

From Prime to Decline?

Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain. Kay Heath. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. xii + 247pp.

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<1> Kay Heath in this book picks up Margaret Morganroth Gullette's case that the nineteenth century saw the development of the concept of a midlife 'crisis,' the construction of the middle years of the life-course as a problem, rather than the ripe prime of life, in order to analyze various ways in which this era was being depicted, mainly in literary texts. The problematization of phases in the life-cycle maps to the general tendency of the Victorians to, as Steven Marcus put it in his pioneering study of their ideas about sexuality in *The Other Victorians* (1964), "regard important issues as 'problems,'" and thus analyzed, discussed, and placed squarely within the field of discourse and its constructions.

<2> While conceding the importance of reading the concepts of age and life-cycle appropriateness implicit if not explicit in the texts of the past, just as we now read for the implicit if not explicit assumptions around gender or race or class or disability, work in this area is still so relatively new that one may perhaps be a little cautious at positioning the Victorian period as the pivotal era in which it all went wrong. Too often the Victorians are featured as being in some cosmic historical sense looming over the present like the "mum and dad" of Philip Larkin's poem: "They fuck you up... / They may not mean to, but they do." The Victorians are accessible, there is a plethora of documentation left by them (not to mention the subsequent floodtide of later commentary), and it sometimes seems that for many people they are the ultimate embodiment of The Past, taking the rap for a range of sins, some of which they shared with other less memorable epochs and of some of which they were not even particularly guilty.

<3> In her introductory first chapter, "The Rise of Midlife in Victorian Britain," Heath lays down the basic arguments for "the culturally constructed nature of life stage theories" (4): the different values assigned to age or life-cycle phases in different cultures, so that the signifiers of age may be a marker of increased or lowered status depending on context. She also provides a broad overview of Victorian thinking on aging and the various stages of life, in particular the distinction between middle and old age. Heath argues that even though midlife was increasingly defined as a specific stage, it was nonetheless one of liminality and different possibilities, even though the idea of decline became more and more of a haunting shadow. Changing paradigms of manhood meant that force, energy and self-reliance – "attributes compromised by aging" (13) –

became central to notions of true masculinity. Women were defined by their reproductive function, which the developing specialty of gynecology was representing as constantly verging on pathological manifestations; while instead of the menopause ushering in a time of calm and value on other grounds, the post-menopausal woman was seen as only of worth insofar as she dedicated herself to promoting the reproductive interests of the succeeding generation. However, various social changes and improvements in the legal position of women to some extent cut across this. It is intriguingly counter-intuitive, perhaps, that a time of largely improving health and increasing life-expectancy, at least in the middle classes, witnessed a shift from seeing the period between the end of youth and the clear manifestation of old age as being in one's prime, to being one in which middle age was already a period of decline. A case possibly might be made that in earlier centuries anyone who survived to fifty in relative good health was probably already endowed with an unusually robust and resilient constitution and that less naturally-favored individuals were now making it through to the later decades of life but with less remaining verve.

<4> Chapter 2 looks at the anxieties around male midlife aging, and the spectre of 'debility' as manifested in loss or greying of hair and a general falling-off from the appearance of manly fitness. Heath does not mention Thackeray's Major Pendennis with his wig and his dyed moustache and his corset fiercely trying to maintain a youthful appearance, but the Major is presented as a somewhat outmoded Regency-era dandy reluctant to abandon that identity, whose virtues contrast with the ridiculous figure he cuts; not as a bourgeois Victorian paterfamilias anxious to maintain his position in a competitive world or provide for the comfort of his even later years. She does analyze the depictions by various novelists of the trope of the older man as suitor, and the delicate balance between a manly and attractive maturity and a rather more anxious sense of age and cautionary contrast with blooming youth. It might be feasible to posit an economic reason as to why Victorian men continued to be considered ripe and suitable protagonists in a romance plot at thirty and upwards. As the many nineteenth-century expressions of concern over marriage and delay in marrying suggest, in the middle classes a man was seldom in a position to wed before then, due to the necessity of establishing himself in his profession or in business in order to be considered an eligible match. This was also, of course, a period at which childhood was extended, or full adulthood delayed (again, in the middle classes), to an extent possibly previously unknown. The period of suitability for mating and marriage became a perhaps rather narrow window of opportunity between unripeness and decay or withering.

<5> Although women were effectively marriageable at a rather younger age than their brothers, they were on the shelf a lot sooner. They did not, as Heath documents in chapter 3, really get to have even an attractive maturity – while some medical authorities might grant them a post-menopausal access of good health, the general consensus was that women should resign themselves to 'desexualization' and not try inappropriately to mimic lost girlishness. If they were not to be monstrous figures of fun or horror, they should be entirely devoted to advancing the romantic interests of their offspring, or, if they had none of their own, those of the younger generation more generally.

<6> Even so, Heath documents in Chapter 5 some relatively sympathetic depictions of remarrying widows in the works of the Trollopes, *mère et fils*. She posits, however, a shift, from a climate in which Frances Trollope's marriage-intent Martha Barnaby, unruly picaresque

protagonist of a trilogy of novels, however sympathetic, was presented in essentially comic mode, to one in which Anthony Trollope could create serious romance plots around experienced older women. Legal changes such as the Divorce Act of 1857 and attitudes as much as legal changes to a widow's right to own and manage property led to a reduction of the stigma on remarriage, which thus became less transgressive an act.

<7> Questions of the signs of age and their complex relationship to self-image are discussed in relation to various literary representations in Chapter 5, while Chapter 6 moves beyond literary texts and into the world of late Victorian age-related advertising (particularly of soap), embedding the images deployed in the wider context of the anxieties over degeneration, race and Empire that were burgeoning in the *fin de siècle*.

<8> There are some problems with the adducing of literary texts as a prime source of evidence for attitudes towards aging and the conduct and demeanor appropriate to midlife. It is a pity that Heath did not look beyond the texts to consider the extent to which women were, in fact, marrying for the first time at an age when the literary discourse would have us believe they were well beyond such a possibility. The feminist and Shakespearean scholar Charlotte Carmichael married at the age of 39 – at a period when both her age and her scholarly and political avocations placed her outside the potential for matrimony in many eyes – the much younger brewer and amateur scientist Henry Stopes. True, it is difficult to establish the extent to which such matches were occurring, as certain adjustments might be made when registering the marriage, particularly if the woman in question was marrying a younger man.

<9> Indeed, it was rather disappointing to discover that Heath has not devoted any attention to any of the notorious age-differential matches involving distinguished and well-known Victorian women, both spinsters and widows. Biographies of George Eliot indicate the extent to which the union between the novelist, by then over sixty, and a man twenty years her junior, was greeted with shock and disapproval even among her friends, who regarded her as George Lewes' *de facto* widow. The marriage of the wealthy philanthropist spinster Angela Burdett-Coutts at the age of sixty-six to her secretary, an American of not yet thirty, caused similar furor. It was described as "distressing and ridiculous" by the Queen herself, even though surely some of the contumely concerning her own relationship with the ghillie John Brown had been due not merely to their differences in social rank but her status as a widowed grandmother, somewhat older than he was. (1) Annie Thackeray (daughter of the novelist and herself a writer) at forty married the youthful Richmond Ritchie while he was an undergraduate at Cambridge. Although George Eliot described this as "one of several instances that I know of lately, showing that young men of even brilliant advantages will often choose as their life's companion a woman whose attractions are wholly of the spiritual order," she bore him two children. That such matches did occur might well be attributable to the already exceedingly anomalous and exceptional status of the women in question, but the extent to which they were gossiped about and anatomized by onlookers both sympathetic and antagonistic would be an interesting insight to the response of Victorians to specific instances of older women's manifestations of desire.

<10> Heath does indicate, in her close and subtle reading of the texts she has chosen, that questions of age, love, and desire were complex and fluctuating, and that there was a degree of

flexibility within certain limits of age and status. Her Afterword, however, reminds us that now in the twenty-first century, the “decline-oriented concept of middle age is a ... widespread, flourishing notion” (199) and that “ageism is rampant” (201). This is an area whose historical roots require further detailed exegesis, but Heath has provided a useful introduction to facets of the Victorian mindset in the matter.

Endnotes

(1) *Letters of Queen Victoria*, ed. A. C. Benson and Lord Esher, and G. E. Buckle, 2nd ser., 1926–8, 3.134.(^)