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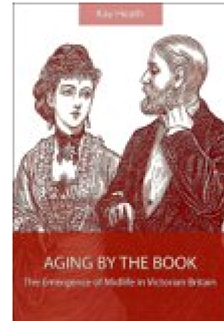
Kay Heath. *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. xii + 247 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-7657-4.



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Commissioned by Thomas Hajkowski

"We have no English equivalent of 'feminism' to designate ageism's challengers," Kay Heath notes, in *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain* (quoting Kathleen Woodward, p. 202), but it is certainly true that recent decades have witnessed the beginnings of a field focused on uncovering the cultural and literary history of ageism.[1] Although she cannot give such a project a name, Heath has surely given it a model, arguing that a new awareness of and anxiety about midlife "germinated in nineteenth-century soil and grew from Victorian roots, is still evident in the artifacts of its print culture, and forms the basis for a pervasive middle-ageism that now affects every adult in the West" (p. 199). Heath is angry about this ageism, make no mistake about it; this is a highly politicized and personal project. Nonetheless, she shows a remarkable ability to retain graceful prose and intellectual rigor when writing of her sources.

Heath uses medical texts, conduct literature, and soap advertisements alongside the Victorian novels that are her principle focus. Her close reading of the fictional texts, which she treats as "conduct books of the imaginary" (p. 18), includes an analysis of both men and women in midlife who feature in plots that highlight the question of the marriageability and sexuality (or lack thereof) of those who are "past their prime." Although the work is most notable for Heath's engagement with the Victorian texts at hand, she also uses recent theoretical literature on aging with real success. In particular, in a chapter that explores specular moments (that is, when characters look into a mirror and engage with their image) in novels of the last decades of the nineteenth century, Heath adopts and refines Woodward's theory of the "mirror stage of old age ... [which] investigates how association with or dissociation from the signs of age affect identity" (p. 146). The book's sources are carefully situated in their historical context through Heath's use of the abundant secondary literature on gender, demography, and empire.

The history of the rise of age anxiety in Victorian England is bleak. Where earlier centuries viewed the middle stage of life as the acme of the life course, over the second half of the nineteenth century, midlife became ever more closely associated with decay and degeneration. What emerged, by the fin de siècle, was a fully articulated "middle-ageism." In the context of emerging challenges to traditional gender roles, anxiety about imperial projects, shifting political sands, and evident demographic change, the Victorians came to find the process of aging ever more alarming. While both men and women were profoundly affected by this new attitude, Heath shows that aging women were generally treated with greater scorn, and with more negative and controlling views regarding their sexuality.

Heath traces an "accelerating age trauma" and "escalating degeneration" of aging males that is both "disclosed by and developed in novels that feature aging men in the marriage market" (pp. 26-27). In the first half of the nineteenth century, novels like Frances Trollope's *The Widow Barnaby* (1839), and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) feature successful, powerful midlife suitors. While at least some of Charles Dickens's mid-century novels portray aging men with sensitivity and sympathy (e.g., *Little Dorrit,* 1855-57), by the last decades of the Victorian era, fictional men in their forties and beyond are ridiculed and maligned for desiring marriage. The epitome of this trend is captured by characters such as

Casaubon, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and Anthony Trollope's aptly named Whittlestaff in *An Old Man's Love* (1882). Heath attributes this growing fear of male aging primarily to changing attitudes towards work and the rise of new ideals of masculinity that emphasized physical toughness and youthful energy. These traits, unlike those associated with the polite sociability of the ideal eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century gentleman, were inevitably adversely affected by aging.

Aging women who sought marriage partners generally faced even more challenges, and were portrayed even more negatively in Victorian novels. Following medical views that saw post-menopausal women as sexless and only fit for service to others, novelistic depictions of aging women reveal a pervasive fear of women who refused to conform to such models. When "mutton dressed as lamb" and attempted to compete with girls on the marriage market, it was met with hyperbolic scorn more often than not. Heath relates the depressingly repetitive dull fates of good aging women, and the bad ends of boundary-crossing older women from the novels of Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and, most revolting, H. Rider Haggard. Still, there are some exceptions to such patterns, particularly in a few of the novels from Frances and, especially, Anthony Trollope. Heath argues that Anthony Trollope, under the influence of his mother and his friends amongst the feminist "New Women" of the 1860s and 1870s, was able to overcome cultural norms and "produce increasingly progressive narratives of gain that suggest new potential for women at midlife" (p. 118).

Despite the general trends, then, fictional depictions of aging men and women were never uniformly negative. What allowed for these apparent cracks in the otherwise linear and overwhelming rise in middle-ageism, Heath explains, was the simultaneous strengthening of British society's belief in the need and power of the individual to resist the limitations brought about by his or her own decline. We can see this theme in both the specular imaginings of late Victorian novels, and the ubiquitous advertisements for soap, which reached a point of "mass media saturation of the national imagination" (p. 197) in the 1880s and 1890s. Thus certain aging characters in Anthony Trollope's novels contemplated their mirror images, and as they encountered this view, they engaged in a process of self-definition that Heath shows to have powerfully affected their narratives, allowing them to "question, reify or revise Victorian paradigms of midlife" (p. 158). More complex, still, was the effect of the soap advertisements on British views towards aging. On the one hand, ads from Pears or Sunlight Soaps that glorified youth and promoted their brands as conquering age clearly vilified the aging process itself. But on the other hand, such ads treated their viewers as individuals able to choose their own level of capitulation to nature's processes of decay. Of course, making consumers responsible for their own, personal anti-aging campaigns is not genuinely empowering for the older person, and such attitudes reinforced the growing ageism that infects Western cultures ever more pervasively and perniciously.

This thoughtful and careful exploration of aging in midlife is an easy book to like. The prose is clear and the use of theory is judicious. Heath's personal stance is compelling, and yet her obvious engagement with her topic does not get in the way of her ability to engage with her material effectively. Historians will undoubtedly question her ability to make large claims of linear change based on relatively limited sources, and readers would benefit by reading this book alongside historical monographs by Pat Thane, Thomas Cole, Thomas Haycock, and Andrew Achenbaum. These works give a fuller sense of the complex nature of views towards aging in the past. For example, Heath may be a little overeager to root midlife ageism so strictly in the nineteenth century, when many of its aspects already were sending out tendrils into the fertile, ageist soil of the early modern era. I would also like to challenge the degree of bleakness in her depiction of British ageism in the past. There were always gerontocratic, as well as ageist tendencies in British culture. Finally, although Heath is careful to note the distinction between a study of midlife, and an examination of the aging process more generally, several of her case studies concern men and women in old age (past sixty), and so the lines between life stages get blurred within several chapters. Nonetheless, I would hope this book enjoys the wide audience it deserves, and that it encourages increased attention to the history of aging.

Note

[1]. The sentence regarding the lack of a term for anti-ageism was originally from Kathleen Woodward, "Against Wisdom: The Social Politics of Anger and Aging," *Cultural Critique*, 51 (2002): 209.

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