

the chapter frequently mentions the ongoing difficulty in uniting the disability movement with late life advocacy groups, this recognition of “corporeal limitations” as a reflection of difference might provide the basis for some common ground.

Ageing, Corporeality and Embodiment views the body in late life as productively destabilizing, a “site for the expression of identities and lifestyles that are other than aged, other than old” (31). It signals an important shift in thinking about the body in aging: not as its “limiting condition,” but instead as a platform for staging a renewed battle for recognizing difference, even perhaps considering the body’s more radical materialism.

NOTES

¹ See Carr and Komp for a recent analysis of the *Third Age*.

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Constituting Old Age in Early Modern English Literature from Queen Elizabeth to King Lear. Christopher Martin. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. Pp. 240. \$80.00 (hardcover) \$27.95 (paperback).

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In her important 2007 account of aging in literature, *The Long Life*, Helen Small remarks that “Old age in literature is rarely if ever only about itself, but as far as criticism has been concerned, it has oddly rarely been much about itself at all” (6). In recent years, scholarship on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature has made a concerted effort to correct this deficiency. Studies by scholars such as Nina Taunton, Anthony Ellis, and Maurice Charney have focused on the various depictions of older people in early modern literature and, especially, drama. Simultaneously, however, books such as Gordon McMullan’s *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing* have moved beyond representation to consider the ways in which alternative narratives about aging have inflected the study of Shakespeare and other early modern writers.

Christopher Martin’s *Constituting Old Age* might look at first glance to belong to the developing “representations” tradition. His stated interest is in the forms and content of

the texts themselves, rather than the broader relationship between aging and its cultural and material contexts. Yet his methodology is more varied and wide-ranging than it might at first seem. Probing the relationship between old age and subjectivity, and exploring the fraught generational politics of the late Elizabethan period, he draws equally on classical and Humanist texts such as Cicero's *De senectute* and Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* and on the recent work of historians and theorists of age and aging such as Pat Thane, Haim Hazan, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Jenny Hockey, and Allison James. In doing so, he seeks, with contemporary critical gerontology, to challenge the narratives of decline and incapacity that have inflected and often shaped earlier studies such as Taunton's.

The term "constituting" in his title draws attention to a central idea of the book: the productive ambiguity of the term *constitutio* or constitution, used by Cicero in *De senectute*, in relation to aging. "While old age was 'constituted' by specific and distinct attributes," Martin writes, "these varied across the sharply distinguished 'constitutions' of different individuals" (13). Aging is thus both physical and mental, created by both the individual who experiences it and the outsider who witnesses it. Revising Simone de Beauvoir's formulation, "Whether we like it or not, in the end we submit to the outsider's point of view," he argues instead that "[h]owever much the 'outsider's point of view' may attempt to govern behavior, the individual's more intimate awareness of a bodily constitution to which she or he alone enjoys complete access provides critical recourse against such encroachment" (176).

Martin also moves beyond a narrow focus on representation in his choice of primary texts. Chapter Two does much to establish the cultural context, focusing on Elizabeth I's negotiations with aging in her poems, speeches, letters, and translations, and on the ways in which both her increasing age and her self-aware response to the process of aging shaped the final years of her reign. This attention to the subject's ability to challenge or manipulate the ways in which their own aging is understood inflects the book's remaining chapters. Chapter Three concentrates on pastoral, a genre that conventionally places older and younger shepherds in conjunction and, often, conflict. It unsurprisingly became newly prominent in the later years of Elizabeth's reign, when a younger generation of courtiers chafed under the regime of their elders. Focusing on Edmund Spenser's series of pastoral eclogues, *The Shepheardes Calender*, and the original version of Philip Sidney's pastoral-tinged prose romance, *The Arcadia*, Martin argues that these texts represent a "flashpoint" in the presentation of the older shepherd's emotional volatility and his capacity to resist conventional narratives of retreat and retirement. Chapter Four similarly focuses on late-Elizabethan verse, drawing on the erotic poetry of Sir Walter Raleigh, John Donne, and Shakespeare, in which the relationship between love and old age is presented in powerful and emotionally ambivalent ways. In particular, Martin traces the varying roles that the fear of aging plays in Shakespeare's sonnets and Donne's "The Autumnal," a poem written in praise of an

older woman that is ultimately hobbled by its own central conceit. Donne, he argues, both indulges in and confronts the “gerontophobic urges” of his day and our own.

In the final chapter, Martin turns to *King Lear*, a play originally written just two or three years after the death of Elizabeth, and one that is, for him, “both a grim antitype and an essential coda to the queen’s legacy” (26). Rejecting interpretations that have variously seen Lear’s tragedy in his refusal to act in an age-appropriate manner, in a denial of mortality, or in a senescent second childhood, Martin emphasizes the surprising physical toughness of the old men of the play, in whose number he includes not only Lear and Gloucester but also Kent. Faced with Goneril and Regan’s narrative of decline, and Cordelia and Edgar’s limited understanding of their fathers in terms of “victimized weakness,” Lear struggles “to marshal his own formidable constitution against the public and private roles that the ascending generation would constitute for him” (140). Old age is made into a spectacle for a society that both fears and wishes to overpower the older generation. This chapter represents perhaps the most compelling account of aging in the book, yet it also raises its most pressing problems. Martin’s desire to preserve Lear as a quasi-Elizabethan text leads him to reject recent scholarship that has seen in the two texts of the play two distinct versions of the narrative, somewhat misrepresenting McMullan’s account of *King Lear* in the process. More seriously, his rehabilitation of Lear at times leads Martin to present Goneril and Regan as the fiendish aggressors of pre-feminist criticism. There must be, I hope, a way of reading *Lear* that does not elide the complexity with which either the older or the younger generation are presented in this play.

Despite these minor caveats, *Constituting Old Age* is a valuable addition to the developing field of age studies in literary criticism, presenting new ways in which old age in literature can be “about itself.” Its strengths lie in the considerable subtlety of Martin’s close reading of literary texts, in his willingness to look across a range of authors and genres, and in his ability to bring the concerns of contemporary gerontology to bear on older texts and historical contexts. While his book demonstrates some of the pitfalls of the emerging literary gerontology, it also marks vital new paths for future scholarship.

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