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6 pages
June 25, 2015

Vanier HQ 1060 G4

Title: Gerontologist, The

Publisher Info:

Volume/Issue: v:2 i:2 **Date:** 1962 **Pages:** 93-98

Article Title: The Supposedly Golden Age for the Aged in Ancient Greece (A Study of Literary Concepts of Old Age)

Article Author: Maria Haynnes

ISSN: 0016-9013

1455, de Maisonneuve Blvd. W.
Montreal, Quebec H3G 1M8

The Supposedly Golden Age for the Aged in Ancient Greece (A Study of Literary Concepts of Old Age)

Maria S. Haynes[1]

In our society there exists a widespread belief in and a certain yearning for a golden age for the aged which supposedly existed in times long past and in a land far away, that is, in ancient Greece. This belief is mainly based on stories told by Greek writers, especially Homer. In his epic, the *Iliad*, he glorifies the truly admirable character of Nestor, the oldest and wisest of the Greeks in the Trojan War. Nestor is delineated as a noble man who in his old age distinguished himself among the Grecian chiefs by his unusual wisdom and justice. In addition to his superior intellectual qualities he was outstanding in his physical achievements. Consequently, he was revered by the young and admired by men in the best years of their lives. The popularity of Homer's story led to a widespread inclination to consider this grand old man, Nestor, as representative of old people in general as they lived in the days of ancient Greece.

A less idealistic situation for the aged in ancient Greece arises, however, if we examine a great number of Greek writings in which predominant concepts of old age are either described or illustrated. Hence, it is the purpose of this article to lift the veil of idealism which envelops the Nestor-concept of old age, and to view rather realistically, on the basis of literary documents, three aspects regarding old age in ancient Greece: 1) the predominant concepts of old age itself; 2) the younger generation's attitude toward the aged; 3) social responsibilities for the aged recommended by Greece's most outstanding men in the field of philosophy and literature.

Among literary men the concept of old age itself was predominantly an idealistic one, although it left room for a realistic appraisal of the disadvantageous elements accompanying man's later years of life. The most optimistic defender of venerable old age was probably Plato, who in the character of Cephalus in *The Republic* created the striking figure of an old gentleman of unusual charm, wit, and intellectual power. Seated on a cushioned chair with a garland on his head, Cephalus is not only the host but also the center of a company of young men, of whom he proudly says: "We are old friends." They, in turn, respond to his delightful personality by confessing that they enjoy nothing better than "conversing with aged men." Cephalus, in his discourse with the young simply refutes the common charges against old age, saying that it is not old age itself which is the cause of so many evils, but the individual's own character and temper, "for he who is of a calm and happy nature will hardly feel the pressure of age, but to him who is of an opposite disposition youth and age are equally a burden."

This idealistic view of old age itself expressed by Plato, but criticised aout 50 years later by Aristotle as being unrealistic, is, however, in harmony with the concepts of old age expressed by many Greek poets, preceding and contemporary with Plato. Greek dramatic literature offers countless instances and illustrations for a common belief in old people's superior mental abilities. Great wisdom and mature judgment, for instance, were considered the natural heritage of old age enabling the old to be the most valuable advisors to the young.

In Aeschylus' plays, for example, we find several young rulers and courtiers who turn for advice to their aged trusty friends. There are repeated expressions of faith in old people who on account of being "elder" have "no doubt wisdom

[1]Chico State College, Chico, Calif.

greater than the young." Sophocles, the Greek writer of tragedies, delineated again and again the impressive figures of old men who were entrusted with most important business of state. At times, they were chosen ambassadors, especially in political situations of crisis; at times, their advice was sought by a young ruler in an hour of grave decisions.

Sophocles emphasizes the appropriateness of old men being chosen for important business of state when Creon, one of his aged characters in *Trachiniae* says, "It was by reason of my years that I was chosen." The Greek tragic poet Euripides expresses a similar view of the wisdom and usefulness of old men in counselling positions when he says, "Ever unstable are the hearts of the young, but in whatsoever an old man taketh part, he looketh before and after, that the issue may be far the best for either side." Indeed, Greek plays, poems, and epics are studded with old men who lived as the honored counsellors and treasured friends at the courts of young rulers.

On the basis of a large part of Greek literature we may assume that old men in those days were not only held in high esteem by young rulers, but that they were equally honored, admired, and befriended by the young in general. In fact, we are led to believe that it was considered a sign of high breeding for a young Greek to be closely connected with an old man, be it in a tutor-student relationship, be it in a travelling-companion association.

The plays of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus firmly support the notion that there existed in Greece a genuine and wholesome relationship between aging men and youths. In these plays one cannot fail to recognize the implication that such a friendly old age-youth relationship was made possible through the older men's approval of the interests, enthusiasm, and achievements of the younger generation. Many illustrations in these plays speak for the fact that old men in those days refrained from harshly criticising the fads and "strange" likings of young people. Apparently, they neither insisted on joining the "rock 'n' roll fans" of their time, nor did they compete with their teen-agers in dress, speech, manners, and ways of merrymaking. Aging people knew what was becoming to them, and the young appreciated them for doing so.

There is then a literary tradition starting with Homer and continuing down through the centuries to Plato's time, in which the country's finest men of letters seemed to unite in an effort to perpetuate the concept that old age itself was a crowning stage in man's life and that the young men's devoted relationship to the aged made for a joyous harmony and lent that glow of warmth and beauty to the time, which is necessary to call it a golden age for the aged.

The most extensive description of the younger generation's attitude toward the aged is again afforded by Plato's *The Republic*, where old Cephalus presides in a delightful manner over the gatherings of admiring and enthusiastic young men. His popularity with the young is not surprising, because he is a man of constant serenity, with a sincere interest, patient understanding, and uncritical attitude toward the younger generation. He is a man of unusual generosity and hospitality, always demonstrating an acceptance of the changes of time and an inspiring hopefulness for the future. His kindness and stability of emotions make him certainly worthy of the affection, admiration, and reverence of the young around him. However, this picture of a grand old man seems to be a vision rather than a reality when we consider the character description of old men by Aristotle. He presents us with a portrayal of old age which is as impressive as that by Plato, but it is painted with different colors. Before considering Aristotle's picture of old men it is well to remember that Aristotle more than once attacked and criticised Plato for being completely unrealistic and impractically idealistic in all of his concepts expressed in *The Republic*. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric* presents this picture of old men

> Elderly men: they have lived many years; they have often been taken in, and often made mistakes; . . . . The result is that they are sure about nothing. They "think," but they never "know"; and because of their hesitation they always add a "possibly" or a "perhaps," putting everything this way and nothing positively. They are cynical; that is, they tend to put the worse construction on everything. Further, their experience makes them distrustful and therefore suspicious of evil. Consequently they neither love warmly nor hate bitterly, but they love as though they will some day hate and hate as though they will some day love. They are small-minded, because they have been humbled by life: their desires are set upon nothing more exalted or unusual than what will help them to keep alive. They are not generous, because money is one of the things they must have, and at the same time their experience has taught them how hard it is to get and how easy to lose. They are cowardly, and are always anticipating danger. . . . They are too fond of themselves; this is one form that small-mindedness takes. Because of this, they guide their lives too much by considerations of what is useful and too little by what is noble—for the useful is what is good for oneself, and the noble what is good absolutely. They are not shy but shameless rather; caring

less for what is noble than for what is useful, they feel contempt for what people may think of them. They lack confidence in the future. . . . They live by memory rather than by hope; for what is left to them of life is but little as compared with the long past; and hope is of the future, memory of the past. This, again, is the cause of their loquacity; they are continually talking of the past, because they enjoy remembering it. Their fits of anger are sudden but feeble. Their sensual passions have either altogether gone or have lost their vigor: consequently they do not feel their passions much, and their actions are inspired less by what they do feel than by the love of gain. Hence men at this time of life are often supposed to have a self-controlled character; the fact is that their passions have slackened, and they are slaves to the love of gain. They guide their lives by reasoning more than by moral feelings, reasoning being directed to utility. If they wrong others, they mean to injure them, not to insult them. Old men may feel pity, as well as young men, but not for the same reason. Young men feel it out of kindness; old men out of weakness, imagining that anything that befalls anyone else might easily happen to them, which is a thought that excites pity. Hence, they are querulous, and not disposed to jesting or laughter—the love of laughter being the very opposite of querulousness.

In this portrayal of old people's character there is little or nothing that could induce a friendship-creating tie between old and young people. It is completely devoid of all the fine qualities which appear with compelling attraction in Plato's portrayal of old men. In Aristotle's view of old men there is nothing that could evoke in young people a strong desire to associate with the old, hoping to share the profits and gains which the experience of a long life should bring to man. From Aristotle's description of old people it becomes apparent that his view stands in great contrast not only to the views expressed by Homer and other great poets of classical Greek literature but also to the ideal concept of old age held by Plato, the philosopher. The question whether Aristotle was prejudiced, pessimistic, or in any other way unrealistic in his appraisal of aging men can to a great extent be clarified by analyzing first, a number of pronouncements by Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus regarding the unpleasant and unfavorable aspects accompanying old age; second, Plato's recommendations to the society of his time and country regarding the social responsibilities of the young generation toward the aged.

There are, first, the laments about the decay of physical strength in old age uttered by the predominantly serious writers of ancient Greece. In Sophocles' plays, *Oedipus* and *Trachiniae*, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Eumenides*, and in Euripides' *Madness*, *Ion*, and *Iphigenia* are many aged people who lament about the decay of their physical strength. They talk of "stiffened joints and stooped body, change and weakening of voice, loss of hearing, and inability to enjoy good food." To this list of physical shortcomings is added the frequent complaint of blindness that overcomes a person in old age. Indeed, there are scores of old men and women in Greek literature who lived a large part of their second half of life in "sightless existence" and had need of others' help because of "sightless feet." Blindness, apparently, was commonly associated with old age.

Aristophanes, the Greek writer of comedy, expressed his complaints regarding old age in a lighter vein. Many of his old men and women are deeply saddened by the realization that the years have left them with a "faded face," that a patiently concocted mixture of "colored powder" has failed to cover their wrinkles around eyes, mouth, and neck, or that a costly hair-dye has not succeeded in covering all of those "hateful gray hair, which tell of man's old years." In Aristophanes' play *Plutus* one of the characters is clearly marked as old by a description of him as being "bald, toothless, deaf, wrinkled, bent, and of a piping voice." In the same play an old lady is ridiculed by her young lover for having "one grinder and no more." The young lover's contemptuous allusion to "one grinder and no more" points at the apparently age-old fact that often, in ancient Greek times as well as in modern times, some aging men and women made themselves conspicuous and ridiculous through their intense search for a very young partner with whom to chase and hunt in the ranks of Cupid. Portrayals of aged women in Greek literature are frequent and of two types. In serious literature we read of very fine, attractive and highly esteemed old ladies of "great knowledge and charm," whereas in comedy, the thin-necked, drunken, quarrelsome and shrewish old woman with her wine flask is a familiar character.

In general, Greek comedy offers a ruthless exposure of the unpleasant physical symptoms of old age, an eager exploitation of man's possible mental decay, and a calculated disregard of those aspects of old age which are honored, exalted, and glorified in serious literature. Of course, this depreciation of the positive aspects and emphasis upon physical and mental shortcomings in old age are effective dramatic devices and a legitimate means for the writer of comedy who treats his subject matter mainly from the viewpoint of arousing laughter.

Nevertheless, a familiarity with both types of Greek literature, serious and comic, adds a certain depth to the question whether the notion of a

golden age for the aged in ancient Greece did exist or was something intensely desired by writers who may be considered humanitarian idealists. The quest for the truth of this matter is advanced quite forcefully by an analysis of Plato's *Laws*[2], a set of laws which he suggested for a happy society in which a golden age for the aged could and would exist. These laws also present serious recommendations regarding social responsibilities for the aged. The fact that Plato found it necessary to develop laws for the care and protection of the aged seems to provide striking evidence for an unsatisfactory situation for old people in ancient Greece.

To begin with, Plato acknowldeged in the *Laws* the woes of physical decay in old age, whereas in *The Republic* he created the impression that man's late years in life were filled with only blessings and happiness. In the laws (V) for an ideal city he suggested that beautiful gardens be planted around fountains and streams. In such places the youth of the city should make sports for themselves and

> warm baths for the aged, placing by them an abundance of dry wood for the benefit of those (old people) labouring under disease. . . . There the weary frame . . . will receive a kindly welcome, far better than he would at the hands of a not over-wise doctor.

Not only the physical decay in old age is admitted by Plato in the *Laws* but also the possibility of man's mental decay is reckoned with. Homer's Nestor, Plato's Cephalus, and many admirable old men and women in Greek plays of classical times leave the reader with the impression that mental superiority was a special mark of old age in those days. In the *Laws,* (IX) however, Plato makes allowance for man's mental decay in his late years of life by suggesting a law regarding crimes committed by "children or old men." Plato argues that in view of possible crimes committed by an old person the legislators should

> make laws which will be the mildest and most merciful of all laws, because a man is very likely to commit some crime under the influence of extreme old age, himself no better than a child.

Hence, in the *Laws,* Plato admits a possible decay of man's mental strength in old age, whereas in *The Republic* he glorifies a strengthening of mental powers in old age.

Regarding the famous reverential attitude, which supposedly was generally shown toward aging men and women in ancient Greece, Plato, in the *Laws,* raises a warning voice against both the old men and the young. First, he addresses the old in an unexpected manner, pointing at their weaknesses of character and recommending to them ways of behavior which will save them from the ridicule of the younger generation. Then, Plato addresses the young who become guilty of disrespect for aging people or are blamed for neglect and other wrongful behavior toward their old parents.

With regard to the aged themselves, Plato was greatly concerned with man's dignity, which should increase, never decrease, with man's years of life. Therefore, he recommended, among other things, that old men and women should leave the popular ways of dancing and singing to the young. He believed that old people's dignity is at stake when they attempt to compete with the young in physical activities. Therefore, he wrote (II),

> Our young men break forth into dancing and singing, and we who are their elders deem that we are fulfilling our part in life when we look on at them. Having lost our agility, we delight in their sports and merrymaking, because we love to think of our former selves; and gladly institute contests for those who are able to awaken in us the memory of our youth.

With these limitations set for the old, Plato did not intend to say that aging men and women should spend their days sitting in the grandstand rooting for their favorite team or filling their evenings baby-sitting for fun-loving teen-age parents. Plato simply intended to clarify the difference between the propriety and impropriety of an older person's way of entertainment, for he also stated that there is no "impropriety in old men's singing and performing publicly, but whatsoever they choose to perform, the act should be one suitable to them."

Among the laws suggested by Plato there is one of special significance in the present quest for the supposedly Golden Age for the Aged in ancient Greece. This law deals with "reverence due to the aged." Plato's demand that old people be held in high esteem clearly reveals that the reverence supposedly shown to old people by the younger generation in ancient Greece was not a common practice as one is inclined to believe by reading Greek epics, dramas, and poetry. In dealing with this problem, Plato at first rebuked the old by saying that reverence "is not really imparted to

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[2] The realistic impact inherent in the *Laws* is of a different nature from that found in *The Republic.* It is mainly to be seen in the fact that the ideal city imagined in *The Republic* is partly a Utopia: "the author himself does not think of it as anything likely ever to take actual shape in the workaday world." In the *Laws* on the other hand, Plato offers a carefully thought-out scheme of the kind of constitution and the sort of legal code which he believed to be necessary if Hellenic civilization were to be preserved at all; see A. E. Taylor, *The Laws of Plato,* London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1934, p. xv.

them (the young) by the present style of admonition which only tells them that the young ought always to be reverential." Plato proceeded by suggesting (V) that

> a sensible legislator will rather exhort the elders to reverence the younger and above all to take heed that no young man sees or hears one of themselves doing or saying anything disgraceful; for where old men have no shame, there young men will most certainly be devoid of reverence.

These rather surprising admonitions to the old seem to be a realistic appraisal of the situation regarding the famed reverence for aging people in Plato's time. Still greater clarity on the subject is attained by considering Plato's urgent appeal to the young to honor the elders of their society reminding them that according to ancient Greek tradition old folks had to be worshipped as much as the Olympian gods. Hence, Plato urged that next to the worship of private and ancestral gods (IV)

> comes the honour of living parents, to whom, as is meet, we have to pay the first and greatest and oldest of all debts, considering that all which a man has belongs to those who gave him birth and brought him up, and that he must do all that he can to minister to them, first, in his property, secondly in his person, and thirdly in his soul, in return for the endless care and travail which they bestowed upon him of old, in the days of his infancy, and which he is now to pay back to them when they are old and in the extremity of their need.

In Book X of the *Laws* Plato emphasizes again the honor which is due to an older person, in this world as well as in the realm of the gods, wherefore, "every man, woman or child ought to consider that the elder has the precedence of the young in honour"; among the gods, "the elder has the precedence of the younger in honour."

In view of a definite lack of reverence for the aged in ancient Greece, we may assume that these concepts of honor and worship due to the aged were considered as a kind of folklore by many young men and women of Plato's time. But the knowledge of such ideal concepts was common cultural heritage. However, these concepts probably seemed to be old, remote and outdated to many of Greece's younger generation. For this reason, Plato argued with great eloquence that if men wished to create a society in which young and old "could live in security and happiness," these age-old Greek concepts of honoring the old would have to be accepted as valid, and men would have to act accordingly.

In addition to recalling the ancient customs of honoring old people "among men and gods," Plato appealed to man's ego by saying (XI), that "good men think it a blessing from heaven if their parents live to old age and reach the utmost limit of human life."

Plato's admonitions to old and young, clearly spelled out in his *Laws*, a persistent reiteration of ideal precepts regarding a reverential attitude toward the aged in serious literature and the frequency of sometimes moving but rather conspicuous illustrations of filial love for aged parents in Greek drama point strongly toward a lack of the desired harmonious youth-old age relationship. But, there is no doubt that serious writers in ancient Greece felt it a sacred mission to instill through their writings an attitude of reverence toward aging men and women, for even Aristotle, who in his description of the character of aging men says very little that is of credit to old people, demands that "As we honour the gods, so ought we also to honour our parents."

Nevertheless, there was no golden age for the aged in ancient Greece. The most striking indication for the non-existence of such a golden age is Plato's appeal to the lawmakers (X) to design laws for both the prevention and punishment of "slayers of mothers"; laws which will deal with "impious hands lifted up against parents." Plato supported the necessity of such laws by referring to men living in his time

> who dare to lay violent hands upon father or mother, or any still older relative, having no fear either of the wrath of the gods above, or of the punishments that are spoken of in the world below, but transgress in contempt of ancient and universal traditions.

For such men, Plato suggested laws which provide "some extreme measures of prevention." The proposed punishments for those who do not sufficiently provide for their old parents or neglect them in any other way, range from "stripes" to "any penalty which a man can pay or suffer." In certain cases, the evil-doers may even "be put to death" (X).

Without a thorough knowledge of Plato's *Laws* in which he expressed a deep concern with the problems of old age, one might easily draw the conclusion that Plato joined Homer and the succeeding long line of famous men in Greek literature in describing the life of aging men and women as they wished it to be. But, in the *Laws* Plato revealed in a highly realistic manner a profound concern with the miseries many old people suffered in ancient Greece, and this concern brings him very close to Aristotle's view that old age indeed was not a golden age.

In a final view of the situation for the aged in ancient Greece we must be aware first of the complaints about physical and mental decay uttered even by the literary optimists on old age. Out of these complaints rises a kind of framework which is quite forcefully and certainly realistically filled in, by Plato's recommendations to the lawmakers of a society for the benefit of aging men and women. Finally, we have to consider the rather dismal portrayal of old age drawn by Aristotle, one of the greatest philosophers. We then are left with perhaps a new, but certainly quite dependable concept of old age and its fate in ancient Greece. The conclusion may be drawn with certainty that there was not a golden age for aged men and women in ancient Greece.