This welcome study shows how nineteenth-century British novels about aging intersect with historical debates across multiple disciplines. Extending recent scholarship on senescence, longevity, and the fictional representation of human temporality, Andrea Charise adopts a dual view. Besides showing how nineteenth-century fiction exemplifies aesthetic principles about aging and old age, she also shows how population expansion and control were increasingly theorized during the same period. Drawing on her invaluable background in geriatrics, Charise pairs biological and physiological accounts of aging with novels that foreground the implications of growing old for identity, experience, and the accrual or loss of social capital.

Recognizing that western culture tends to marginalize old age, Charise admits in her preface that even among academics, "there is much about older age that can feel off-putting or even repulsive" (xii). Contesting such reactions, this book joins recent efforts of Aging Studies (or Age Studies) to give old age and the aging process their rightful due. In its nuanced analysis of literary and cultural senescence across the long nineteenth century, this study is elegant, energetic, and invigorating. It shows how the senescent bodies of nineteenth-century fiction encode aging as both a personal and social concern, and how the novels of this period pursue the pressing question of what it means to grow old.

Approaching this topic from various perspectives, Charise tracks competing notions of the lifespan (religious versus secular) and also shows how often youth and age are contraposed through an aesthetic of generational difference. Combining medical humanities and literary studies, Charise sheds fresh light on both canonical and less well-known writers within their social, cultural, and demographic milieu. While her chosen texts are neither parts of a survey nor even necessarily representative, they are meant to capture, she says, "decisive flashpoints" or moments of crisis that illuminate nineteenth-century thought about old age (xiii).

Unsurprisingly, the book opens by examining the influence of Thomas Malthus's Essay on the Principle of Population (1798), which calculates and assesses individual physiology through the lifespan as well as its impact on the health and relative prosperity of the social body. Charise then correlates the fictional representation of age and the aesthetics of old age with theories about population and the physical and moral health of the British nation over the course of (primarily) the 1800s.

While the first three chapters respectively treat the fiction of William Godwin, Mary Shelley, and George Eliot, the last two move beyond detailed analysis of single authors. Along with the prominently featured work of George Gissing, chapter 4 considers a range of fictional and extra-literary debates about senescence that circulated at the fin de siècle. Then, skipping forward some hundred-plus years, the final chapter briefly probes the relationship between population and age discourse in the twenty-first century.

Starting with the fiction of Godwin in chapter 1, Charise argues that his St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century (1799) contradicts his own schema for Enlightenment progress, wherein the prolongation of life emerges as a key aspiration for future moral perfectibility. Rather than treating old age as a source of anxiety, a symbolic state of crisis to be overcome, the novel instead finds late life exemplifying "the necessity of individual decline to the collective perpetuity of human life" (3).

Turning from Godwin's St. Leon to a novel by his daughter, Charise reads the futuristic story of Mary Shelley's The Last Man in light of Romanticism's complex relationship with youth and old age. According to Charise, Shelley's novel skeptically rejects youth and the Romantic encapsulation of its energies in order to find instead a restorative quality in old age. In what Charise suggestively identifies as a youth-renouncing, ephphibiphobic stance, Shelley (Charise argues) recuperates old age for women in particular as a time of liberation from constraints--especially reproductive imperatives.

While Shelley's Last Man privileges old age over youth, Charise argues that George Eliot aimed to bridge the gap between them in novels such as Silas Marner (1861), which literary critics have often analyzed for its portrayal of old age at midcentury. To demonstrate the significance of integrating the old, Charise writes, Eliot's novel includes lines from Wordsworth's poem "Michael," a pastoral poem about the struggles of an 84-year-old shepherd. Contesting the harmful gap between youth and age that Romantic writing had promoted, and revising the "failure of intergenerational bonding" (91)
narrated in "Michael," Silas Marner is said to highlight not only an intergenerational relationship but also social connection and the incorporation of different temporal moments. Reading Silas Marner beside theories of waste, excess, repair, and the ameliorative potential of intergenerational support, Charise fruitfully compares its theme with the non-linear experience of multiple ages and life stages in stories like Dickens's A Christmas Carol. For Charise, these novels illustrate the benefits -- for social cohesion -- of finding continuity between youth and age, past and present.

Casting a wider net, the last full-length chapter considers how several novelists treated the question of age, the politics of population, anxieties about social degeneration, and global as well as national decline at the end of the nineteenth century. Gissing's fiction in particular is said to highlight "the Woman Question" -- a touchstone for the culture's senile topography, "a nexus of anxieties linking reproductivity, gender, and visions of pathological aging at the fin de siècle" (104). In her last, very short chapter Charise summarizes her argument as well as indicating how her analysis of senescence can be applied to later writing and the contemporary moment through "brief excursions into the present" (146).

Essentially, this book considers the portrayal of aging in a selection of British novels dating from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth. While frankly admitting that these novels do not necessarily represent the dominant views of aging in their time, Charise also carefully explains that their authors develop a complicated and sometimes contradictory view of this topic. Challenging the demarcation of the lifespan into largely artificial stages, these novelists often emerge as figures of resistance whose reflections on aging can offer rich and surprising ways of thinking about it. In considering how the aged, elderly, and senescent are constructed aesthetically, Charise demonstrates the importance of the body and shows how the process of aging is embodied -- personally, culturally, and economically -- at key moments across the length of the Romantic and Victorian periods.

Even now, Charise argues, the multivalent perspectives of fiction make it an apt medium through which to view the complexities and paradoxes of aging. As we assess the cultural status of age and aging in our own time, Charise provocatively shows how fiction can highlight the continued importance of collective identity and the value of intersubjectivity. She thus illuminates the history of gerontology as well as nineteenth-century British fiction.

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