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Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750–1850

(review)

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Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas, Volume 8,
Number 2, June 2010, pp. 414–417 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0182>



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[their] family fictions” (173). Rather than reject the constraints of the past — as Sayles’s characters somewhat unconvincingly suggest they will do — Corbett explores and expands them by, in her words,

emphasizing the diversity within Austen’s representations of family, marriage, and the relation between the two; by construing both adoption and biological reproduction as key sites at which the Brontës, Eliot, and Gaskell differently articulate the shifting relations among affinity, consanguinity, and the politics of familial, national, or imperial belonging; [and] by identifying the differences within marital, sexual, and familial practices that we have too readily relegated to the convenient but misleading shorthand of “incestuous,” “exogamous,” or “heterosexual.” (205)

Corbett’s book represents a useful corrective and provides a convincing contribution to our understanding of domestic fictions of all kinds, our own included.

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Devoney Looser, *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750–1850*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 252 pp.

In *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain*, Devoney Looser suggests that examining the late careers of British women writers is a necessarily “compensatory gesture” for nineteenth-century critics who have focused upon issues of gender and genre without paying adequate attention to the significance of aging, particularly given the notably long lives of many of their literary subjects. As she trenchantly observes, “We have, for more than a century, comprehended the late lives of early modern British women writers too rosily, too darkly, or more often, not at all” (178). Looser unapologetically identifies the source of such misrepresentation and neglect as “ageism, whether malignant or benign” (168), and identifies some of the larger repercussions of disregarding the total arc of a literary career. Close analysis of the lives and works of nineteenth-century women writers reveals fissures — or perhaps more accurately bridges — between literary periods constructed around the lives and careers of male writers. The careers of many women writers are often incommensurable with standard literary periodizations, as critics such as Susan Staves, Anne Mellor, and Isobel Armstrong have also noted. Maria Edgeworth and Frances Burney, often identified as “eighteenth-century writers,” both lived and published into the Victorian period, and it would have been impossible for Austen to have acted upon Virginia Woolf’s injunction to pay homage at Burney’s grave, since she died nearly two decades before her “predecessor.” While the fact of the nineteenth-century

woman writer's longevity has been noted, Looser's book makes a truly original contribution to a comparative study of several different women writers.

Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain is written as a goad to other critics. Looser tends to ask questions rather than answer them, inviting her readers to follow avenues of study towards which she directs them. The exploratory nature of her critical methodology is evident throughout the volume: she examines the differences between the careers of several writers rather than construct a single unifying narrative. Indeed, she frequently refers to the chapters as "case studies," and she explores diverse perspectives on women writers and old age. As Looser notes, there was no single model for the aging professional woman writer in the nineteenth century, since it was only in mid-century that such a group came to be known: "These long-lived writers negotiated the literary marketplace early in their lives, during a time when women authors achieved greater visibility and, for some, greater respectability. Then, in their later years . . . these authors encountered a new set of complicated prejudices for which they were largely unprepared" (1). As Looser goes on to demonstrate, women writers chose various paths as they sought to sustain their cultural authority as authors, shape their posthumous reputations, or simply make enough money to guarantee themselves a relatively comfortable old age.

Steadfastly committed to her contention that there is no single story to be told about old age and women writers, Looser synthesizes a variety of primary and secondary sources in order to construct a picture of the conflicting attitudes towards aging, gender, and authorship at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. She describes the multiple ways in which women writers responded to the range of unattractive representations of them in their culture, where they appear as rouged and bitter crones, benevolent and bespectacled wise women, or, more commonly perhaps, anachronistic nonentities. Much of the success of the Introduction, which is both compelling and persuasive, lies in its inclusion of a large group of women writers, ranging from Charlotte Lennox (whose prosperous career did not protect her from an impoverished old age) to Joanna Baillie (who publicly renounced writing for philanthropy) to Lady Morgan (who concealed her true age and refused to abandon an image of sexual desirability well into her eighties). The sweeping survey in the Introduction usefully situates the more detailed case studies that follow.

In the first chapter of the volume, Looser contrasts Maria Edgeworth's construction of an aged authorial identity in *Helen* to Frances Burney's failure to do so in *The Wanderer*. According to Looser, Burney's preface to the novel unapologetically envisions the older woman writer as still actively engaged with a life of feeling, and even with "passion," while Edgeworth's text carefully distances age from passion, aligning the aged observer with the impartial narrator. Edgeworth, Looser argues, conforms to cultural expectations of a sexless old age as well as to more conservative attitudes about the novel's social role. Although Edgeworth's approach initially led to more favorable reviews, ultimately both

Edgeworth and Burney became part of what Looser calls (*pace* Clifford Siskin) “The Great Forgetting” (168). Yet ending the chapter with an evocation of that “forgetting,” Looser foregoes an opportunity to speculate why Burney has been “remembered” so well by critics such as Margaret Doody, whose readings of Burney draw upon (and celebrate) the very transgressions (of age, of politics, of genre) that made *The Wanderer* unpopular at the time of its publication. Taking as a model Looser’s own methodology, it might be interesting to consider the ways in which contemporary attitudes towards aging may be influencing current estimations of nineteenth-century writing.

In the second and fourth chapters of the volume, Looser examines the different ways in which two elderly women writers sought to influence their posthumous reputations. From Burney’s transgressive representations of aging Looser turns first to Catherine Macaulay’s “defiant self-defense” when dismissed by critics as antiquated and irrelevant (53). As Looser notes, however, Macaulay’s attempts to respond to criticism were ignored, and her efforts to manipulate her posthumous reputation and reception were no more successful than Burney’s. Macaulay was unable to secure a good review of the *Letters on Education* from William Enfield in *The Monthly Review* and was the subject of malicious rumors after her death. Nevertheless, her heroic struggle to control her image and reputation in the media (all but futile during the nineteenth century) draws Looser’s admiration. Macaulay’s “case study” is that of “one woman writer’s refusal to do what her culture expected: to go away quietly” (74).

Indeed, one of the strengths of *Women Writers and Old Age* is Looser’s uncompromising willingness to acknowledge how difficult it was for older women writers to triumph over the cultural forces ranged against them, particularly when those forces could influence a woman author’s access to the literary marketplace and (ultimately) the fate of her literary reputation. In the fourth chapter, a case study of Hester Lynch Piozzi, who lived well into her eighties, Looser finds an interesting contrast to Macaulay: Piozzi (although maligned in ways not too dissimilar) responded to attacks with a willful playfulness. She kept herself in the public eye by, for instance, throwing a very public and lavish birthday party for herself very late in her life, and cultivated a scandalous relationship with a much younger man, a protégé later entrusted with the care of Piozzi’s posthumous reputation.

Looser actually rejects the option of constructing a tutelary narrative of the aging woman author’s resistance to and ultimate triumph over a sexist and ageist culture. She includes, for instance, Jane Austen’s unsympathetic representations of the “old maid” amongst the other case studies, emphasizing the sharp edge of Austen’s satire rather than sympathy for aging spinsters that other critics find in Austen. Looser comes dangerously close to constructing an exemplar of the aging woman author only in her evaluation of Anna Letitia Barbauld’s late career as an editor and literary critic who brought back “authors of the previous generation to the public eye, . . . doing for others what she may have hoped would be

done for her in the next — reviving almost forgotten texts for a readership that needed to be nudged towards them” (29).

In keeping with her strategy of giving troubling responses to aging as much credibility as those that are easier to celebrate, Looser concludes her series of “case studies” by examining Jane Porter’s efforts to secure a government sinecure after retiring from writing: “Porter’s is a story worth telling, as it provides a picture of a different kind of resourcefulness in old age from those we have seen in previous chapters” (142), one that particularly contrasts with Jane Austen’s refusal to court official favor and Sir Walter Scott’s success in doing so. One of the questions that the Porter chapter raises is, indeed, that of the relationships between seemingly “forgotten” writers like Porter (whose fame in her own time was notable) and their better remembered contemporaries.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain* is Looser’s embracing that which she cannot yet know, given the paucity of material on the late careers of women writers as well as the lacunae in our knowledge about attitudes towards aging and the conditions of the aged in the nineteenth century. For Looser, such lack of certainty provides an opportunity to explore an undiscovered literary landscape, always keeping in mind “the full life spans and careers of writers” (7). Throughout the book Looser makes a compelling case for further grappling with the methods of such study, “the thorny issues and factual and methodological questions that persist at the level of the group and the individual” (177), and exhorts her reader to remember those older women writers we have left “marooned” (169) within literary history.

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Elizabeth Sabiston, *Private Sphere to World Stage from Austen to Eliot*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. 214 pp.

Elizabeth Sabiston’s book takes up a scene central to the history of feminist scholarship: a heroine, circumscribed not least by gender, acquires agency through artistic, often literary, expression. It is easy to understand the attraction this scenario holds for feminist critics, above and beyond its self-reflexivity. As a common literary story and, for many women, a life story, it may have played a part in motivating many of us to become scholars. Having witnessed, in the last four decades, efforts to define and explore the category of “women’s writing,” in today’s critical climate we may be less inclined to create narratives that group nineteenth-century women writers into a straightforward trajectory of artistic or personal development.