

***Growing Older with Jane Austen.* By Maggie Lane. London: Robert Hale, 2014. Pp. 192. \$34.95 (hardcover).
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One might be forgiven for mistaking the subject matter of Maggie Lane's new book, *Growing Older with Jane Austen*. The title suggests a kind of primer or self-help book aimed at the sizeable population of Janeites who began reading Austen's novels in their youth and have returned to the books repeatedly during various times of their lives in search of enjoyment, guidance, or a combination of the two.

Lane's enterprise here is actually quite a different and more valuable one. Looking closely at the six complete novels as well as at major literary fragments such as *Catharine, or the Bower* (ca.1792) and *Sanditon* (1817), Lane explores Austen's attitude toward age, simultaneously connecting the older characters in these works to real people with whom Austen had contact during her brief life.

Praising the author for exemplifying "the truth that growing older need by no means imply growing sadder, and that while physical ageing is inevitable, renewal of hope and purpose, unexpected reasons for optimism or unforeseen twists of fate may occur at any time" (9), Lane also acknowledges that Austen was a woman of her time and as such absorbed and occasionally reflected back in her work some of the period's insensitivity toward older people. More frequently, Lane suggests, the older/aging characters in Austen's novels reveal the difficulties faced by real people in eighteenth-century Britain during the aging process and the multiplicity of ways older people dealt with the challenges before them.

In chapters on the loss of youth and beauty, the fraught relationships between parents and children as parents age, old maids, and the connection between happiness in old age and financial stability, Lane makes many parallels between aging women in the novels of Jane Austen and friends and relatives of the Austens themselves.

Family friend Mary Benn, for example, was, like Emma's Miss Bates, "an impoverished spinster of gentle birth but scanty means" (88) who was subject to the whims of distant family members, even regarding her domestic circumstances—her home had to be changed several times at the convenience of others. Given exposure to "old maids" like Mary Benn and Austen's good friend Anne Sharp—who was also forced into an unsettled life working in different posts as a companion, teacher, and governess throughout her life—one would expect perhaps a more sympathetic portrayal of Miss Bates, whose representation in *Emma* (as observed by Devoney Looser) largely echoes the era's stereotyping of the old maid (Looser 77). In the interest of gaining a more complete (though more complicated) understanding of Jane Austen as a woman of her time, a fuller discussion by Lane of some of the instances where Austen appears complicit in the stereotyping of the aged would have been helpful.

Subsequent chapters that focus on the connections between old age and money illustrate instances of Austen questioning rather than endorsing her culture's prevailing perspective on aging. Lane describes how—despite the many examples in the novels of men increasing their financial status as they age (John Knightley, Mr. Weston, and Mr. Cole in *Emma*, Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion*)—with Austen's female characters we often see fortunes going in the opposite direction. Upon the death of her husband at the beginning of *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Mrs. Dashwood loses her home and much of her income. The widowed Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*, who is the same age as Anne Elliot, nevertheless appears decades older due to the deterioration of her health and financial situation after the death of her husband. Austen draws attention to the inequality behind these situations, and Lane perceptively notes that "women enjoyed far less scope to affect their own worldly wealth" (173). Austen's awareness of the difficulties faced by real women in this situation—like her own mother, who repaired to Bath as a money-saving proposition upon the death of her husband—seems

to have enhanced the realism of the characters in her novels. Nor was such “downward mobility” a phenomenon that was bound by class. As historian Susannah Ottaway describes, genteel or middle class women were not exempt from this economic condition, for it was based on legal restrictions: “inequities in law and property hindered their ability to maintain themselves into old age”(14).

Lane’s movement back and forth between Austen’s fictional and actual worlds is in general both compelling and seamless, but there are a few places where she veers a bit off course, such as her tangential chapter on “Old Wives” in which she defines “old” wives as “those who had been married long enough to come to some accommodation with the choices they had made in youth” (72). Not only does such a definition make *Persuasion’s* young Mary Musgrove an “old wife”—in itself problematic—but the move away from her discussion of aging here diffuses the focus of Lane’s argument. In addition, some instances of authorial assumption are jarring, as when we read that we love “and are intended by the author to love”(58) Elizabeth Bennet, and later that Austen “wants us to think that only a powerful sexual attraction” (131) could evoke the behavior of Emma’s Aunt Turner. These few missteps, though, are minor flaws in an important contribution to our understanding of Austen’s era and priorities.

That Austen’s fictional worlds were grounded in and based upon the real one should not be a surprise to us; there is, after all, a reason why the public has compulsively devoured countless modern retellings of her works, from “The Lizzie Bennet Diaries” to Curtis Sittenfeld’s *Eligible*. Lane’s book is a timely reminder, though, of the true and perceptive characterization that leads us to see ourselves in these fictional figures, and to recognize in Austen’s older women and men the infinite variety of possible reactions to the natural process of aging.

WORKS CITED

- Looser, Devoney. *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain 1750-1850*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008.
- Ottaway, Susannah R. *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England*. NY: Cambridge UP, 2004.