

BOOK REVIEW

The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel. Andrea Charise. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020. Pp. xlv+194.

Has the study of aging in nineteenth-century literature come of age? It is just over a decade since the publication of Devoney Looser's groundbreaking book (*Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain*) on the intersections of gender, old age, and creativity in the Romantic period. Karen Chase's *The Victorians and Old Age* (2009), which has become increasingly influential for scholars working at the other end of the century, appeared the following year. Both gave scholars new ways of considering old age as a category as potentially significant to identity formation as gender, class, and ethnicity. Since then, the topic of aging has taken root more firmly in Victorian studies than Romantic—with significant contributions to knowledge from Kay Heath and Claudia Nelson—perhaps because of the persistence of the Romantic tropes of euphoric and Promethean youth. But a field is developing here too with recent special issues of the journals *Romanticism* (2019) and *Age, Culture, Humanities* (2020) and studies that abut onto the subject of late-life creativity, such as Tim Fulford's *The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets* (2013). What critics have yet to find is an approach that draws a debate through the century as a whole, doing for literature some of what Pat Thane has done for nineteenth-century history, picking up continuities that don't simply play into the chronological fact of the aging century. This has changed with the publication of Andrea Charise's compelling study *The Aesthetics of Senescence*, which provides a comprehensive account of the centrality of aging to new conceptions of British identity—national, political, and cultural—throughout the period.

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In the introduction to the book, Charise sets out her intention to address how the novel becomes a focus for the changing experience of human temporality, partly through the way it draws on new combinations of medical, economic, and philosophical epistemologies beginning with the writings of Burke, Godwin, and Malthus at the end of the eighteenth century. Others have previously observed that the Romantic period saw an intensification in literature's interest in subjective and fluid understandings of aging and temporality—a move away from the strictly chronological “ages and stages” thinking that dominated earlier periods—even as it operated in a context where the subject of old age drew increased attention to social and material realities and knowledge of demographics. Charise's approach is, however, significant and original for her maintenance that embodied accounts of the aging subject in the novel cannot be extrapolated from the conditions that saw people sorted by age-inflected groupings and human aging represented in terms of the fate of the species.

Specifically, Charise views the Godwin-Malthus debate, particularly Malthus's attention to the demographics of population, as fundamental to a shift in scientific and philosophical thinking that made “citizens newly subject to social discourse” (xxv). The debate recasts aging as a state—rather than a series of distinct stages through which a subject naturally passes, as in Shakespeare's famous “Seven Ages of Man” in *As You Like It*—which produced narratives of “burden, difficulty, or disruption” (xxv), or oppositions between youth and age, of the sort with which twenty-first-century students of aging are so familiar.

Malthus's framework of demography famously challenged beliefs that youth was an axiomatic social good, pitting reproductive capacity against the resources and sustainability of a population. In so doing, he drew attention to what Charise calls “massified” groups or population cohorts that were as subject to aging as individuals. Charise argues that the novel was the ideal form for capturing temporal complexity of this sort, “an especially productive space for plotting new textualizations of older age as a fluid, non-teleological, and increasingly medicalized state of life: one in which the finitude of individual lifespan often exists in strained reciprocity with the perpetual succession of species” (xlii).

Such strained reciprocity is immediately evident in the study of William Godwin's depictions of old age in *Political Justice* (1793) and *St. Leon* (1799) that opens the book. Charise is insightful in arguing for the latter's problematization of the former's advocacy of longevity as a sign of human perfectibility and of the mind's ability to overcome the temporal limits of the aging body as a requisite of achieving political justice. The constraints of lifespan that are equated to those of government in *Political Justice* are exposed as largely individualistic concerns through the selfish and immature behavior of Reginald de St. Leon, who finds himself increasingly isolated

from human concerns and interactions, having been given the secret of eternal life. The significance of maturation to the bildungsroman, the novel of the development of human experience, is undermined by the gift of unlimited lifespan. As Charise argues, "Godwin's novel displaces St. Leon from exactly the social human relations that call out for political justice" (25).

Aging and generational succession turn out to be integral to "ongoing improvement and the life of species" (30), a lesson further explored in relation to Mary Shelley's fiction in chapter 2. Charise is particularly good at giving paradigms new and memorable denominations, and here it is "Frail Romanticism," which is defined as "a high consciousness of the temporalized infirmity of the flesh" (61). Victor Frankenstein is terrified of his monster's capacity for reproduction, a Malthusian nightmare in which his destruction of the female monster is an image of an attempt to wreck futurity. By way of contrast, Charise proposes that *The Last Man* (1826), a fantasy of reverse colonization of the Old World by the New, offers a compensatory model of sympathetic reciprocity among age groups that assuages the resentful Romantic models of Jupiter and Prometheus, or Frankenstein and monster.

The second half of the book demonstrates similar bridges between age groups in Victorian fiction, with chapters on G. H. Lewes's *The Physiology of Common Life* (1860) and George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861), and George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893). Charise continues to show how the novel problematized linear aging, describing the joint susceptibility of youth and age to the processes of bodily waste and repair as represented by Lewes and Eliot, where "waste" is both a hoarding and squandering of vitality, the balance of which indicates the health of society in Eliot's novel. As so often, Charise skilfully knits discussion together through her handling of medical, philosophical, and anthropological texts: here, it is the second law of thermodynamics and Charles Lyell's geological discoveries that affect understanding of physiological aging. *The Odd Women* is read as an example of "senile topography" (108)—another of those memorable phrases—the fin de siècle anxieties concerning a class of counterfeit women who refuse to adopt the roles of wife and mother and accordingly challenge the heteronormative temporal markers of female aging.

The Aesthetics of Senescence is a valuable, and highly original, contribution to the emergent field of aging studies in nineteenth-century literature, which enables readers to see more clearly embodied aging as a social, cultural, and national phenomenon. It shows how old anxieties of aging intensify and new ones emerge in the nineteenth century in relation to what Charise calls the biopolitics of aging, which draws on medical, scientific, economic, and ethical contexts. It is a book that will be integral to future discussions of aging in the period.

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