

From the editor

Ageing into Old Age: Literary Conclusions and New Beginnings

Katarzyna Bronk-Bacon, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

In his 1775 letter to William Mason the almost sixty-year-old Horace Walpole writes: “I seem to myself a Stralbrug, who have lived past my time, and see almost my own life written before my face while I am yet upon earth” (Walpole 1955, 186).¹ Little did he know that he would continue writing about his experience of ageing for over twenty more years. Walpole, like his epistolary contemporaries, reported on what it meant to age into middle age, and then senescence, and investigated the accuracy and validity of eighteenth-century precepts and promises concerning late life.² Walpole, Mary Berry, Lord Chesterfield or Mary Wortley Montagu – to point out just a few of the more recognized letter-writers – confronted the inculcated ideology of successful ageing with their lived experience of suffering and deteriorating bodies, and pondered upon the meaning of life which seemed both too short and not long enough, an assessment depending on their somatic and mental well-being on a given day. Their epistolary and diaristic conclusions on ageing seem both period specific (especially in terms of life expectancy and medical treatments in the eighteenth century) as well as universal and ahistorical, proving that there is an almost timeless and shared vocabulary of ageing as well as a cultural imagery that is generationally reiterated despite medical and sociological progress. Age studies, with their various subdisciplines, came into being to help pinpoint and analyse why such an alignment between the ‘pastness’ of ageing and its modern experience is actually possible. And why it is inevitable that

1 Though misspelling, Walpole refers to Swift’s race of Immortals whom Gulliver meets during his voyages. Instead of being celebrated as long-livers, they are despised even by their own families. Swift’s novel opens an interesting dialogue with Julia Velten’s paper in this volume.

2 For more on Walpole’s experience of ageing into old age see Bronk-Bacon, Katarzyna. 2022. “‘It Is Scandalous at My Age’: Horace Walpole’s Epistolary Aging.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 55, no 4: 497-516. [10.1353/ecs.2022.0051](https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2022.0051). I am currently working on Lord Chesterfield’s correspondence and his geragogic lessons on old age. This is an extension of my existing research on old age in British culture, published among others, in 2019 *‘And Yet I remember’: Ageing and Old(er) Age in English Drama between 1660 and the 1750s*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

people like the eighteenth-century *crème de la crème* both detested and were grateful for their experience of ageing.

Age studies point to all life stages as culturally and historically idiosyncratic, and further complicated by various and often changing intersectional perspectives. Within this age(s)-focused field of analysis, humanistic and critical gerontologists as well as historians of old age issued an ardent call to redefine old age as equally ephemeral and multi-layered as any other life stage. Addressing the existing studies of the formative and foundational quality of youth and adulthood, humanistic gerontologists³ of various subdisciplines objected to seeing old age as simply the end of life, and to even defining it as a precise point in time rather than a period with no exact temporal opening bracket. Thane (2000) in particular stresses the difficulty in defining old age in terms of chronology only, proposing to view it as a functional and cultural category as well. Scholars such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004) and Michael Mangan (2013) note that one is sooner *made (to feel)* old by their own culture and society than one perceives oneself as such. Consequently, scholars have shown that old age must be seen as an essentially intimate and embodied lived experience, as well as a phenomenon with a set of socio-cultural prescriptive and proscriptive rules of conduct and decorum as well as sanctions and rewards pertaining to the failure or success of compliance. Old age can then be seen as simultaneously “the culmination or the dreary denouement of life’s drama” (Cole 2006, xx), written as somatic and mental narratives of decline (Gullette 1997) as well as the most meaningful moment of human existence, “a time for recapitulating, connecting part to part, re-membering” (Carson 1987, xii), leading to wisdom only allowed to the members of this in-group.

Addressing all of the emerging conceptual recalibrations, Gullette claimed that indeed age “could be the next analytic and hermeneutic concept to make cutting-edge a difference” (Gullette 2004, 106) in humanist research. Having specifically worked on middle and old age in her research, she further notes that, just like with other necessary intersectionalities, to talk about ageing is to keep unravelling and disentangling “the din of representations, unseen internalizations, [and] unthinking practices” (Gullette 2004, 27). Humanistic gerontology then asks questions such as: Do we with age become the embodied repositories

3 Scholars use both “humanistic” and “humanist” with gerontology. I follow W. Andrew Achenbaum in his choice of the nomenclature.

of knowledge and guardians of traditions? Do we need to properly perform old age as the various “gerontideologies” socialize us to do (Mangan 2013, 3-5)? Are we our ageing bodies? How do our auto/self-narratives change with age? Can we “read the beginning in the end and the end in the beginning” (Baars 2016, 82)? This themed volume aims to critically address and further explore the meaning(s) behind and potentialities of old age and ageing, and turns to literature to propose avenues for further discussions on the aforementioned questions.

Sarah Falcus stresses that “telling and reading stories of age does open up a debate and embrace complexity, and may challenge our ways of thinking” (Falcus 2015, 53). Indeed it is humanities, and literature more specifically, that help to find examples for Stephen Katz’s interdisciplinary definitions of ageing. In the first volume of his now seminal journal, he states:

In the *Encyclopedia of Aging* I defined ‘aging’ as, on the one hand, ‘the elegant and continuous means by which the forces of nature, from the microscopic to the universal, create the conditions for regeneration’ (45) and, on the other hand, as having ‘inspired the human artistic and cultural imagination for millennia’ because it makes us confront ‘the paradoxes of living and dying in time’ (48). (Katz 2014, 22)

Katz’s research in general allows to point out three fundamentals in ageing research that form intertwining trajectories within this special volume: 1) old age as a phenomenon, 2) the (ageing/deteriorating) body and lived experience, and 3) memory, the latter understood not only as recollecting one’s spatio-temporal past but, in particular, re-mem-bering one’s somatic “past-ness”. Such intertwining of old age with memory inevitably invites studies of nostalgia, seen as both positive and negative approaches to and perceptions of one’s embodied past. The academics who joined me in this volume’s challenge to investigate late life as “a nebulous existence of unpredictable duration” (Achenbaum 1989, xix) have essentially proved that even within the aforementioned categories, the potential of old age (or ageing) as a research topic is tremendous.

The wealth of concepts, themes and motifs discussed in the papers demonstrates not only the multilayered and interdisciplinary nature of old age studies, but also the complexity of the phenomenon of ageing itself. In the present volume, based on, predominantly British and American literary examples, ageing

is both a literal somatic and mental process as well as a metaphor. It is a measured and medicalised experience as well as a set of ephemeral and enigmatic sensations. Ageing is embodied and externalised, projected onto landscapes and architectural designs. It is the time lost and the time gained, a moment of reaping and the trauma of loss. Ageing brings about existential ambiguity and offers integrative clarity through life reviews. Old age is shown as a blessing and a curse; an advantage over the younger generations and an obstacle to living in any kind of symbiosis with them. It offers poetic exuberance as well as narrative stagnation. The authors within this volume address these potentialities and avenues across various historical and literary periods, perhaps quite tellingly opening the discussion with an age reading of the eighteenth-century gothic novel. It is therefore no coincidence that the guest editor of the volume begins with Walpole's epistolary lessons on ageing. Who else should initiate the discussion on ageing than the historian and writer who was so in love with the past of the world and yet very anxious about seeing his own life unfolding.

I wish to thank the authors who joined me on this project. I am also very grateful to the reviewers who offered valuable advice on making this volume critically sound and academically valid. And, finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the General, Thematic and Managing Editors of PJES who saw the validity of continuing the research on ageing into old age. We have not exhausted the discussions on ageing or old age ... and fortunately so.

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