Shulamith Shahar is already well-known as the author of useful general works on women and on childhood in the medieval West. Here, the topic of Growing Old in the Middle Ages receives Professor Shahar’s usual capable handling, i.e., a valuable survey of attitudes and views drawn from a variety of primary sources combined with a discussion of the historical reality based on a careful synthesis of existing secondary works, all drawn together in clear and attractive prose. Shahar begins by showing that, despite frequent modern claims that medieval people saw forty as the onset of old age, old age was generally recognized as beginning at about sixty. Yet, despite her explicit emphasis on the continuity between medieval and modern attitudes to old age here and in her conclusion (172), Shahar’s own analysis in fact tends to stress the many differences between the medieval and modern periods in treatment of old age without ever reducing such differences to a set of simplistic binary oppositions. Nor is her analysis based on some uniform medieval mentality or culture. On the contrary, Shahar is often at her best in revealing the contradictory nature of medieval views of old age to be found even in the works of individual authors depending upon their immediate rhetorical purposes. Equally useful is her highlighting of the variety of experience which characterised specific orders, classes, regions, and periods, and, in particular, her emphasis on the differences between men and women. Especially interesting, given the tendency of many modern historians to see social positions and identities as discursively created, is Shahar’s emphasis on the relative uniformity of discourses about old age compared with the variety found in historical reality (11) and the consequent gap between discourse and social practice.
At times, there is a tendency to lapse into using literature as evidence for social reality (e.g., 121-22) and there is the occasional error of fact (Fortescue, for instance, was not writing in the early sixteenth century [125]). Nevertheless, it is a sign of the strength of Shahar’s work, rather than of any weakness, that it draws to our attention how even the most basic facts about old age in the medieval period (for instance, about the tendency of Parisian widows to remarry assumed by the author of The Good Man of Paris [140]) remain to be discovered. Specialists in the field will learn much from Shahar’s survey whilst students taking courses in medieval social and family history will turn to it as a standard text.

At one point Shahar toys with the idea of the old as a “marginal” social group (7), but as her own analysis shows, and as Joel Rosenthal argues in his Old Age in Medieval England, far from being excluded, many of the aged “were in positions of power, wealth and culturally endorsed authority” (190). It is the aged amongst the power elites of medieval English society who form the main focus of Rosenthal’s studies: nobles, bishops, knights of the shire, and so on. Rosenthal’s book functions as a collection of relatively discreet chapters, many of which, given this early stage in the exploration of old age in medieval England, explore the difficulties of using sources such as inquisitions post mortem and wills. Many of the conclusions seem relatively uncontroversial: there were significant numbers of old people in medieval England (chap. 1); proofs of age gave old people a social role (chap. 2); the aged were omnipresent (chap. 3); three-generation families did exist (chap. 4); wills tell us little about three-generational families (chap. 5); we can know relatively little about the affective relations involved in three-generation families (chap. 6); medieval people could retire (chap. 7); there was a variety of experience amongst aged peers (chap. 8); longevity was useful in an ecclesiastical career (chap. 9); the aged were common amongst medieval writers (chap. 10); and there was a diversity of theories about old age in the medieval period (chap. 11). Like Shahar, Rosenthal stresses the disparity between the contradictory discourses about old age which characterised the medieval period and the social reality of the day. Even more than Shahar, he emphasises the variety of experience to be found amongst the aged even within relatively small social groups. Indeed, at times the refusal to generalize about the aged tends to lead to a dissolution of old age as a distinct subject area: in the area of piety, “as in most others, elderly aristocrats were very much like other people, noble or common, old and young” (134). But in that case why discuss