



'I am not who I was': Old age and masculinity in Maximianus Etruscus' elegies

Sara Casamayor Mancisidor

c/Ferrerías n°5, Donostia, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Aging
Sexuality
Masculinity
Poetry
Late antiquity

ABSTRACT

The Elegies of Maximianus Etruscus (sixth century CE) are first-person narratives in which the poet writes about the life cycle, making love and sex the building blocks of the story. Through his failed relationships with different women, Maximianus talks about the perception of his aging, especially the changes in his body and his eroticism, and the progressive loss of masculinity that to him comes with old age. The aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between old age and gender in Maximianus' elegies from a double perspective: the perception of old age itself as a unique and personal fact, and age and masculinity as interacting social constructions that are historically constructed. We will address issues such as the emotions linked to aging, the representation of old age as a living death, the relationship of masculinity with sexuality and the importance of erection. Finally, we will place Maximianus' poems within their historical context, analyzing how they can be interpreted as a metaphor for the period in which its author lived, in which old age and loss of power symbolized the disappearance of the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy and, in general, the end of the Roman Empire. A literary exercise but also a life story, this set of six elegies allows us to approach the social construction of gender and age in Late Antiquity.

Introduction¹

Sometime back in the sixth century CE,² an old man named Maximianus looked back and decided to tell the story of his life in six poems³ Out of all the events he could have chosen, he decided to use love and sexuality as the building blocks of his story. Neither the life cycle nor, of course, love, were foreign topics in elegiac poetry before Maximianus. In his poems we find references to Horace, Ovid, Tibullus and Juvenal (Fielding, 2014; García, 1984; Roberts, 2018; Uden & Fielding, 2010). Maximianus would have had first-hand knowledge of all these authors, since in the sixth century they were still part of the education of the elite (Lozovsky, 2016). What was new in the work of our poet is that he approached the question of sexuality in old age from his own *senectus*, and not as a future possibility or in reference to third persons, as happened in the poets of the classical period.⁴

Maximianus' motivation for writing these poems has been debated in

historiography. For example, Webster (1900) considered the *Elegies* to be pure fiction. For the purposes of this paper I will assume, as is done in most studies (Arcaz, 2012; Moralejo, 2018; Uden & Fielding, 2010), that the poems are largely autobiographical and detail specific episodes in the author's life, although they were probably altered for literary reasons. Moreover, whether these six elegies are first-person narratives or pure exercises of poetic fiction, they are undoubtedly a source of enormous value for addressing the relationship between aging and masculinity in Late Antiquity, as I will develop in the following pages.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between old age and masculinity in Maximianus' elegies from a double perspective: the perception of old age itself as a unique and personal fact, and age and gender as interacting social categories. I will address issues such as the emotions linked to aging, the representation of old age as a living death, the relationship of masculinity with sexuality and the importance of penetration and erection. To this purpose, I have drawn on various

E-mail address: sara.casamayor@unirioja.es.

¹ I thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their careful reading of the manuscript and their insightful comments and suggestions. I feel that this has resulted in a stronger paper.

² The exact dates of Maximianus' life are unknown. Although it has been claimed that he lived in the tenth century, most scholars now believe he was born c.490 and wrote the *Elegies* between 540 and 560 (Arcaz, 2011; Juster, 2018; Roberts, 2018; Webster, 1900).

³ The elegies have been consulted in two recent editions, Juster (2018) and Arcaz (2011), with others being consulted at specific moments and only looking at the commentaries and introductions to the text.

⁴ See Catull. 5; Prop. 3.5; Tib. 1.1.70–75. A late example in Auson. *Ep.* 14.

works that address these issues in contemporary societies (Butler, 1963; Calasanti & King, 2021; García, Jiménez, & Hernández, 2020, Katz & Marshall, 2002). This has allowed me to analyze issues such as the perception of the aging of one's own body, the concept of successful aging, or sexuality in old age. I also intend to see whether in Late Antiquity old age was perceived by men as a moment of loss of masculinity and therefore of social power, as Gerontology has described it to be today (Calasanti & King, 2018; Sandberg, 2011). Finally, I will place Maximianus' poems within their historical context, analyzing how they can be interpreted as a metaphor for the period in which its author lived, in which old age and loss of power symbolized the disappearance of the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy and, in general, the end of the Roman Empire.

This is not the first research on masculinity in Late Antiquity. There is an abundant literature on this topic, mainly focusing on the Christian notion of masculinity (Cooper & Leyser, 2000; Kuefler, 1995), but also on specific writings and authors (Nathan, 2015; Stewart, 2017), as well as on issues related to family life (Dossey, 2008; Elm, 2009). However, when it comes to old age and masculinity, the volume of publications is much smaller, and these focus on the stereotype of *senex libidinosus* (Augoustakis, 2008; Bertman, 1989), except for the studies on John Chrysostom by De Wet (2016 & 2018). This may be due to the relatively recent incorporation of old age as a historical category of study, to the tendency of historians to include old people in the group of adults without questioning age-related differences, or to researchers' own bias, who from their present perspective consider that sexuality and old age are not compatible terms (García et al., 2020; Sandberg, 2011).

Young and old Maximianus, or how life cycle shapes gender identity

Following the sequence commonly established for the *Elegies*, it is clear that Maximianus does not respect chronological order in them. The first elegy presents Maximianus at the time when he wrote the poems, already an old man, and continues to look back to compare himself with his young and sexually active self, justifying the theme of the work. However, in the second elegy Maximianus does not go back to his youth but tells us about his break-up with Lycoris when they were both already old or at least mature, and it is not until *Elegy 3* that we meet teenage Maximianus. The fourth poem seems to take place shortly after the previous one, the poet being a teenager or a young adult. Why does Maximianus choose to follow this order? We cannot know whether the break-up with Lycoris happened before or after the events narrated in *Elegy 5* but, if they follow the encounter with the Greek woman, it may be the end of what had apparently been his longest relationship and the importance of old age in it that motivated Maximianus to write the poems.

The first elegy shows an old Maximianus who hates his old age because he feels that it has taken away all the good things in life, including his own identity, leading him to say "I am not who I was: my greatest part has perished" (*Non sum qui fueram: periit pars maxima mihi*, *El.* 1.5). It is likely that Maximianus takes these words from Ovid (*Tr.* 3.11.25),⁵ who wrote them some five hundred years earlier about his own experience of old age, in this case lived in exile, far from everything that was familiar to him and that constructed his identity. But who was Maximianus for himself?

The youngest Maximianus we meet in his elegies is the teenager of *Elegy 3*. In it the poet narrates his relationship with Aquilina when they were both very young. Pale and consumed by love (*El.* 3.5–6), the teenager presents a physical appearance typical of elegiac poets who suffer for not being able to be with their beloved. When his friend, the renowned philosopher Boethius, finally manages to bring the lovers

together, their contact is limited to childish touches and games (*El.* 3.75–76); enough contact, however, for Maximianus to decide that he does not want to go any further, and to abandon Aquilina on the grounds of protecting her virginity and after making the decision to restrain his impulses and remain chaste (*El.* 3.79–94). His other youth love, Candida from *Elegy 4*, is also experienced from a distance and follows the classic pattern of the suffering lover.⁶ Maximianus thinks of this *puella docta*, sings the songs he has heard her sing, blushes when seeing her... but ends all hope of having a relationship when he pronounces her name in a dream in front of her father (*El.* 4.35–44). We cannot know whether *Elegy 1* narrates events that take place before or after *Elegy 4*, but it shows a young adult Maximianus, whose gendered identity is completely formed. Thus, he meets all the required things for being a man in his society: an athletic body, a proper education, and an active sexuality (*El.* 1.7–54). Throughout the six elegies, Maximianus is proud of his youthful qualities and bases his identity on them. So many merits did he have, that all parents wanted to marry him to their daughters, who were madly in love with him (*El.* 1.59–73). Maximianus, however, found none to his liking, so he decided to remain chaste. In these three elegies referring to his youth, it is Maximianus himself who frustrates the possibility of relationships with women, a fact that he will regret in old age, when he feels he can no longer enjoy love.

Despite his difficulties in finding a partner, in *Elegy 2* we discover that Maximianus has had a long-term relationship with a woman named Lycoris. We do not know how long this love has lasted, but we do know that they are of a similar age (*El.* 2.25 & 2.55–56). They were very happy, but she has decided to leave him in search of younger lovers whose "parts function" (*El.* 2.37) and avoids him when they pass each other in the street. For Maximianus, the worst thing is the lack of loyalty Lycoris shows in breaking up with him after they have spent so much time together (*El.* 2.51–70). They will no longer be able to enjoy that ideal old age as a couple of which other writers speak (Auson. *Ep.* 17.35–40 & *Protrept. ad nep.* 2.15–20; Mart. 4.13; Ov. *Met.* 3.133–135 & 6.500; Plin. *Ep.* 8.10 & 8.18.1–2; Tib. 1.7.55). If his relationship with Lycoris was affectionate, his relationship with the woman in *Elegy 5* is purely sexual. Maximianus meets this woman on a diplomatic mission. She shows interest in him, and the poet ends up falling at her feet because of her beauty and her many virtues (*El.* 5.5–46). They spend one night together, which Maximianus declares to have enjoyed as he did not think he could at his age (*El.* 5.47–48). However, during the second night Maximianus is unable to get an erection and cries as the girl accuses him of having spent his strength on another lover (*El.* 5.61–75). The girl ends with a funeral lament in honour of Maximianus' penis, in which she situates the male genitalia as the axis of nature and society, serving to underline how death awaits the old poet. In elegies 1 and 6, Maximianus shows the harshest face of old age, equating it with long agony, prison, and death (*El.* 1.3–8 & 6.1–2).

Maximianus adopts an ambiguous attitude towards old age. On the one hand, unlike the Augustan poets, who only had a positive view of love in old age when it came to maintaining a relationship established in youth (Arcas, 2012), Maximianus sees no objection to continuing to express his erotic feelings and desires in old age. He therefore finds a certain happiness in his life. However, this happiness soon fades away as he becomes aware that his desires are socially reprehensible and suffers from not being able to satisfy his eroticism, which leads him to show repulsion for his body and his feelings (*El.* 1.101–292 & 4.51–54).

As far as his gender identity is concerned, Maximianus pivots his masculinity around his body and his sex life. In order to show that old age has destroyed him as a subject, the poet makes an effort to make comparisons of how he was and how he is (see esp. *El.* 1). Young Maximianus was strong and fast and old Maximianus is weak and slow. He was an excellent speaker and now he can barely read or remember texts. He was in excellent health and now he is losing his senses and his limbs

⁵ The classic texts have been consulted in the editions of the *Loeb Classical Library* or in the digital libraries *The Latin Library* and *Perseus*.

⁶ For other examples of this pattern, see Auson. *Ep.* 103; Prop. 1.12, 1.3 & 2.9.

are deformed. He was handsome and now he is ugly: he has become hairy, pale, and weeping. Such is the loss of identity that comes with old age that he no longer sees himself as human (*EL* 1.143–144: *Iam pavor est vidisse senem, nec credere possis hunc hominem humana qui ratione caret*). A similar attitude can be seen in his friend Boethius (*Cons.* 1.1–22), who chooses elegiac metrics to contrast the happiness of youth with the sadness of old age, alluding both to the physical aspect and the loss of mental agility.

The same is true of his sex life, and more specifically his ability to maintain an erection and play an active role in sex. Here, Maximianus seems to want to fulfil the premise of being “forever functional” (Katz & Marshall, 2002; Marshall & Katz, 2019). Although he is expected to forget his eroticism as society considers it inappropriate in old age, there is a perceived desire to have a sex life equal to that of youth, and thus not adapted to his circumstances in old age, but focused on erection and dominance. The loss of this dominant role seems to be the main reason for the break with Lycoris and the fundamental aspect on which the poet defines his masculinity. In the case of *Elegy* 5, Maximianus laments that, although he has previously been able to have intercourse with the Greek girl, he suddenly cannot. His statements are reminiscent of a poem in the *Palatine Anthology* in which the poet gives an account of his progressive loss of sexual vigor, stating that he used to be able to make love up to nine times in a row, whereas now he can barely manage to do so once (*Anth. Pal.* 11.30). Maximianus’ possibilities are dwindling, and even the remedies he used when the dysfunction began no longer work (*EL* 1.170).

However, our poet does not fit the stereotype of *senex libidinosus/amator* present in ancient literary sources as early as Aristophanes, which we see transferred to Rome in the theatre of Plautus (e.g., *Asinaria* or *Casina*).⁷ Maximianus is not an old man who chases young women and makes a fool of himself to get their attention (as for example in *Tib.* 1.8.50), but a man who suffers for losing the love of his life in the case of Lycoris and for not being able to complete the sexual act in the case of the Greek girl. There is no character here to laugh at Maximianus’ attitude, as the *puella* is angry and saddened rather than mocking the poet’s erectile dysfunction, and the text is set up for the reader to suffer along with him, not to find the situation comical. In fact, here he reverses the literary roles of *senex libidinosus* and *puella*, for it is she who spies on him through the window and seeks him out, not the other way round, as in *Tib.* 2.1.74. Similarly, it is she who mourns the failed sexual act, not the poet himself, while he laughs at her complaints, rather than the *puella* ridiculing her lover for not being able to satisfy her. In *EL* 2, Lycoris’ reaction is one of rejection and avoidance, but not derision (*EL* 2.7–16).

Viewed as a whole, the *Elegies* are an example of what Robert Butler (1963) called “life review”, or the tendency of old people to recall the past and re-evaluate their lives. This re-evaluation can become obsessive and is often accompanied by nostalgia and regret, and even anxiety, guilt, despair, and depression. While life reviews help some people to find serenity in old age, to adapt to the changes it entails and to accept the proximity of death, in Maximianus the effect is the opposite. Following Butler’s proposals, Maximianus’ poems would also fit in with the so-called “mirror gazing”, or the practice of looking at oneself in the mirror and realizing how the passage of time has affected the body, comparing the present image with the past. In this sense, he seems to have been inspired by Ovid’s exile poems. On the other hand, in Maximianus we can appreciate a phenomenon that Castellanos and López (2010) have analyzed as common in aged people, who tend to describe their situation based on the comparison they make of the present moment with the past, emphasizing the loss of possibilities and capacities with which they forged their identity in their youth, such as bodily changes and limitations to carry out daily activities, work, and participate in society. A predecessor of our elegiac in this sense would be

Ausonius (*Ep.* 14), a poet of the fourth century who wrote not of the loves that he was experiencing at the moment, but of those that had passed.

An analysis of the representation of sexuality in the *Elegies* also requires discussing, albeit briefly, the subjects with whom the Etruscan interacted. Unlike other elegiacs, at first glance it might seem that Maximianus’ eroticism is directed exclusively at women. If we follow Kuefler (1995), this is because in Late Antiquity relationships between adult and young men began to be considered inappropriate and anti-masculine. Although it is true that in the *Elegies* there is no Marathus nor any explicit mention of homosexual attraction, two passages in the first elegy could be interpreted that way. Thus, in *EL* 1.229 Maximianus writes that boys run away from him (*horrent me pueri*) because of his aged appearance, words that could allude both to the rejection caused by his aged body and to the fact that they no longer desire him sexually. A little further on, in *EL* 1.283–284, he comments on how, because of his old age, boys and girls no longer call him “master” (*ipsi me pueri atque ipsae sine lite puellae turpe putant dominum iam uocitare suum*).

What about women in the *Elegies*? We know nothing about the physical appearance of Aquilina, from *Elegy* 3. One could think that it is because so much time has passed since the relationship took place, and old Maximianus does not remember any detail. The poet at least shows us some traits of her tenacious personality, capable of enduring her mother’s blows in order to see her beloved, and even makes her speak in *EL* 3.39–42. Nor does he give many details about Candida - not even whether she had any love interest in him - but we do know that she plays the lyre and dances, as does the *Graia puella*. It is the latter and Lycoris who are best described in the poems. The physical appearance of the Greek girl, whose name we do not know, is taken from Ovid (*Am.* 1.5). The frail body with which Maximianus depicts her is striking: is she a very slender woman, or is she a girl? Perhaps we should lean towards the second option, since in *EL* 1.81–99 Maximianus describes different types of female body in a manner similar to Ovid (*Ars* 2.657–662, *Med.* 327–330) or Martial (1.57), pointing out that thin women cause him horror (*horrebam tenues*). As for Lycoris, he only alludes to her physical appearance saying that she is still beautiful despite her grey hair, and focuses on describing her lack of morality. On the other hand, from the description of the behavior of almost all of them, including the anonymous young women in *Elegy* 1, we deduce that they are women of the elite, who show their *puicitia* by blushing and hiding from his sight (*EL* 1.65–70).

Masculinity and old age in Late Antiquity

As Linn Sandberg (2011: 13) points out, the way in which individuals talk about sex can tell us many things about what discourses are more widely available on sexuality in their cultural context. Thus, Maximianus’ elegies tell us about the historical context in which he lived as much as they tell us about his personal experiences. Broadly speaking, Roman masculinity or *virtus* was defined by the elite adult: athletic, strong, and sexually active, with an authoritative but moderate character, oratorical ability, and a high cultural level. In this context of self-control and constant questioning of gender identity, a sexually excessive man could not be called *vir* (Cooper & Leyser, 2000). And, if self-restraint was to be applied to all men in general, it had to be especially so in the case of *senes*.

In Maximianus we see little of that discourse on old age and masculinity that seems to emerge at the end of the Republic, and which attempts to enhance the value of the old man despite the fact that he has lost the main features that society attributes to the *vir* (Casamayor, 2020). This was an exclusively male model set out in Cicero’s *De Senectute*, which implied that the correct old age was one lived in full physical and mental health, with moderate political activity and maintaining control over one’s family and slaves. A model that, as has been highlighted both for today (Calasanti & King, 2021; Phillips, Ajrouch, & Hillcoat-Nallétamby, 2010) and for ancient Rome (Casamayor, 2020),

⁷ For an extensive study of this character in Plautus, see Ryder, 1984.

excludes the disabled or poor. Perhaps Maximianus's distance from this discourse is due to the chosen subject matter or the literary genre employed, or it may also be that elegies are influenced by a literary tendency to represent suffering bodies and to self-represent oneself as a suffering subject that emerges in the second century CE and that could be influenced by Christianity (Perkins, 1995). In fact, according to Nathan (2015), a concept of bodily perfection as a symptom of masculinity emerged in Late Antiquity, which would acquire enormous importance in Byzantine representations. While this emphasis on strength and beauty may signify a change from earlier times regarding adulthood, in the case of old age the ugliness and weakness of the aged body is highlighted from the beginning of the Republic (Plaut. *Cas.* 1015–1018 & *Merc.* 639–640), being one of the reasons why some writers try to emphasize a model of aged masculinity centered on the mind, rather than the body. An ugliness which, as seen above, Maximianus also saw in his own body.

Much of the ancient texts - both pagan and Christian - that tell us about aging and sexuality postulate that sexual desire waned or disappeared in old age due to biological causes (Aug. *Serm.* 138; Cic. *Sen.* 14.49; J. Chysost. *ad Hebr.* 7.9 and *ad Isaiah* 3; Hor. *Ep.* 2.2.55; Ov. *Am.* 1.9.4; Prop. 3.5.13; Sen. *Ep.* 12.5; Verg. *Georg.* 3.95–101). Since sexual desire depended on natural heat and moisture to produce the seed and they diminished with aging, sexual appetite was believed to vanish as a consequence as well. Otherwise, authors such as Galen (*apud Orib. Med. Coll.* 22.2) even thought that the life of the *senes* could be in danger, since sexual intercourse would exhaust their bodies to the point of not being able to recover their heat and moisture. On the other hand, morality also prevented old men from having sexual intercourse. A *senex* had to remain moderate in all aspects, including sexuality, so as not to appear ridiculous by trying to perform the actions of the young (Arnob. *Adv. Nat.* 3.37; Aug. *Serm.* 161; Cic. *Sen.* 11.36 & 12.40; J. Chysost. *ad Hebr.* 7.7; Macr. *Sat.* 2.8.10; Plaut. *Merc.* 305–315; Plut. *De Lib. Ed.* 20.14; Tib. 1.1.70).⁸ Moreover, being driven by the libido took older people away from tasks more suitable for them, such as cultivating the mind through reading or learning new skills. In *Elegy* 1 (101–104), Maximianus expresses how talking about sexuality is inappropriate for old people, who should not have erotic desires. Although it is clear he does not follow his own advice, his words show how in the sixth century the idea that old age and sexuality were incompatible was still valid. Unlike other *senes*, Maximianus does not agree with this imposition, which has its origin in the biological process of growing old but is mainly due to an ageist social vision. What Cato saw as an advantage (Cic. *Sen.* 12.42), for the Etruscan was a condemnation. And he does not refer only to sex, but also to the theory that the aged should dispense with singing, enjoy banquets, or wear colorful clothes (*El.* 1.155–192). If the ideal male was to be austere, the *senex* even more so. Maximianus was not, however, the first to record in writing the frustration he felt at not being able to live an active sexuality in old age - whether for physical or moral reasons - since this is a complaint that appears in the sources from Republican times onwards (Cic. *Sen.* 12.39; Hor. *Epist.* 2.2.55 & *Od.* 4.1; Prop. 3.5.23).

Maximianus' poems also show the importance of erection and penetration for Roman masculinity. The funeral speech that the *graeca puella* dedicates to the flaccid penis equates the metaphorical death of Maximianus' organ with his biological and social deaths. With the ability to penetrate and therefore to procreate gone, the Roman male no longer had an identity and therefore no reason to go on living. Although episodes of erectile dysfunction were expected in old age, they were nevertheless used against elder men for comic purposes (Anth. Pal. 11.30; Juv. 10.205; Ov. *Am.* 3.7; Plaut. *Merc.* 305–315).⁹ A common

⁸ For how some of these writers were inconsistent with their own ideas about sexuality in old age, *vid.* Casamayor, 2020 and Cokayne, 2003.

⁹ For the emergence of erectile dysfunction in Latin literature, *vid.* Baeza, 2010.

reference is the mistress having to resort to manual or oral stimulation to achieve erection (Mart. 4.30), as happens to Maximianus in *Elegy* 5, in his case without success. These references are particularly demeaning, as in these episodes the male assumes the passive role, ceasing to be masculine. Moreover, the visible presence of male genitalia, and especially of the erect penis, facilitated the fixation of a clearly binary gender system, constituting what Kuefler has called "a phallic economy of sexual gender difference" (1995: 24). Indeed, as Shannon-Henderson (2020) has shown, Latin texts emphasize the importance of the penis and the testicles in masculinity, placing them as a prerequisite for manhood.

Two centuries before Maximianus, St. Augustine (*Civ. Dei* 14) had characterized erectile dysfunction as one of the most important threats to masculinity. For him, it symbolized the loss of control of the mind over the body, and thus the loss of male power over the whole society.¹⁰ In this respect, Augustine was somewhat more severe than most later authors, who regarded impotence as a humiliating evil unbecoming of a male, but which could be remedied by various therapies (Aet. 3.3.35; Paul. Aeg. 6.54), although Maximianus himself (*El.* 1.170) declares that they are no longer useful to him. On the other hand, we must bear in mind that Augustine's opinion was based mainly on the fact that the lack of erection prevented procreation, and thus distanced the male from one of his key functions in society, fatherhood. A motivation, that of pater- nity, which Maximianus does not seem to have ever had in mind.

Maximianus' decision not to marry, as well as his allusions to chastity, are inserted within a historiographical debate about the possible influence of Christianity on the way of living sexuality and on the concept of singleness. In this sense, many questions arise: What does this supposed celibacy of Maximianus mean? Does it imply that he was a Christian? In historiography we find both affirmative (Weddeck, 1952) and negative (Webster, 1900) answers to this question. Uden (2009) postulates that Maximianus' poems, especially the portrayal of Aquilina, are a satire of Christian values. Fielding (2014) thinks that in the *Elegies* Maximianus alters the genre of elegiac love to adapt it to the Christian values of Late Antiquity, and thus insists on virginity and chastity. If we pay attention to the vocabulary related to celibacy used by Maximianus, the words derived from the concept of *puicitia* are particularly noteworthy.¹¹ It is a distinctively Roman and difficult to define term that would refer not only to total abstinence from sex but also to displaying appropriate, "restrained" sexual behavior without engaging in socially reprehensible acts that might generate gossip (Langlands, 2006). Although it is often associated with women, it has been shown that it can also apply to men, both in terms of their own behavior and their ability to preserve the modesty of others. Moreover, as Kuefler (1995) notes, it seems that in Late Antiquity the meaning of this word becomes identical for women and men. In this sense, Maximianus' allusions may refer to a claim not to be indiscreet and not to provoke a "sexual scandal", as well as to preserve the reputation of the women with whom he is associated, without having anything to do with celibacy in the Christian sense. This interpretation would fit with the episode in which Maximianus calls Candida in his sleep and is frightened to be overheard by her father, as he is worried about what this man might think of him and his daughter. On the other hand, Christian Laes (2019: 14) points out that Christian celibacy meant forgetting about sex in order to devote time to helping others, and this is certainly not the case for Maximianus. We should therefore interpret Maximianus' allusions as a sign of the maintenance of the classical concept of *puicitia* in Late Antiquity, and not as a consequence of Christian interference in sexuality.

That said, a new question arises. If Maximianus was concerned not to

¹⁰ For how Augustine's words can also be interpreted as a symptom that no one man could declare himself morally superior to another, see Cooper & Leyser, 2000.

¹¹ *puicum* (1.73), *puoris* (3.84) and *puica* (3.94), as well as closely related words such as *casto* (1.73) and *virginitas* (3.84). For the relationship between these terms, see Langlands, 2006.

be accused of *impudicitia*, why did none of his relationships lead to marriage? It could be because, as Kuefler (2007) points out, in Late Antiquity marriage went from being a civic duty - strongly regulated since Augustus' time - to being a personal decision, so that it could be renounced without any legal or moral problems. Moreover, from 331 CE the law tightened the conditions for divorce (*Codex Th.* 3.16.1). If not marrying was no longer frowned upon and there was a possibility that the union could not be dissolved, Maximianus' decision to live as a single is not incongruous with his *pudicitia*, nor does it make him a Christian.

Gibbon found in the loss of Roman masculinity one of the causes of the empire's collapse. According to him, young men would have preferred the quiet and asexual monastic existence to the virile military life (Gibbon, 2012, 37.I.III). This equation between military life, masculinity and sexuality is found in Maximianus, but also in Ostrogothic sources in general and in the Augustan elegiac poets, and it is also a constant in patriarchal societies, which culturally represent love as a war between the sexes (Kuefler, 1995; Moorhead, 1992; Stewart, 2017; Uden, 2012). On the other hand, as Cooper and Leyser (2000) point out and can be observed through the *Elegies*, contrary to what Gibbon thought, the hegemonic notion of masculinity did not change much during Late Antiquity. Youth, domination, and penetration remained the fundamental pillars of male sexuality.

An aged empire: a brief political reading of Maximianus' *Elegies*

It has often been argued that Maximianus wrote not just about his old age, but also about the political changes of his time, equating his *senectus* and near death with the disappearance of the Western Roman Empire and the imminent end of the Ostrogothic Kingdom of Italy at the hands of the Eastern Roman Empire (Uden, 2009; Uden, 2012). If so, his loss of masculinity could be taken as a metaphor for the global loss of which Gibbon spoke. Some scholars (Webster, 1900) have even thought that there is nothing about human aging in the *Elegies*, and that the six poems are solely a metaphor of the political events of the sixth century. I sense in the latter position a certain ageism, thinking that no man would speak of himself in the terms Maximianus does, or verbalize his feelings about the physical and erotic changes experienced in old age.

Using life cycle as a political metaphor is not a novelty of Maximianus. It has been present since Republican Rome, and it seems natural to compare the rise, development and demise of political entities to the birth, growth and death of living beings (e.g. Amm. Marc. 14.6.4; Aug. *Serm.* 81.8; Cyprian *ad Dem.* 4; Lact. *Div. Inst.* 7.15; Lucr. 2.1144–1174; Sallust. *Iug.* 2.3).¹² However, according to Uden and Fielding (2010), in Late Antiquity these metaphors begin to pay special attention to old age. These same authors suggest that Maximianus' use of the topic of the *senectus mundi* may be satirical, a claim disputed by Moralejo (2018).

Thus, when Maximianus speaks of the old age of an empire and its probable coming death, he is referring not only to the Ostrogothic kingdom, but in general to the Roman Empire, since with other authors of the fifth and sixth centuries, he projects an image of continuity with the *romanitas*. An image that is not entirely inaccurate, given that despite some social changes the way of life and the political career of the elite men like Maximianus remained the same. In this sense, the fact that it is a Greek woman who in *Elegy 5* delivers the funeral speech of Maximianus' penis may refer to how the Eastern Roman Empire had outlived the Western Roman Empire and was destroying the Ostrogothic Kingdom of Italy, a theory that would be reinforced if, as is thought, the episode Maximianus narrates occurred during an official visit to Constantinople. Sometimes (Arcaz, 2011; Barnish, 1990; Ruiz Sánchez, 2012) it has been interpreted that Maximianus would have been sent there by Theodoric, but this would give a cut-off date for this mission in

526, a year in which the poet would not be old. A chronology between 546 and 550, during the second half of the Gothic Wars (535–554), is therefore more plausible (Boano, 1949; Scheinder, 2003; Wedeck, 1952).

The political background of *Elegy 5* is also evident in the vocabulary used by Maximianus to describe himself as a son of Etruria (5.5) and Tuscan (5.40), and the constant allusions to the military. Maximianus confesses that his love for the young woman caused him to neglect the diplomatic mission entrusted to him, failing in both tasks (5.43–44). The metaphorical relationship between sexual and political failure is reinforced by the words of the *puella*: "I mourn a public, not a private, hell" (*El.* 5.110: *non fleo priuatum, sed generale chaos*).

Conclusion

'I am not who I was' sums up perfectly the main message of Maximianus' elegiac corpus. We are faced with a man who feels his body as if it were no longer his own, who seems to feel deprived of his identity by old age. To explain to us who he is, he describes his early experiences of love, so that we can compare them with his present, and give him the reason for his argument. In his elegies, Maximianus bases his identity on his ability to have a satisfying sexual identity; that is, a dominant and active one, in which erection plays the leading role. Gender identity becomes synonymous with all that Maximianus could be, an identity that is conditioned by age.

Maximianus expresses his youth using positive words, while his old age is unhappy, envious, sad, and harmful. In the *Elegies* we see an old man who feels that as he ages, he has lost his identity and his place in society, who bases his masculinity and his purpose in life on his ability to remain sexually active and attractive. Unable to adapt to the changes of the life cycle, he finds himself in a constant struggle between what he is, what he was, and what gender roles dictate, between his desires and social constraints. If in other elegiac poets, after the failure of love there was the possibility of a future triumph, in Maximianus this is denied by his age and the proximity of death.

In sum, the reading I have made in this paper of Maximianus' poems has allowed us, on the one hand, to see that gender shapes aging and that aging shapes people's identity. And, on the other hand, to show that, even if our poet is an atypical example of old age, he could not escape the social norms and stereotypes of his time. In Late Antiquity, old age was socially perceived as a time of loss of masculinity and therefore of power. Although the model changed slightly with respect to classical times, the fundamentals remained the same, which is why earlier elegiac references worked for Maximianus when writing his poems. Moreover, the *Elegies* are an example of the difficulty of having a successful aging in social terms. Maximianus was a male who belonged to the social elite and who had an active and healthy life, characteristics that authors of his time used to describe the ideal old age. However, the conflict between his sexual desire, the possibilities of putting it into practice, and the social perception of sexuality in old age, generated a sense of loss of identity and rejection of his old body.

Some possibilities for future research emerge from this, comparing Maximianus' perspective on the life cycle and old age with those of other authors of his time, as well as with other personal narratives of aging. To scholars of aging, this may be seen as an historic example of the social construction of masculinity as intimately tied to being "forever functional" (Katz & Marshall, 2002; Marshall & Katz, 2019) and perhaps there are roots in other classical texts yet to be examined.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

¹² On elegy's political meanings, see Bowditch, 2012.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

References

- Arcaz, J. L. (2011). *Maximiano Etrusco. Poemas de amor y vejez. Escolar y Mayo Editores*.
- Arcaz, J. L. (2012). *Senilis amor: postura de los elegíacos latinos frente al amor en la vejez. AnMal Electrónica, 32*, 3–28.
- Augoustakis, A. (2008). Castrate the he-goat! Overpowering the *paterfamilias* in Plautus' *Mercator. Scholia, 17*, 37–48.
- Baeza, E. F. (2010). 'Quin istic pudibunda iaces, pars pessima nostri?': la impotencia sexual como motivo literario en el mundo clásico. *Lexis, 28*, 433–463.
- Barnish, S. J. B. (1990). Maximian, Cassiodorus, Boethius, Theodahad: Literature, philosophy and politics in Ostrogothic Italy. *Nottingham Medieval Studies, 34*, 16–32.
- Bertman, S. (1989). The ashes and the flame: Passion and aging in classical poetry. In T. M. Falkner, & J. de Luce (Eds.), *Old age in Greek and Latin literature* (pp. 157–171). State University of New York.
- Boano, G. (1949). Su Massimiano e le sue elegie. *Rivista di Filologia Classica, 27*, 198–216.
- Bowditch, L. P. (2012). Roman love elegy and the Eros of empire. In B. K. Gold (Ed.), *A companion to Roman love elegy* (pp. 119–133). Blackwell.
- Butler, R. (1963). The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry, 26*, 65–76.
- Calasanti, T., & King, N. (2018). The dynamic nature of gender and aging bodies. *Journal of Aging Studies, 45*, 11–17.
- Calasanti, T., & King, N. (2021). Beyond successful aging 2.0: Inequalities, ageism, and the case for normalizing old ages. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B, 76*(9), 1817–1827.
- Casamayor, S. (2020). Como un pollo de golondrina: vejez y masculinidad en la antigua Roma. *Revista de História da Sociedade e da Cultura, 20*, 13–28.
- Castellanos, F., & López, A. L. (2010). Mirando pasar la vida desde la ventana: significado de la vejez y la discapacidad de un grupo de ancianos en un contexto de pobreza. *Investigación en Enfermería, 12*, 37–53.
- Cokayne, K. (2003). *Experiencing old age in ancient Rome*. Routledge.
- Cooper, K., & Leyser, C. (2000). The gender of grace: Impotence, servitude, and manliness in the fifth-century west. *Gender & History, 12*, 536–551.
- De Wet, C. (2016). Grumpy old men? Gender, gerontology, and the geriatrics of soul in John Chrysostom. *Journal of Early Christian Studies, 24*(4), 491–521.
- De Wet, C. (2018). Old age, masculinity, and martyrdom in late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and the Maccabean martyrs. *Journal of Early Christian History, 8*(1), 43–67.
- Dossey, L. (2008). Wife beating and manliness in late antiquity. *Past & Present, 199*(3), 40.
- Elm, S. (2009). Family men: Masculinity and philosophy in late antiquity. In M. Papoutsakis, & P. Rousseau (Eds.), *Transformations of late antiquity* (pp. 279–302). Routledge.
- Fielding, I. (2014). A poet between two worlds. Ovid in late antiquity. In J. F. Miller, & C. E. Newlands (Eds.), *A handbook to the reception of Ovid* (pp. 101–113). John Wiley & Sons.
- García, A. (1984). El amor en la juventud y en la vejez en Tibulo. *Archivum, 34*, 7–21.
- García, J., Jiménez, G., & Hernández, C. I. (2020). Estereotipos sobre la sexualidad en la adultez mayor: un análisis desde la perspectiva de género. *Revista Electrónica en Educación y Pedagogía, 4*(7), 27–38.
- Gibbon, E. (2012). *Decadencia y caída del Imperio Romano. Atalanta*.
- Juster, A. M. (2018). Commentary. In *Maximianus Etruscus, The Elegies of Maximianus. Edited and translated by A. M. Juster* (pp. 103–210). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Katz, S., & Marshall, B. L. (2002). Forever functional: Male sexual fitness and the aging body. *Body & Society, 8*(4), 43–70.
- Kuefler, M. (1995). *The manly eunuch. Masculinity, gender ambiguity and Christian ideology in late antiquity*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Kuefler, M. (2007). The marriage revolution in late antiquity: The Theodosian code and later Roman marriage law. *Journal of Family History, 32*(4), 343–370.
- Laes, C. (2019). What's in a single? Roman antiquity and a comparative world approach. In S. R. Huebner, & C. Laes (Eds.), *The single life in the Roman and later Roman world* (pp. 3–33). Cambridge University Press.
- Langlands, R. (2006). *Sexual morality in ancient Rome*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lozovsky, N. (2016). Intellectual culture and literary practices. In J. J. Arnold, M. S. Bjornlie, & K. Sessa (Eds.), *A companion to ostrogothic Italy* (pp. 316–349). Brill.
- Katz, S., & Marshall, B. L. (2019). Forever functional: Sexual fitness and the aging male body. In S. Katz (Ed.), *Cultural aging. Life course, lifestyle, and senior worlds* (pp. 161–187). University of Toronto Press.
- Moorhead, J. (1992). *Theoderic in Italy*. Clarendon Press.
- Moralejo, J. L. (2018). De nuevo sobre la *senectus mundi*: Notas sobre un tópico literario. *Revista de Estudios Latinos, 18*, 11–27.
- Nathan, G. (2015). The ideal male in late antiquity: Claudian's example of Flavius Stilicho. *Gender & History, 27*, 10–27.
- Perkins, J. (1995). *The suffering self. Pain and narrative representation in the early Christian Era*. Routledge.
- Phillips, J., Ajrouch, K., & Hillcoat-Nallétamby, S. (2010). Key concepts in social gerontology. SAGE.
- Roberts, M. (2018). *The elegies of Maximianus*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ruiz Sánchez, M. (2012). *Reseña de Maximiano Etrusco, Poemas de amor y vejez, Traducción, introducción y notas de Juan Luis Arcaz Pozo, Colección Vestigia, Madrid, 2011, 119 pp. Myrtia. 27 pp. 441–516*.
- Ryder, K. C. (1984). The *Senex Amator* in Plautus. *Greece & Rome, 31*, 181–189.
- Sandberg, L. (2011). *Getting intimate. A feminist analysis of old age, masculinity & sexuality*. University of Linköping.
- Scheider, W. (2003). *Die elegischen Verse von Maximian: Eine letzte Widerrede gegen die neue christliche Zeit*. Steiner Verlag.
- Shannon-Henderson, K. E. (2020). Life after transition: Spontaneous sex and its aftermath in ancient literature. In A. Surtees, & J. Dyer (Eds.), *Exploring gender diversity in the ancient world* (pp. 67–78). Edinburgh University Press.
- Stewart, M. E. (2017). The danger of the soft life: Manly and unmanly romans in Procopius's *gothic war*. *Journal of Late Antiquity, 10*(2), 473–502.
- Uden, J. (2009). The elegiac "Puella" as virgin martyr. *Transactions of the American Philological Association, 139*, 207–222.
- Uden, J. (2012). Love elegies of late antiquity. In B. K. Gold (Ed.), *A companion to Roman love elegy* (pp. 459–475). Blackwell.
- Uden, J., & Fielding, I. (2010). Latin elegy in the old age of the world: The elegiac Corpus of Maximianus. *Arethusa, 43*, 439–460.
- Webster, R. (1900). Introduction. In *Maximianus Etruscus, the elegies of Maximianus* (pp. 7–22). Princeton Press.
- Wedek, H. (1952). An analysis of the techniques of Maximianus Etruscus. *Latomus, 11*, 487–495.