

University of Bergen

Interdisciplinary Conference 30 and 31 January 2015



## *AGEING*

### *HISTORIES, MYTHOLOGIES AND TABOOS*

There is a growing awareness that the “ageing wave” will challenge society not only economically but also in terms of philosophical, ethical, aesthetic, and religious views and values. Today the urgency of defining strategies to ensure the rights and welfare of the elderly is widely recognized. But it is equally important to acknowledge the symbolic aspects of ageing and the formative power culture and society exert on public and private conceptions of the aged self. The new humanistic gerontology has over the last decades addressed these issues, using interpretation, rhetoric, and narrative to counteract dehumanizing tendencies in cultural stereotypes of ageing as well as in society's treatment of the elderly.

The Research group "Literature and Science" invites scholars of literature, the arts, and the medical humanities, as well as philosophers, cultural historians, historians of religion, sociologists, and anthropologists to explore representations of ageing and late life in social, cultural, and personal contexts. Drawing upon interdisciplinary studies of literature and medicine, we believe an approach to old age rooted in the humanities, could interact with gerontology and pursue goals that are significant not only for gerontology's interest groups. Ageing is particularly relevant to the humanities and the social sciences because it represents

both a fundamental dimension of human existence, and a marginalised existential mode. It is a prerequisite for understanding human temporality and for addressing the construction and dissolution of identity, language, and meaning. As a persistent taboo it represents a psychological blind spot, a sphere of denial or oblivion awaiting recognition and analysis.

Critical interpretations of the symbolic dimensions of old age in past and present societies are necessary to elucidate alienating simplifications and enforce a nuanced understanding of late life. Reformulating the insight of Susan Sontag's essay "Illness as Metaphor", we see the need of liberation from stereotypes in order to acknowledge our second citizenship in the kingdom of the old. But it is also the humanities' task to restore and reinterpret our cultures' formative myths, metaphors, and narratives, and thus enrich the figurative reservoirs on which modern individuals continue to model their selves. Detailed, in-depth studies of verbal and visual representations within the wide historical range of philosophical, religious, ethical, and aesthetic responses to the question of what it means to grow old is a task which scholars of the humanities and social sciences should deal with, and which an ageing society's self-understanding depends on.

**Confirmed keynote speakers:**

**Jan Baars**, Professor of interpretative gerontology (University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht)

**Martine Boyer-Weinmann**, Professor of modern and classical literature (Université Lumière-Lyon 2)

**George Rousseau**, Professor of cultural history (University of Oxford)

**The conference organizers welcome proposals for papers addressing topics on ageing not limited to those suggested below:**

New theoretical paradigms of ageing

Cultural histories of old age

Ageing societies and civilisations

Histories and metaphors of life cycles, life stages, lifelines

Figures of old age in folklore, mythology, art, literature, cinema

Symbolisms of old age

The literary genres, poetics and rhetoric of ageing

Ageing body and mind

The psychiatry or psychology of ageing

Old age as pathology

The neurology of senescence

Ageing and memory

Longevity and immortality

Ageing and religion

Ethics of ageing

Ageing and gender

Posthuman ageing

**Please send by 1 September 2014: a title and a preliminary abstract (300 words and 3 keywords) including name, discipline and affiliation to Margery Vibe Skagen:**

[margery.skagen@if.uib.no](mailto:margery.skagen@if.uib.no)

A final abstract may be sent no later than 30 September 2014.

The conference fee is NK 500.

For further information about the conference please contact: [margery.skagen@if.uib.no](mailto:margery.skagen@if.uib.no)