

“Much Yet To Learn”: Feminist Age Studies and the Long Eighteenth Century

Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750-1850. Devoney Looser. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 234 pp.

Reviewed by **Kay Heath**, Virginia State University

<1> Devoney Looser’s *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750-1850* takes up a fascinating and neglected topic – the late-life careers of the first generation of British women writers to be widely published. Though Looser discusses many female authors, she focuses in particular on the elder years of six women: Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Catharine Macaulay, Hester Lynch Piozzi, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Jane Porter. In addition, she examines aging in Jane Austen’s fiction, a writer who did not herself live past midlife. Engaging and clearly written, Looser’s book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of what it meant to be an elderly female writer in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries while also identifying important considerations of fact and methodology often overlooked without the perspective of age studies.

<2> An emerging interdisciplinary field, age studies has been adopted more readily by historians than literary critics. Looser includes contemporary age theorists such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette and Kathleen Woodward⁽¹⁾ as well as historians of British and European aging such as Pat Thane, Susannah R. Ottaway, and Lynn Botelho, to mention just a few.⁽²⁾ Looser’s book breaks new ground as a feminist age study of the long eighteenth century dealing specifically with literature, which is, as she repeatedly points out, sorely in need of work. *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain* is an especially welcome addition to the small but growing number of texts on aging in British literature and culture and will be considered alongside studies by Victorianists such as Teresa Mangum and Karen Chase.⁽³⁾

<3> In her introduction, Looser exposes problems particular to aging female authors as well as factors that complicate their study. She provides a helpful overview of the meaning of old age during the long eighteenth century and specifies ageist stereotypes that have caused women’s later-life writing to be ignored (9). This group has been discounted, for example, due to the enduring notion that men may reach genius in maturity while women of the same age produce substandard work (17). An even more fundamental problem has been our tendency to judge old age itself as insignificant and unworthy of study (19). Identifying stereotypes of age and gender that collude to make older women especially invisible, Looser shows the impact of disparaging

generalizations on their lives and on the reception of their writing (21). For example, Looser points out that because women were expected to be sexless in later life, “If an older female author pretended to youthfulness or to special knowledge about romance, she could be seen as sexually suspect” (26). As a result, elderly female writers were denigrated for daring to represent characters in passionate liaisons or even to discuss such a subject.

<4> Looser emphasizes the advantages of accounting for each writer's unique life span rather than slotting authors into discrete, and often misleading, eras. Because she deals with the long lives of women who were born in the eighteenth century but who, for the most part, lived well into the nineteenth, her study cuts across territory that scholars usually divide into three separate fields. Periodization, for example, causes us to place Edgeworth in the eighteenth century but Frances Trollope in Victorian England, though the two were born only twelve years apart (7). As Looser cogently argues, “We simply cannot understand the literary past with much nuance if we continue to pigeonhole authors into eras that their published and unpublished writings significantly postdate” (7), a problem we create by overlooking their later years.

<5> The book's chapters explore a fascinating array of issues faced by women writers of age. In chapter 1, Looser compares Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814), a novel that thwarts age stereotypes (expressing, for instance, appreciation for aged garrulity), with Edgeworth's more conventional treatment in *Helen* (1834). She shows that these late-life novels affected later reception of all Burney's and Edgeworth's work, including their early writing. Chapter 2 addresses Macaulay's struggle to resurrect her reputation in old age when her final book, *Letters on Education* (1790), received a lackluster review. Looser examines Macaulay's outraged response in an unpublished letter as well as posthumous charges that she defaced a manuscript in the British Museum, removing pages with which she disagreed. Looser closes by analyzing critics' subsequent attempts to recover Macaulay's reputation.

<6> Chapter 3, of particular interest to scholars of the nineteenth century, takes up the case of Austen. Unlike the others represented here, Austen lived only into her forties, but, as the quintessential “good spinster-author” (76), she makes an excellent subject. Looser surveys Austen's treatment of the aged, noting that she frequently depicts their problems and satirizes their mistreatment. Characters like the foppish Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion* (1818), however, are portrayed as fools for being overly preoccupied with age. The elderly consistently function in much the same way as servants, mere “faceless backdrops” (77), but both middle and old age generally are “fluid” and “slippery” categories in Austen's works (78, 80). The heart of this chapter focuses on *Emma* (1815), demonstrating that rather than defending “old maids” against ageism, Austen reifies denigrating stereotypes. Looser urges us to consider whether Austen's usual insight is lacking where spinsters are concerned due to her own relationship with that troubling identity.

<7> In chapter 4, Looser looks at Piozzi's unpublished works written after age sixty – letters, diaries, and almanacs – as evidence of an active late-life career. She notes Piozzi not only comments on age itself but praises behaviors often associated with the elderly such as retrospection and loquacity. She also examines Piozzi's infamous co-opting of a young male protégé, William Augustus Conway, suggesting that instead of coquetry or a self-serving ploy to

establish a following in the next generation, she attempted to become his maternal literary mentor. Chapter 5 discusses Barbauld's work near the end of her life, arguing that by editing and writing criticism about neglected works, she hoped to establish a literary legacy while also inspiring such service on her own behalf (131). Looser analyzes the reception of Barbauld's controversial final poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812), including ways in which ageist stereotypes contributed greatly to negative reviews. Chapter 6 details the capricious and frustrating business affairs of an aged female author who tried to live off her former work. Attempting to maintain an independent existence in her later years, Porter futilely sought a literary pension, though she was able to garner other support that allowed a modest lifestyle. Looser offers accounts of assistance several women writers were able to negotiate successfully, but in her exploration of Porter's struggle, she emphasizes the financial challenges that aging female authors faced.

<8> Scholars interested in age studies, especially those working in the eighteenth century, will benefit from Looser's conclusion in which she mentions numerous women writers whose lives and work still are disregarded. She closes by returning to the ageism that all too often has caused female authors to be overlooked – especially the first generation of British women successfully to pursue writing as a profession – and she questions how much we have lost by such neglect. “Unless and until we get a better grasp of the finer points of authorship and old age in the early modern period,” Looser writes, “we are bound to reproduce incomplete pictures of British literary history” (171). *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain* is a substantial addition to feminist studies as well as an open invitation to literary scholars interested in exploring age and its intersection with other categories of identity. As Looser continually reminds us, “There is much yet to learn about . . . aged writers of both sexes” (20), and her innovative book challenges readers to continue what she has begun.

Endnotes

(1) Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Kathleen Woodward, ed., *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).(^)

(2) For example, Lynn Botelho and Susannah R. Ottaway, eds., *The History of Old Age in England, 1600-1800*, 8 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008-9); Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, eds., *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2001); Susannah R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).(^)

(3) Teresa Mangum, “Growing Old: Age,” *Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), and “Little Women: The Aging Female Character in Nineteenth-Century British Children's Literature,” in Woodward 59-87; Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).(^)

Children can spend more time and effort on learning than adults who have many competing demands; the motivation for children to fit in is much higher, and the habits of pronunciation and grammar of their first language are less deeply ingrained and thus easier to overcome. And, of course, all learning gets harder with age. None of these factors have anything to do with a specific critical period for learning languages, but all of them do make younger learners of a new language eventually outperform older ones. Created with Sketch.

Britain's "long" eighteenth century, which began with one aristocratic revolution in 1688 and ended with another in 1832, was a pageant of success. The nation's art and architecture reached their elegant and original best. The British constitution became a topic for eulogy, as much by the unenlightened and illiterate at home as by the Enlightenment literati abroad. The armed forces, fiscal system, and bureaucracy of the British state grew in efficacy and range, bringing victory in all but one of a succession of major wars. 17

Holmes, Geoffrey, *The Electorate and the National Will in the First Age of Party* (Kendal, 1976); Cannon, John, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640-1832* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 40-42. "Feminism," as we know the term today, was nonexistent in nine-teenth-century America. The phrase did not become popular until the 1910s as efforts began to focus around women's suffrage, yet pre-feminist activity began long before 1910 (Cott 13). During the mid-nineteenth century, the "Woman Movement" developed as a result of "women's striv-ings to improve their status in and usefulness to society." The objectives of the movement were "to initiate measures of charitable benevolence