Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Aging in Nineteenth Century Culture, by Katharina Boehm, Anna Farkas, and Anne-Julia Zwierlein. New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2014. Pp. 257. £96.00 (hardcover); £33.59 (electronic).

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This collection of essays in cultural history focuses on old age in Victorian and Edwardian England and the English literature of the period, extending up to the Great War. A chapter on social history (Goose) and one on the making of wills (Probert) are the exceptions to what otherwise is a dominant literary studies focus. Given this framework, what does this book offer the student of aging? As with many collections of essays, there is something for everyone, offering a number of facets by which later life in the later nineteenth century might be understood. Arguably this was a significant moment of change, both in social policy terms (the transition from poor law to state welfare), in health care (the emergence of laboratory medicine and medical specialism), and in the idealization of late life coupledom (the rise of Darby and Joan). At the same time, by focusing upon England, there was little evident demographic change, either in the relative size of the over-sixty population or in later life expectancy. The "problem" of old age was not, as it is now, anxiety about the costs and burden of growing numbers of very old people. Rather old age was but one facet in the more widespread concern over the poverty that urban industrial society was generating, about which Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree wrote incisively at the turn of the century.

The focus upon cultural rather than social history misses this point (though Pat Thane draws attention to some of this, in her epilogue) leaving the collection with little coherence from one chapter to the next, and hence a resource to draw upon selectively, depending very much upon one's interests. Some of the chapters I found challenging–in that I disagreed with what was written–and others simply failed to engage. Most, however, offered fresh insights, new knowledge or simply a new way of reading old material. Whether that constitutes a greater historical understanding is, however, not clear. Two

other books, both published almost a decade ago, offer a more coherent picture of the cultural history of aging and old age (Chase's *The Victorians and Old Age* and Heath's *Aging by the Book*). What this volume adds is variety.

Let me start with the two chapters I found myself disagreeing with most– those of Botelho and Chase. Lynn Botelho is best known as a social historian of early modern England (pre-nineteenth century), and she draws upon this background in challenging the idea of "situating the start of the medicalization of old age in the nineteenth century" (21). Rather, she suggests the "medicalisation of old age" was present in increasing force throughout the early modern period, as indicated by reference to age and strength in recipe books (26). This is a peculiar reading of the idea of "medicalisation," and to illustrate this point by referencing a quack's promotional literature on a cordial drink as fitting "all ages sexes complexions and constitutions" seems to be straining the meaning of medicalization beyond its conceptual limits. Writing about health and old age goes back as far as writing about health matters themselves and the dominance of a humoral model of health, including its framing of age as (*pace*, Thane 234) cold and dry, persisted from late antiquity into the nineteenth century. The rise of laboratory medicine in the nineteenth century was a point of transition, finally putting an end (almost) to the last gasps of Galenism. However, it is doubtful whether there was any medicalization of old age until well into the mid-twentieth century; in fact, age was one of the reasons for people not being admitted to hospital, as Smith pointed out (385).

Turning to Chase's chapter on 'senile' sexuality, this seems to riff off some late nineteenth-century medical writings about age and sexual activity (Acton, Kellogg, and Parise) to then pursue various musings on what might constitute alternatives or complementary practices to genital sexuality in later life, reflected in Victorian literature, but refracted through a decidedly "post-modern" twenty-first-century sensibility. Her concept of "social sexuality" is offered as a way of promoting a pro-social closeness more suited to those nearer to the end rather than the beginning (or begetting) of life. While I would not agree or disagree with such sentiments, I am doubtful of her readings of Dickens, Gaskell, or Trollope as indicative of a Victorian sensibility of social sexuality. Arguably, the

late nineteenth century did mark a transition from viewing sex as a sin in old age to re-conceptualizing it as a source of prolongevity, but Chase does not refer to such developments that were exemplified by the work of Brown-Séquard and the emerging interest in internal secretions (later re-labelled as hormones).

Helen Small picks up this theme–of age, gender, and sexuality–in one of the later chapters. Drawing on Susan Sontag's 1972 essay on the double standard of aging, Small explores the conflict engendered by older women's sexuality as illustrated in Stendhal's novel, *The Charterhouse of Parma*. She raises the question of a more complex issue that resonates still – namely the difficulty of reconciling the continuity of desire in later life with the discontinuity of attractiveness. Though the timing of this crisis was at an earlier age then than perhaps it is now, the issue remains relevant. In responding to such existential crises, Small notes the distinction between a too easy lapse into satire typifying much English writing of the time with the more nuanced sympathy already evident in European literature. This issue would be explored much further, Small notes, first by de Beauvoir and soon after by Sontag. Small's point, however, is that perhaps in the literature of the early nineteenth century, the beginnings of a shift in sentiment can be discerned, from the simple satirical framing of older women's sexuality to a more sympathetic recognition.

What of the other chapters? Nigel Goose is a historian whose focus on age and aging in England has long been mediated by a concern for the distinctiveness of locality. His chapter provides yet another illustration on the extent of variation in the conditions of later life, by geography and gender (69). The chapter renders contingent any general account of the plight of older men and women in Victorian England. That said, I would still argue that for most people, in most of the country, the threat of the workhouse remained a vivid presence in the social imaginary of "ordinary folk" throughout this period.

Teresa Mangum's chapter on the old "new woman" starts by recognizing that science, laboratory science, was beginning to impact upon popular culture, and that ideas of aging and rejuvenation were affected by these developments. These, she links to what she calls the "literary juvenescence plot" in two novels

associated with the "new woman" fiction (75). Never having come across either, I was fascinated by Mangum's accounts of both, set in the context of the desire for, yet modified by a fear of, the consequences of restoring "the old" to youthfulness. While such magical thinking is evident in pre-modern myths and legends, she makes the case for the rise to prominence of such ideas not as myth or metaphor but as empirical possibility. The extent to which such literature grew increasingly popular around this fin-de-siècle period, and after, seems worth pursuing further.

Zwierlein addresses a somewhat related theme, in her chapter on the links between scientific theory and the fin-de-siècle fear of "degeneration." Although concern with population aging and degeneration was not absent, the Victorian period was associated with a relatively youthful, fecund period in British society, and it was not until the 1930s that public concern was really voiced about aging as a demographic problem (see, for example, Thane 1990). The pre-occupation with degeneracy that she notes in fin-de-siècle literature seems, to me, to focus less upon the fear of aging and decline as a fear of the propagation of unfit/degenerate members of society, itself a reflection of the new science of heredity and anxieties about the duration and strength of Britain's imperial powers. She mentions two continental writers, Max Nordau and Theodule Ribot. Nordau was, after all, a German writer, whose preoccupations did not necessarily reflect those of British writers, while Ribot was concerned less with aging than with the transmission down the generations of vitality and its diminishing returns. I feel that the preoccupation with youth and fear of age arise more evidently in the period after the Great War and were matters of less concern to pre-war Victorian society.

Katharina Boehm's chapter comes from a very different direction. Using as her key texts Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Pioneers* and Elizabeth Gaskell's novella *Lois the Witch*, she explores the significance of the old Indian (Native American) as a transatlantic inflected reflection on "the existential dispossession of the aged" (96) as realized through the cultural dispossession of the Indian. Boehm argues that Cooper depicts old age and the Indian population as occupying positions of necessary marginality in the "new" society

that is becoming the United States. This requires compromise and negotiation since neither can rely upon the exercise of authority the way that was once possible (105). Gaskell's novella, in contrast, implies that the influence of the older Indian on New England society needs to be abandoned in favor of an assimilation to more properly modern Christian ways. Although both the native American and the English woman are condemned alike as witches, Boehm points out how in her novella, Gaskell effectively "writes out of history" the former, native American older woman, while leaving behind the aging English woman as the common bond whose memory is cherished not only by the judge in New England but also by her sweetheart back in "old" England (107). The multiple meanings reflected by an older age viewed from across the Atlantic, Boehm seems to suggest, echo the beginnings of a cultural shift in the meanings of old age in societies that, in different ways and at different rates, were moving toward modernity.

Another take on growing older is illustrated in Jochen Petzold's chapter on stories in *The Girl's Own Paper*, a penny magazine targeting "girls of all classes" (149). Petzold focuses upon stories that seem to offer instruction on growing older and, particularly, those concerned with "teaching its readers how to age well" (151). Such advice, according to Petzold, focuses upon "achieving financial security," "maintaining physical health," and, most importantly, "achieving spiritual health" (155). Behind these moralizing impulses, it is implied, is an instruction to care for family members who have grown old and to grow into a "good old age," effectively guiding young women "of all classes" to their future role in society. The fact that such instruction was deemed a suitable part of young women's reading suggests in turn that late Victorian popular literature was gradually extending a vision of middle-class gender roles for all to follow.

Amigoni takes up the issue of instructing the public in growing older as presented in the writings of the Edwardian novelist and playwright, Arnold Bennett. His key text is Bennett's novel, *The Old Wives' Tale*, further reflected through its re-enactment, over half a century later, as a two-part play. He seeks to locate a literary period–namely Edwardian writing–in the context of past and

present policy. I found his chapter unsatisfactory, however, since it did not seem to offer much further elucidation of the novel and its theme of growing older, nor does it make much connection between policy and literature, as the author seems to have intended (187). In discussing the dramatization of Bennett's novel in 1970s Stoke-on-Trent, what seems most emphasized is "creating the visual experience of advancing age" (191). Essentially, the play seems to have concentrated on marking the passage of time and the physical signs of aging evidenced by the two central characters of the novel, the sisters Constance and Sophia Baines. This effect was made more pronounced by splitting the play into two parts, each performed on different days, the first emphasizing the "youth" of the sisters, the second their "age." Amigoni notes that by showing Constance walking to vote in a poll on "federation" just before she dies, this presents "the perspective of the active ageing subject" (191). The notion that theatre "re-created a world in which pensions, recognition, cultural visibility, and legitimacy for older people had to be won through democratic struggle" (192) seems to be stretching a point, which neither Bennett nor the dramatists can be considered to have captured.

Anna Farkas' chapter on another younger Edwardian playwright, James Barrie, and his depiction of old age among those left behind on the home front, moves more distinctly toward the new modernity that would be realized in the wake of the First World War. Drawing on material from four war plays, Farkas points out how age and generational divisions formed a key moment in these plays, a theme Barrie persisted with beyond his literary works in his critique of the waste of youth by the "corrupt calculations" of the older men at home who lied to them (207). While this topic is itself of critical interest in the rise of the new and the culture of youth that followed the war, it is also quite different from Victorian ideas of age; it is in fact a sign of the twentieth century and the death of the nineteenth. More perhaps could have been made of this than is merely intimated in this chapter.

That leaves Gordon McMullan's chapter on the creation of a "late" Shakespeare in Victorian readings of his later plays. McMullan has written extensively on the trope of late style, as conjured up first by Adorno and more

recently by Said (*On Late Style*, 2006). In this chapter, he focuses on two Shakespearean scholars of the nineteenth century, one German (Hermann Ulrici) the other English (Edward Dowden). In doing so, however, he suggests that, at least as far as Shakespeare is concerned, the idea of a late style is "essentially fictional" since Shakespeare did not have a chronological old age, creative or otherwise (179). This fictionality, this alleged serenity and late burst of creativity propounded by these authors, McMullan suggests, now serves to distract us from "the physical and psychological decline that so often affects creative artists later in life … [when] … energy fades and physical disability intrudes" (176). The desire of aging Victorians to rework "the romantic focus on youth" and construct in its place "a version of transcendent creativity" on becoming older is no more than that, McMullan suggests, with "nothing whatsoever … to do with old age" (177).

This raises a more critical point for the volume as a whole, namely the extent to which any common framework for old age constructed by literary studies can avoid the criticism of their being themselves no more than a "mere" fiction reflecting the assumptions, experiences, and concerns of the time: a style by which old age is narrated rather than an insight into its social status or subjectivity. Arguably, there exists a difference between literary studies that are historically or geographically related and studies that are focused upon agedness as a transcendent quality and its more universal significance for what it means being human. This volume is very much geared toward the former. However, it lacks a strong enough historical grounding to contribute to the social history of old age, while its very variety weakens its capacity to illustrate the latter. While the literary works described might each be thought to be contributing to ideas and representations about old age, at the time, taken as a whole the book fails to marshal any integrated view of what that might have been.

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