupil, which follows an *exemplum* on negative female trickery. The pupil notes that now he is admonished not to get married but the master points out that not all women are like that. They can be chaste, good, and take proper care of the house, and also Salomon in his proverbs speaks about good qualities of women.[12] Then the pupil:

> *Bene me confortasti! Sed audisti tamen aliquam mulierem quae sui sensus ingenium niteretur mittere in bonum? Magister ait: Audivi. Discipulus: Refer mihi de illa, quia videtur mihi res nova!*[13]

> [You comforted me well. But have you ever heard of a woman who would strive to use her talent for a good purpose? Master says: I heard. Pupil: Tell me about her because this seems to me a new thing!]

Thus, the context into which the story featuring a good old woman is placed makes it clear that it is a very unique example indeed.

There were, of course, several female saints who were quite old. A special type of "saint grandmothers" could be defined. It would include, for example, St. Ludmila (died 921), grandmother of the Czech King St. Wenceslas, or St. Olga (died ca. 969), grandmother of St. Vladimir of Kiev. They are both associated with the coming of Christianity, so they are both one of the first wise converts who then initiate their relatives. St. Ludmila is put in contrast to her daughter-in-law, Wenceslas' mother, Drahoměř, who remains pagan, that is evil and envious, and eventually has Ludmila strangled. But the holy grandmothers are never called *vetulae*, and they are never described or depicted as old. The only holy grandmother sometimes depicted as not quite young is St. Anne, and that seems to be only because she is rep-

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[12] This passage reads: *Discipulus: Nemo est, qui se a mulieris ingenio custodire possit, nisi quem Deus custodivrit, et haec talis narratio, ne ducam uxorem, est magna dehortatio. Magister: Non debes credere omnes mulieres esse tales, quoniam magna castitas atque magna bonitas in multis reperitur mulieribus, et scis in bona muliere bonam societatem reperiri posse, bona mulier fidelis custos est et bona domus. Salomon in fine libri proverbiorum suorum composuit viginti duos versus de laude atque bonitate mulieris bonae.*

[13] The Scholar's Guide 46.

resented together with Mary and Jesus, so it has to be clear on the image that she is the grandmother and not the mother.[14]

On the other hand, there are positive women who are explicitly described as old but then it is their sexuality which is suppressed. Thus, a positive *vetula* is for example the old virgin sister of St. Anthony who educates young virgins;[15] St. Mary of Egypt is praised for spending so much time in the desert that it was impossible to tell whether her body was male or female; the good abbess Sara stressed she was a woman only by sex, not by her soul: *Sexu quidem mulier sum, sed non animo.*[16]

But introducing *vetula* in a text does not always mean that a stock negative character is needed. Her presence can be due to discussing a subject matter, which she illustrates well. In the Old Testament, the primary role of *vetula* is to show the greatness of God: old women like Sara conceive despite their age. And in the New Testament, Paul uses the same image in his First Epistle to the Romans when stressing the faith Abraham had in God despite the rules of nature (I Rom 4:18–19). It is in this context that both the Church Fathers and medieval theologians use the word *vetula* most frequently. This type of a miracle is then taken over by the medieval saints. For example, in one of the miracles of St. Francis of Assisi narrated by Thomas of Celano, Francis is making an 80-year-old woman able to breastfeed her grandchild after her daughter dies.[17] Should we insist on judging these *vetulae*, they are definitely rather positive: they deserve God's grace due to their piety. But the primary consideration in such cases is not the moral judgment good versus bad, *vetula* rather becomes the means of manifesting something else.

While Hugh of Folieto quoted above uses the image of the transition from the sexual attraction of a young woman to the repulsiveness of an old one just to stress the mistake of getting married, in medieval poetry the character of *vetula* is used in a more general context in order to demonstrate the pass-

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[14] Late medieval representation of St. Anne is the subject of two studies: Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society. Ed. by Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn. Athens GA 1990; and Virginia Nixon, Mary's Mother: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Europe. University Park PA 2004.

[15] Athanasius Alexandrinus, Evagrius Antiochensis, Vita Beati Antonii abbatis. In: Patrologia Latina 73, col. 150. But only one sentence is dedicated to her in the Life of Anthony: *Sororem quoque jam vetulam virginem videns, et aliarum puellarum magistram, mira exsultatione sustollitur.*

[16] Verba seniorum. In: Patrologia Latina 73, col. 925.

[17] Thomas de Celano, Tractatus de miraculis beati Francisci. In: Legendae S. Francisci Assisiensis saeculis XIII et XIV conscriptae. Ed. PP. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, Analecta Franciscana X (1926–1941) cap. 18, par. 182, line 3.

ing of time. For example, in a French chanson by Conon de Béthune from the 13th century, a woman who was long refusing a man finally offers herself to him but he does not want her any more because she is old and ugly.[18] In the *Roman de la Rose* by Jean de Meun, the old woman, both nostalgic and angry with the men who mock her, complains about the damages time has caused to her body.[19]

A poem *De vetula* supposedly found in Ovid's grave in the 13th century, and thus ascribed to him,[20] tells of a young man (interpreted as being Ovid himself, since the whole is narrated in the first person) desperately in love with a beautiful young lady.[21] The lady plays a trick on him: instead of herself, she sends to the young man's bedroom an old female servant. The man does not realize the replacement immediately in the darkness but when he does, he is completely shocked. The description of her repulsiveness is still more vivid and disgusting than in Hugh of Folieto's text.[22] In a witty way, "Ovid" describes this 'metamorphosis' as much more striking than all those he previously sang about:

> *Credere quis posset quod virgo quatuor implens*
> *Nuper olimpiades adeo cito consenuisset?*
> *Numquam tam modico rosa marcuit; in nova formas*
> *Corpora mutatas cecini, mirabiliorque*

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[18] See Heather Arden, Time zones of the heart in medieval French literature. In: Nancy van Deusen (Ed.), The Cultural Milieu of the Troubadours and Trouveres (Claremont Cultural Studies) Ottawa 1994, 1–8.

[19] For a discussion of this text and further examples see Marie-Dominique Luce-Dudemaine, La vieille femme, l'amour et le temps perdu. In: Vieillesse et vieillissement au Moyen Age. Communications présentées au XIe Colloque du C.U.E.R.M.A., Aix-en-Provence, 1986 (Sénéfiance 19) Aix-en-Provence 1987, 215–225.

[20] Even, e.g., Roger Bacon believed the authenticity of this clearly medieval text.

[21] The Latin text is available in Dorothy M. Robathan, The Pseudo-Ovidian De Vetula. Text, Introduction and Notes. Amsterdam 1968 and in an independent edition by Paul Klopsch, Pseudo-Ovidius 'De vetula': Untersuchungen und Text. Leiden 1967. The English translation is mine.

[22] Robathan, The Pseudo-Ovidian De Vetula 98–99, book II, verses 501–508:
Accusant vetulam membrorum turba senilis,
Collum nervosum, scapularum cuspis acuta,
Saxosum pectus, laxatum pellibus uber.
Non uber sed tam vacuum quam molle, velut sunt
Burse pastorum, venter sulcatus aratro.
Arentes clunes macredine crudaque crura,
Inflatumque genu, vincens adamanta rigore,
Accusant vetulam membrorum marcida turba.

Non reperitur ibi mutatio quam fuit ista.[23]

> [Who could believe that a virgin who has just fulfilled four olympiads (i.e., was 16 years old) could have become old so quickly? Rose has never faded in such a short time. I sang about forms being changed into new bodies, but there is not to be found a more astonishing transformation than this one.]

The young lady is eventually forced to marry someone else. Twenty years later, when her husband dies, the lady looks for her former admirer, and he is first excited but then struck by the change: the beautiful lady meanwhile became an ugly *vetula*. Seeing that it is impossible to reverse the flow of time, and feeling that staying with this woman would keep reminding him that his victory came too late, he chooses to concentrate on the sciences, the detailed discussion of which actually forms the greater part of the poem.[24] This second, real metamorphosis is not presented in such negative terms as the preceding fake one. "Ovid" is not angry with his love, he just becomes extremely melancholic.[25]

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It seems indeed to be the case that medieval *vetulae* do not tend to be positive characters. If one is found, it causes a big surprise. Positive old women

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[23] Robathan, The Pseudo-Ovidian De Vetula 98, book II, verses 493–497. The English translation is mine.

[24] Finally he predicts the birth of Christ and becomes Christian (!).

[25] *Sentio ridentem, ruo totus in oscula. Quid plus?*
Nudus suscipior cum mansuetudine multa;
Totus in antiqui delector amoris odore.
Quod fuerat meminisse iuvat, quantique uisset
Integra racta docet; numquam matrona totennis,
Precipue post tot partus, fuit aptior ulla [...]
Ecce meis in visceribus nova rixa creatur [...]
Cum recolo tacitus trutinanteque mente revolvo,
Quid fortuna michi dedit et quid casus ademit,
Evehor huc illuc fluitans, hinc gaudeo multum,
Quod super optato tam longo tempore vici.
Inde memor rursum quam tarde vicero tristor,
Quod nullo reditura modo sit fracta senectus.
Auget laetitiam desiderium diuturnum;
Auget tristitiam pigra desperatio, verum
Ipsam laetitiam nec desperatio tollit,
Nec desiderium valet evacuare dolorem
(verses 667–671, 676, and 680–689; Robathan, The Pseudo-Ovidian De Vetula 105).

are represented in such a way that at least one of the aspects is suppressed: they appear as either not quite old (like the saints), not quite women (like the virgins), or not quite positive (like those who rather represent the greatness of God's power or the melancholy of time passing). If not repulsion and laughter, the presence of *vetula* usually brings about a deep nostalgia for the ever changing world and the youth lost once and forever.