In *The Work of Writing* (1998), Clifford Siskin describes what he calls “The Great Forgetting” of women writers, enjoining us to keep in mind that “there is much remembering to be done, and admirable progress has recently been made. But . . . we also need to find out how we forgot.” In the wake of what we might now call our great remembering of early modern British women writers, spearheaded by feminist literary criticism, we ought to extend Siskin’s admonition to ask how—and why—have we forgotten so many women writers of this era in old age? Despite the burgeoning of recent feminist work on early modern women writers, why have we continued to ignore or downplay so many subjects’ achievements and trials in old age?

The great forgetting of the first generations of aged British women writers (and their selective remembrance as a group in the nineteenth century) may stem from what we would now call ageism, whether malignant or benign. The chapters of this book demonstrate a commitment to the explanatory power of this theory. It seems evident that many older female authors’ works were devalued because of their age and sex, though these may not have been the only obstacles to critical or popular success. Readers and critics were fixated (usually negatively) on women writers’ old age when it was known—a virtual inevitability with the most famous of them. Many seemed to have an investment in conceiving of women writers in old age, even those once considered great, as past their prime or perhaps past being worth listening to. Critics today carry this misapprehension forward, as British women writers’ late works from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are on the whole infrequently read, taught, republished, or commented on. The findings I have presented in this book suggest that, to no small degree, ageism or proto-ageism (often
in concert with and inseparable from other ideologies) played a role in the neglect of many women authors in their late lives. This conclusion should function as an invitation to further research.

If limited understandings of gender, old age, and authorship have prevented our seeing the full range of a subject’s life course, however, so has literary historical periodization. The ways in which literary history has been packaged has affected our ability to see all but the most visible (traditionally, male and canonical) writers across their entire careers. In particular, the first generations of elderly professional women writers, especially those who published over many decades, have become marooned in our literary histories. When we as scholars of the eighteenth century or the Romantic era stop attending to the works “our” authors published after 1800, 1832, or 1837—and when Victorian studies compatriots also consider those authors as “ours”—it is not difficult to see how partial views of long careers may take hold. As we have seen, Edgeworth becomes an eighteenth-century author (despite having published as late as 1848), Austen is admonished to worship at Burney’s grave (though Burney died two decades after she did), and late careers are diminished in literary biographies as life epilogues.

Literary history would look radically different if organized by authors’ death dates. This is not, of course, a serious suggestion, but it makes for a provocative thought experiment. Jane Austen (1775–1817) and Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) would come before Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) and Frances Burney (1752–1840); William Godwin (1756–1836) would come long after Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97). William Blake (1757–1827), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), and William Wordsworth (1770–1850) would come after John Keats (1795–1821), Percy Shelley (1792–1822), and Lord Byron (1788–1824). Attending to the long lives even of the most canonical poets makes problematic traditional designations of “early” and “late” Romanticism. Although we might argue that these designations arose from what has been considered each author’s most important work(s), the case of British women writers is more complicated. Most hold either very new or largely exceptional places in the literary canon, and therefore, we have only scratched the surface in the project of determining what ought to be considered their most important contributions.

Focusing on works, rather than authors, may provide some advantages. In her landmark study, *A Literary History of Women’s Writing in Britain, 1660–1789* (2006), Susan Staves uses this method, emphasizing “texts rather than authors’ lives” and using “dates of texts rather than biographical dates.”
This is a promising approach, for many reasons. As Staves notes, a focus on
texts rather than lives for her chronology allows her to treat Eliza Haywood’s
(1693–1756) early and later work in separate chapters, “suggesting ways in
which it was representative of more general trends” (10). There is great poten-
tial in this for allowing us to comprehend the entirety of writings across an
author’s life (e.g., the early vs. the late Haywood) and across traditional liter-
ary periods, but this approach also has drawbacks. If we focus on works and
downplay authorship, we may not be in a good position to tell whether late
lives and works deserve reconsideration, and we hamper ourselves in attempt-
ing to study late works with an eye to literary, cultural, and historical issues of
age qua age.

Recent moves toward claiming a long eighteenth century (1660–1830) or a
Romantic century (1750–1850) offer greater possibilities for looking at some
writers’ old ages within reconfigured periods, and such shifts could also open
new windows for age studies. Even so, it would remain difficult to see Edge-
worth and Frances Trollope (1779–1863) as near contemporaries, to use the
example cited in the introduction. An additional challenge is the matter of
whether we ought to focus on dates of publication or dates of composition
in the study of women’s writing (Staves 11). The current scholarly emphasis
on first editions as the preferred standard texts also means that we may have
additional work to do to consider authors’ revising and editorial practices in
late life. What might we learn—about literary history, politics, gender, and or
aging—if we look to the individual (and perhaps even generalizable) ways in
which authors rewrote their earlier printed texts for late-life publication? We
have much to do to share subjects and scholarly questions across the literary
periods that have traditionally separated us; age studies provides yet another
impetus for doing so.

It is also possible that our neglect of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century
British women writers in late life stems from insufficient scholarship on how
old age is represented in literature. In the introduction, I outlined a number
of stereotypes of old age (e.g., garrulity, trifling qualities, querulousness, and
virtuousness) that might have influenced perceptions of elderly women’s writ-
ings. We do not yet have a substantial body of work documenting prevalent
literary treatments and cultural stereotypes of old age in early modern Great
Britain; this would seem a necessary foundation for determining whether and
how women writers responded to conventional understandings of gender
and age. Differences in the representations of old age across decades, nations,
classes, and genders have been drawn only in vague terms. As we add to this
work and seek to categorize those representations, we ought to be mindful not only of what seems clearly prejudicial but of what Betty Friedan calls (in a contemporary context) “compassionate ageism”—that is, well-intentioned, “sympathetic” attitudes that nevertheless have negative effects.4 (We might say that this kind of response was at work in the posthumous treatment of Anna Letitia Barbauld’s “Life.”) Finally, as we seek to describe the features of old age in the lives and works of the old, we should not expect to find only sympathetic renderings of old age, as my reading of Jane Austen and old maidism serves to remind us.

Some female authors worked against rather than embracing or accepting sexist and ageist representations in their writings and their careers, while others acceded to strictures for enacting proper old womanhood, and still others combined these two approaches. A recent study of twentieth-century French literature contrasts these extremes as “age rage” versus “going gently.”5 Catharine Macaulay, witnessing her historical work criticized and labeled as old fashioned, did not go gently, using her old age to urge a better reception for her later works. Others sought channels beyond the literary marketplace to further their aims. Hester Piozzi may have forged an unusual friendship with a young actor to create her own “reading public,” when unable to secure publication (and maintain or re-establish literary reputation) through former channels. Some writers left aside fictional, poetic, or dramatic pursuits and took up literary-critical ones. By commenting on the great books of the previous generation and bringing them to the attention of the rising generation, Barbauld did unto other authors as she may have hoped would eventually be done unto her. Some writers tried to live off of their early literary success in old age. The aged Jane Porter, no longer able or willing to craft new full-length works, sought to capitalize on her former productions through republication and through a quest for a pension. This book’s chapters ought to lead us to conclude that unless and until we get a better grasp on the finer points of authorship and old age in the early modern period, we are bound to reproduce incomplete pictures of British literary history.

What specifically can be done to complete the picture? To begin with, more studies are needed of aged writers as a group. How often did aged female authors—and when did they or how did they—maintain professional relationships with publishers, other female writers, or men of letters of all generations? Do patterns appear in women writers’ romances, marriages, maidenhood, or widowhood, and how do these relate to authorial careers?6 How did having children—or not having children—have an impact on later years
as a female author? It has been estimated that up to one-third of women who lived to age 65 in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England had no surviving children (Thane, “Social” 102). We might guess how this affected wealth, but did it have a similar impact on authorship? Did economic well-being have an impact on whether authors continued to seek or to achieve publication? When women writers were unable to care for themselves, who served as their caretakers? How did illness, health, and medical treatment relate to the ability or desire to continue writing? Did political affiliations become more conservative or more progressive? Might some of these questions be answered in the same ways for aged male as well as aged female authors, and if so, what does that mean for age studies and feminist studies?

We ought to ask, too, if there were genres in which it was more acceptable to write as an old woman. Was it a greater challenge to remain “fashionable” in a masculinized or a feminized genre? My preliminary research suggests that the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novel, with its increasing emphasis on presentism and fashionability, became a more challenging nut for older women to crack. Even historical novels, with their focus on the past, proved difficult for some, particularly after Scott. Letters and conduct books appear generally to have been a more acceptable form for female authors in old age, particularly when an experienced narrator offered expert advice to a young charge. By the end of the period, private letters published posthumously were becoming almost genteel. What conclusions might we draw about writing or publishing works of drama, poetry, history, travel writing, or natural philosophy in old age? Were certain areas of the literary marketplace more open—or less open—to granddames? Or did success depend less on the genre and more on the approach to an audience—or some other factor or factors as yet unnamed?

Many stories also remain to be told and questions remain to be asked and answered at the level of the individual. In the remainder of the conclusion, I briefly recount some of these stories, which could provide chapters or book-length studies of their own. The long-lived Bluestockings offer fascinating subjects for the study of writing and old age. Elizabeth Montagu (1720–1800) seems to have worked out a system for thriving in late life, involving periodic trips but much solitude and considered reading. As she writes in a 1780 letter to Elizabeth Vesey (ca. 1715–91), “a quiet life is suitable to my age, & my taste. I love society, but to be perpetually in company makes fools of ye young, & dotards of ye old; as it adds to ye natural inconsiderateness of youth, & imbecilities of age. I have enjoyd more real satisfaction in my few retired hours
Conclusion

since I came hither, than in a month of Bath life. I wd by no means live always out of ye World, but intervals of perfect retirement in every month of ye Year, & solitary hours in every day, wd be my wish. There are books in every kind, excellent in their kind, whether ye mind is indolent or active, serious or gay, suitable to its disposition.”9 In another letter, Montagu recommends the kinds of reading that ought to be contemplated in late life: “The least agitating of all employments is reading of what is past; one calmly peruses the tale of other times. The ruin of Carthage, the Sack of Rome, the destruction of Babylon, do not give such emotions while one reads them, as hearing a nightingales or Robins nest has been plunderd in ones garden” (HL, MO 6415). Positing history or romance as a genre suited for the old, Montagu implies a great deal about what she thinks old women ought to write, as well as what they ought to read.

Montagu published two works during her middle age, Dialogues of the Dead (1760) and An Essay on the Writing and Genius of Shakespear (1769), but she wrote many letters throughout her life. In the years after her death, some of them were published, but editors most often selected those letters written before she was 40. Some of the letters of her late life have now seen print, though the task is by no means complete. We have much yet to learn about Montagu and other important Bluestocking women. In some cases, establishing the basic facts of their late lives provides the next step. For the aforementioned Vesey, for example, Deborah Heller has made a speculative diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease; this promises to reconfigure our understandings of Vesey’s late life and those of her Bluestocking friends in their later years.10 Another Bluestocking writer whose late life deserves more of our attention is Hester Mulso Chapone (1727–1801). Her very successful conduct book writings used a mature female narrator speaking directly to a young woman.11 Many other individual writers merit continued research into their later careers because of their heretofore unrecognized ingenuity. The line of inquiry I have begun on Piozzi, Barbauld, and Porter—that each tried in her own way to direct her posthumous reputation—might be extended to the poet Anna Seward (1742–1809). She left instructions to try to conduct her writing career from the grave. In her “Posthumous Letter from Anna Seward to Mr. A. Constable” (1807), she asked publisher Constable to follow the directions in her will in bringing her letters into print. She gave him the exclusive copyright to a dozen quarto volumes, writing that they contained “copies of letters, or of parts of letters, that, after I had written them, appeared to me worth the attention of the public.”12 Seward intended for Constable to bring out two volumes annually,
in chronological order, as he found them transcribed. Despite these directives, he published all twelve volumes at once in 1811, even leaving out some of the letters she had selected because he saw them as unfit for public consumption.

Other writers used indirection when attempting to influence audiences in late life. Jane West (1758–1852) titled her last novel *Ringrove; or, Old Fashioned Notions* (1827), effectively defusing any criticism that it was aiming at being fashionable. The novel’s end can be read not only as a character’s but as an aged author’s farewell. The final paragraph, in an old woman’s voice, begins, “‘Yes,’ she said to me, after she had given Ellen’s hand to Frederic at the altar, ‘my duties now seem all terminated. Yet, believe me, I retire in charity with the world; for I rise from the feast of life satisfied, and vacate my place for a younger guest, without envious regret.’” In her old age, West is said to have suffered from a growing feeling of isolation, describing herself as “an old Q in a corner whom the rest of the world has forgotten.” She outlived her husband and sons—and her celebrity—but saved her letters and read them as “bon bons to gratify” her old age, until her eyesight began to fail (Lloyd 669). Her papers were left to a grandson, but they are as yet untraced, suggesting yet another danger of outliving one’s literary fame.

West appears to have maintained her politically conservative slant throughout her career, but other writers have reputations for late life political shifts. Mary Hays (1760–1843), one-time compatriot of Mary Wollstonecraft, has sometimes been understood as leaving behind her radical politics to become a late-life monarchist, but this hardly seems a fair assessment. Hays is “interesting not only for her achievements but also for her longevity,” according to Marilyn L. Brooks. Hays ended her publishing career in her sixties with *Memoirs of Queens: Illustrious and Celebrated* (1821). In the preface to that work, Hays mentions herself as writing “cheerfully,” though “declining in physical strength and mental activity.” She also puts her authorship at one remove, speaking of compiling it at “the request of her publisher,” heading off any potential criticism that she has had the audacity to seek print of her own accord. She apologizes for the lack of novelty in the work and notes, “sickness retarded its progress,” in effect asking for her audience’s forbearance in judging her harshly, because of her old age (viii). In fact, portions of the book recycle her own earlier work; half of its seventy “memoirs” are found in some form in her earlier work, *Female Biography* (1803). Some have claimed that she used the 1821 work to make connections to her 1790s feminist ideals, but measuring in detail the continuities and differences of Hays’s early and late political positions remains an unfinished project.
In late life, Hays complained “more than once that ‘the world forsakes me.’” In a letter from 1842, she tells a friend that should he be unable to see her in the near future, he should “seek my remains in a humble grave in the Newington cemetery with the simple memorial Mary Hays engraven on the headstone” (qtd. in Ty 160). Hays “lived through the 1830s and into the early Victorian period, but she published nothing more and dropped out of contact with literary life,” according to Gary Kelly. Biographer Gina Luria Walker argues that Hays had an “unspoken wish . . . that Mary Shelley, a professional writer, would memorialize Hays as well as her father [William Godwin] and mother [Mary Wollstonecraft]” at the end of her “lonely, idiosyncratic struggles over the last 50 years” to gain recognition for her own and other women’s contributions to history. Brooks finds Hays in old age an “embittered recluse” (x). Much more might be done to make sense of these statements and arguments and to contextualize Hays’s late life.

Arguments that a woman author gave up writing and publication in old age are sometimes easily refuted. The late life of Ellis Cornelia Knight (1758–1837), best known today as the author of *Dinarbus* (1790), is a case in point. She published novels, poems, and histories from the 1790s to the 1810s, although her service to the likes of Lady Emma Hamilton, Queen Charlotte, and Princess Charlotte has proven to be of greater interest to some. After close connections with the court came to an end, Knight left England for the Continent, returning to England for short visits. It was said in the introduction to her posthumously published *Autobiography* that in her old age, “she devoted herself more to Society than to Literature” and “gave nothing to the world beyond a few fugitive pieces.” This is untrue, as she published a novel in 1833, *Sir Guy de Lusignan.* One twentieth-century critic considered it “the most remarkable of her works.” Fragments of later works apparently survived her as well (Knight, *Autobiography* 1: x). There is clearly more to say about the post-court service portion of Knight’s life and about her decision to publish a new work of historical fiction in her mid-seventies.

In other cases, an author’s reputation for ceasing publication in old age seems based on sound evidence, though the story may be more complex than it appears at first glance. Susan Ferrier (1782–1854) is said to have made a positive decision to stop publishing in her late life, though her reasons for doing so remain debated. The author of three novels—*Marriage* (1818), *The Inheritance* (1824), and *Destiny* (1831)—Ferrier’s fortune as a writer grew with age. She received £1,700 for *Destiny* and respectfully dedicated it to “Sir Walter Scott, Baronet,” from “an obliged friend, though anonymous author.” It
sold 2,400 copies in four months. In 1837, she was offered £1,000 “for a volume anything from you” and declined, saying she had made two attempts to write something and did not please herself, so she would not publish “anything” (Latané 100). Did Ferrier choose not to seek publication because she was “aware of the inferior quality of” her last work? Was this decision “wise,” as one critic would have it? Are there other factors at play here, such as her alleged growing blindness, which may have deterred her from further writing? Did she choose to focus on family duty over (anonymous) authorship? Manuscript fragments of late work survive, and more remains to be considered.

Still other kinds of stories of authorship ought to be retold in the context of gender, authorship, and old age. The brief accounts I have offered in earlier chapters of the late life activities and attitudes of Hannah More, Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, and Anne MacVicar Grant deserve expansion. Dozens more stories, ranging from tantalizing to tragic, await further research. What might be learned, for instance, of the late life of Adelaide O’Keeffe (1776–1855), author of poems for children and religious novels and caretaker daughter of John O’Keeffe, the playwright who had been financially savvy and fortunate in his late life? Another promising subject, Eliza Fenwick (1766–1840), author of the novel Secresy (1795) and other works, apparently did not pursue literary fame in late life. She moved abroad with two of her children, first to the West Indies and then to the United States, only to witness their deaths. She began by running boarding schools and then, in old age, a boarding house, subsequently moving from New York City, to Niagara, Toronto, and Rhode Island. In 1832, she encountered a friend of Jane Porter’s, prompting her to send a letter to her fellow aged author, saying that she had often boasted of their friendship. Despite having left the literary scene in England, Fenwick remained connected to it through trans-Atlantic correspondence.

Another promising subject for the study of authorship and old age is Amelia Opie (1769–1853), known best for her novel inspired by the lives of Godwin and Wollstonecraft, Adeline Mowbray (1804). Opie published her last work of fiction, Madeline, in 1822. Her career as a fiction writer ended when she joined the Society of Friends in 1825 and renounced novel writing. She decided to leave unfinished a novel already under contract. Still, she continued to publish as a Quaker. Her Lays for the Dead (1833) consisted of retrospective poems in memory of loved ones. In late life, she engaged in charity work and antislavery activism. Much has been written about her, both in the nineteenth century and in recent years, but little interrogates the contributions she made (and did not make) as a writer in old age.
Science writer Mary Somerville (1780–1872) was one of the rare women authors who published a memoir with “old age” in its title, though it was published posthumously. There she writes proudly of retaining her faculties into her early 90s: “I am now in my 92nd year (1872), still able to drive out for several hours; I am extremely deaf and my memory of ordinary events, and especially, of the names of people, is failing, but not for mathematical and scientific subjects. I am still able to read books on the higher algebra for four or five hours in the mornings, and even to solve the problems. Sometimes I find them difficult, but my old obstinacy remains, for if I do not succeed to-day, I attack them again on the morrow. I also enjoy reading about all the new discoveries and theories in the scientific world, and on all branches of science.”30 A recent writer says of Somerville’s last published scientific book, *On Molecular and Microscopic Science* (1869), that, “though its science was largely out of date, [it] was kindly received out of deference to its author, then in her eighty-ninth year.”31 What does it mean that Somerville was “kindly received”? Was her reception typical, or did it represent change in the way old women writers were treated as the nineteenth century progressed? Was it a matter of genre or an anomaly? Was it possible to publish scientific work as an old woman in this period and not be perceived as out of date?

In addition to the ordinary there are as well the unusual aspects of female authorship in old age. Prophetic writer Joanna Southcott (1750–1814) promised to give birth to Shiloh, the next Messiah, and showed signs of pregnancy at age 64. She died many weeks after the blessed event was to have occurred, an autopsy found no fetus, and her followers conjectured that Shiloh had “mysteriously disappeared.”32 One contemporary denounced her prophecies as “the witless efflorescences of a distracted old woman.”33 Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823), though she did not survive far into old age, had a mysterious late life, and it was rumored that she was driven crazy by her own Gothic novels. Though little is known of her last years, in which she seems to have gone silent, her fiction features scores of garrulous old servants. One, in *The Italian* (1797), complains of her lot, “old women now-a-days are not much thought of; out of sight out of mind with them, now-a-days!”34 This comment by a minor character might itself serve as a backdrop for many of the writings, experiences, and attitudes we have seen throughout this book.

Although British women writers deserve to be studied across their careers and across the life course, what this book has sought to demonstrate is that their late lives present us with thorny issues and factual and methodological questions that persist at the level of the group and the individual. Until we
take seriously the idea that studying gender and old age in the past presents its own set of concerns, we are bound to ignore or mischaracterize female authors’ late lives. We risk following Victorian critic Jerom Murch by seeing women writers in old age as “calm and gentle,” living out an inoffensive, graceful coda. We might carry forward other limiting frameworks, such as viewing old persons in the past as powerless to respond to cultural stereotypes or, on the contrary, as being able to set their own terms and agendas. 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. We owe it to our subjects and to our literary and cultural histories to investigate British women writers in old age through emerging frameworks, some of which are enacted in the chapters of this book. If old women remain overwhelmingly out of sight in our scholarship, there is no reason any longer for them to remain out of mind.