

Age and Aging Studies, from Cradle to Grave

Devoney Looser

A famous section of Virginia Woolf's feminist treatise, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), includes an impossible admonition. Woolf writes, "Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney" (113). Like Austen, Woolf suggests, we must honor our pioneering female-author predecessors. Noble as that goal was, Woolf's imaginary charge to Austen (1775–1817) could never have been carried out. Born some twenty years before Austen, Frances Burney (1752–1840) also outlived her by two decades. Woolf did not recognize this; subsequent generations of feminist literary critics missed it, too. In imagining Austen and Burney together, we overlooked the fact that Burney lived to, wrote to, and published into, old age. Woolf's unnoticed error indicates how few of us have conceived of Burney as both before and after Austen. It demonstrates that we have neglected to see authors, particularly female authors of past centuries, as active across the life course. It shows the erasure of old age in women's literary history, a subject I wrote about in *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750–1850*, which I began with this anecdote about Woolf.

There remains much more work to be done. We are at a surprisingly nascent stage of documenting how what we now call sexism and ageism operated in the past, an ideological coupling that Susan Sontag dubbed the "double standard of aging." It is imperative that we undo the work of previous generations of literary historians who slotted authors into the eras of their most enduring creative works. For women writers, that has often meant those texts published in youth or middle age. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British women's late-life writings, when noticed at all, tended to be disparaged or measured for a falling off of powers. (The same patterns do not seem to have applied to male authors, although we need more documentation of those, too.) To come to terms

with patterns of age and gender in tandem is crucial to understanding the past, not only for its own sake, but also as it has led to problems, challenges, and conditions of the present. We can no longer afford to write biographies of Burney with brief chapters on more than three decades of her late life using dismissive, mischaracterizing titles such as “Keeping Life Alive” (Harman). Where attending to old age is concerned, whether for individual authors or for wide-ranging literary and cultural histories, our habits and practices must shift. What we see as worthy of scrutiny and interpretation must change. “We,” of course, does not mean only or even primarily age studies practitioners, but rather humanities scholars generally.

One danger I see before us is failing to communicate to our colleagues that “age studies” is much more than an updated term for literary gerontology, that it must not be the work of a select few. It remains difficult to convey that not only the “old” have “age.” I am sympathetic to those age studies scholars who believe that, for social justice reasons, our scholarship should center on the old as the most marginalized age cohort. I sympathize, but I do not agree. In order to produce better scholarship, we need to come to terms with what age and aging mean and have meant, and that implies “from cradle to grave,” as the life course has long been colloquially described. We must learn more about how life in past centuries was carved into distinct periods, each with its own changing nomenclature and supposed characteristics, rewards, and challenges. For example, the eighteenth century’s “middle period” appears to have shifted to become the nineteenth century’s “mid-life.” As Kay Heath argues (in a book I review in this issue), nineteenth-century “mid-life” may have carried with it new associations with decline. In studying the cultural meanings of what we now call middle age, we will likely arrive at new insights about and knowledge of old age, and vice versa. We must continue to seek out the ways that the meanings and practices of age and aging changed from decade to decade, generation to generation, or century to century. We must do so in conversation with the other categories of identity that have become central to our work in the humanities,

particularly in cultural studies: gender, race, class, nation, and sexuality among them. Age belongs on that list. Age must be added to that list.

I realize I am preaching to the choir of those reading this first volume of *Age, Culture, Humanities*. We know all too well that, even with several decades of important work behind us, few humanities scholars presently attend to age qua age. With the exception of a growing body of work on the child writer and children's literature; on women's aging in the literature and culture of the twentieth century; and on old age in the classical past, there remains an overall dearth of scholarship using age studies concepts and methodologies. In many literary historical periods and national literatures, just one or two titles have appeared to date, usually devoted to old age. The English language demonstrates one obstacle. We have a word to describe writings authored in childhood, loosely defined: juvenilia. Beyond that, if we bother to mark texts by an author's age at composition or publication, we call them simply "mature writings." This label might refer to anything written after one's mid-twenties.

I am not suggesting that we need new terms to describe the qualities of so-called mature writings. I share the skepticism of "late style" expressed by Linda and Michael Hutcheon. They see the concept (as used in the work of Theodor Adorno and Edward Said) as problematic and universalizing in its singularity. Employing age as a useful category of historical analysis—to repurpose Joan Scott's terms—will not, I think, result in our locating features that inhere in writing based on age or stage of the life course (Looser, "Oblivion"). I am more confident, however, that we will locate many new patterns of authorial self-fashioning, imagined readerships, and critical reception based on age. Such insights promise to change not just the work of age studies practitioners, gerontologists, or children's literature specialists but to inform the ways that all of us go about humanities work.

I would like to end with a final thought on the question of what we call our emerging field, namely "age" versus "aging" studies. Although I prefer Margaret Morganroth Gullette's "age studies" for its linguistic parallelism to other identity studies terminology, there is certainly

something to be said for deploying “aging studies” as well. That phrase highlights aging as a process—as a set of changing and ongoing cultural and individual practices and experiences. “Age” seems a static term, whereas “aging” presents itself as a dynamic one. One wonders how gender studies would have evolved as a field if we had come to call it “gendering studies.” Individuals are aging and gendering—being aged and gendered—from their first moments forward. Age is the more unusual facet of identity, perhaps, in its involving obvious, noticeable, and measurable change over time. It is nevertheless important to get across forcefully that no subcategory of age is static. Age’s measurability does not carry with it universality of meaning. Indeed, the supposed visibility of aging as a process can make revealing its historical and cultural variability all the more challenging. This is nowhere more evident than when “aging” is employed as a synonym for “old.” Whenever aging is imagined as a problem belonging to late life—as if “aging” starts somewhere in late middle age and ends at death—we ought to be uneasy about whether it serves to limit the parameters and potential of future scholarship. I am hopeful that, as more scholars come of age in an age/aging studies-rich environment, there will be fewer errors like Woolf’s, as more of us seek opportunities for crucial discoveries and new insights.

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