

The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the 19th-Century British Novel, by Andrea Charise. Albany: State University of New York, 2020. Pp. ix + 194. \$32.95 (paperback). \$95.00 (hardcover).

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Andrea Charise's *The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the 19th-Century British Novel* constitutes a thorough study of the evolution of the biopolitics (a theoretical framing that places the biological life of individuals at the center, engaging with it as a political problem) of older age and its literary representations. It offers a highly relevant contribution to scholars of age studies, health humanities, and literary studies of the nineteenth century. Charise's work on age as a category of analysis fits within a larger body of scholarship in age studies, concerned with issues attached to the construction, evolution, self-reflection, and self-(re)presentation of identity (see Crossley; Gullette; Henneberg; Looser; Yallop). It explores the ways in which nineteenth-century British literature allows authors to reflect — and influence — contemporary perceptions of older age from an intellectual, social, and demographic standpoint and investigates how novelists consider population within society as a (bio)political problem. With her background in geriatric health research and her role as a major contributor to the development of the field of health humanities — she has developed the first undergraduate program in health humanities in Canada and is the founding editor of the “Studies in Health Humanities” book series (2020-present) — Charise brings together literary critical analysis, age studies, gender studies, and health studies in her assessment, in what is a fruitful, interdisciplinary approach.

The book is structured into 5 chapters that map out the chronological evolution of the aesthetics of senescence from the literature preceding Malthus' *Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798) to the *fin de siècle*. In its introduction, Charise considers the 1798 Godwin-Malthus debate as a key event in the shift in the perception and representation of older age away from a religious

conception into a medicalized and politicized one. This introductory chapter sets the theoretical framework for the close reading in the book, as the Godwin-Malthus debate is a recurrent topic Charise draws on in the subsequent readings. Chapter 1 develops the two opposing factions in the debate and provides a close reading of Godwin's best-known texts. This analysis both informs the readings in the following chapters and sets the starting point of a genealogy. It explores the evolution of Godwin's thoughts on aging and older age; from the speculation of the eradication of bodily decline as a tool of resistance against the tyranny of time in *Political Justice* (1793) to the destructive personal and social implications of prolonged life in *St Leon* (1799). This development in Godwin's thought reflects contemporary concerns about what Charise describes as "an unprecedented—and [...] hotly politicized—climate of crisis associated with growing old" (xix), which, together with Malthus' response to Godwin in *Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798) formulated a "new biopolitics of lifespan" that signaled a shift between Enlightened and Romantic thought. The author also addresses gender in the texts, alluding to Godwin's "covertly masculine subject" (5) and Malthus' rejection of the traditional conception of population growth as an exclusively female duty.

The second chapter addresses the anxiety around juvenility (ephebiphobia) in *The Last Man* (1826) that Mary Shelley first explored in *Frankenstein* (1818) and the way the author resists the Romantic youth model in both texts. Charise considers Shelley's novel as an example of "frail Romanticism," which she defines as a tendency within the movement characterized by its interest in the diversity of explorations of the temporality of selfhood and the physical frailty attached to senescence, expressed in a compassionate vein. In this framework, attention is paid to Shelley's positive portrayal of senescence as a tranquil period conducive to creativity and intellectual development, a life stage Shelley depicts as ruled by temperance, in contrast to the chaos she associates with youth. Additionally, Charise remarks on Shelley's engagement with Wollstonecraft's intellectual legacy, drawing a parallel between Shelley's conception of older age and Wollstonecraft's ideal of older age as a liberation for women from the demands of reproduction, an idea the author recovers in chapter 4.

Chapter 3 engages with George Henry Lewes's medical treatise *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859-60) and George Eliot's novel *Silas Marner* (1861). In this chapter, Charise questions the portrayal of old age in the Victorian novel. The author scrutinizes the tension between the physiological forces "waste" and "repair" in order to bring to the fore the dialectic between youth/age and growth/repair that prevails in Eliot's novel. Additionally, Charise adeptly addresses the intergenerational bonds established between its two protagonists at opposite ends of their life course and suggests that through this intergenerationality Eliot reconsiders waste and repair as a "restorative social principle" (83).

The chapter that follows focuses on the "Woman Question" and explores the period's anxieties around gendered reproductivity and the pathologizing of senility embodied in the figure of the aged single woman in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893). At the time, senility became a symbol of moral and social decay, and non-reproductive bodies (the old, the unmarried, the same-sex couples) were signaled as compromising the continuity of the empire. Charise describes women who fail to fulfill their social duty as reproductive bodies as "counterfeit women": the odd woman, the single woman, and the new woman. Like in chapter 2, there are points of connection with the eighteenth century, suggesting an underexplored genealogy: the perception and treatment of single women in the *fin de siècle* are reminiscent of the eighteenth century's demonization of single women for failing to fulfill their reproductive duty towards the nation (Froide; Hufton; Lanser; Ottaway). Gissing, Charise argues, proposes that these single, older women (the "old maid"), in their so-called failure to fulfill traditional roles, are in fact providing society with a reserve force of workers who will sustain the economy instead of increasing a population that would decimate resources, an argument that echoes Malthusian theory.

The book ends with a conclusive chapter that synthesizes its main ideas through the analysis of Anthony Trollope's *The Fixed Period* (1882). Trollope's novel allows the author to showcase a re-emergence of Godwin's and Malthus' principles in twenty-first century texts such as Chris Buckley's *Boomsday* (2007), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love*

Story (2010) or Minae Mizumura's *Inheritance from Mother* (2012), which, as Charise maintains, suggest a "transnational canon of aging pop(ulation) literature" (146).

All in all, *The Aesthetics of Senescence* offers a highly relevant and valuable contribution to the field of age studies and health humanities. The book presents a well-balanced combination of theoretical input and analysis, and implicitly suggests further lines of research, especially in the field of gender studies, which is explored only tangentially in the monograph (with the exception of chapter 4). An arguable shortcoming of the book is its failure to address more fully issues of social class and the influence of imperialism and race. The latter, however, is a matter fully acknowledged by the author, who anticipates this critique by pointing toward a further line of inquiry: broadening the scope of the analysis beyond the geographical limits of Great Britain and considering the role of British imperialism in the portrayal of age and aging.

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