

That Querulous, Garrulous, Dangerous Age

Women Writers and Old Age in Britain, 1750-1850

By Devoney Looser.
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Reviewed by Laurie Kaplan.

Old women actively engaged in public and private writing—an achievement or an embarrassment? In *Women Writers and Old Age in Britain, 1750–1850*, Devoney Looser excavates the dangers a woman writer encountered if she dared to publish anything, especially a novel, once she reached that querulous, garrulous, dangerous age of about fifty. What kind of writing is resourceful? What is desperate? What is acceptable for an old lady to bring into print at the end of her literary life? Having outlived husband, children, and contemporaries, should an old lady be writing at all?

With close attention to the language of age and aging as well as to the cultural constructions of old women, old maids, and spinsters, Looser demonstrates a unique understanding of the aged Bluestockings' dilemmas: how to protect their hard-won literary reputations and how to maintain financial independence. Cutting across conventional literary boundaries, Looser examines the shift in ideas about aging in the years 1750–1850. Women writers were not expected to live long lives, but they often did, and many extended their writing lives into old age—Maria Edgeworth was in her sixties when she wrote *Helen*, her last novel. Looser ponders “what is altered when we look at literary history through the lens of women’s aging.”

The contributions—fiction, essays, histories, biographies, and poetry—made in late life by such authors as Edgeworth, Catherine Macaulay, and Letitia Barbauld defined not only *if* they would be remembered, but *how* they were remembered. Some women added new prefaces and republished earlier

works; others wrote memoirs or edited letters. And some wrote novels. In the early 1820s, Jane Porter visited Carlton House and succumbed (as Jane Austen did not) to the suggestion that she write a romance extolling the virtues of George IV’s Hanoverian ancestors. When *Duke Christian* appeared in 1824 (Porter was nearly fifty years old), the King did not “notice” her novel, and, when she sought a pension for literary service to the Crown, the King did not “notice” her. She had risked her reputation on the assumption of Royal preference, but critics defined her in old age as “an unsuccessful, fawning sycophant” and mocked her arrogance and “untitled obscurity.”

If older women did not conform to culturally stereotyped codes and hide themselves away, they put their personal and literary reputations at risk. Hester Lynch Piozzi courted ridicule and revilement when she threw herself a flamboyant 80th birthday party and established an intimate friendship with a much younger actor. When Catherine Macaulay’s last published work, *Letters on Education* (1790), received an unenthusiastic review, she recognized the impact the review would have on her reputation and fired off a 16-page letter in response. These women would not exit quietly, and their end-of-life outbursts can be judged, Looser notes, on the one hand, as evidence of vanity, irrationality, and bad taste, and, on the other, as proof of the women’s vibrancy.

In her chapter “What Is Old in Jane Austen?” Looser presents the idea that Janeites “might wish that, as an old maid herself, Austen had become a champion of them in her mature fiction.” Looser dismantles the premise that Austen was “sensitive” to old maids; Miss Bates, she says, functions “as little more than an object—whether of pity, charity, or derision.” Austen recognized the difficulties old women faced in society and in fiction, yet in her own fiction she neither challenged, nor redeemed, nor criticized the dominant ageist stereotypes reinforced by fiction, poetry, drama, and treatises.

What surfaces recurrently in Looser’s text is the extreme cruelty of the reviewers, generally male, writing for such publications as *The Critical Review* and the *Quarterly Review*. They are fixated on age and gender, pointing out that the work under review is “a series of dreams by an old lady” (Piozzi’s *Retrospection*) or that the writer herself is “an old coquette author who endeavours . . . to compensate for the loss of the natural charms of freshness, novelty, and youth” (Burney). One reviewer begged Letitia Barbauld to refrain from “put[ting] herself to the trouble of writing any more party pamphlets in verse.” John Wilson Croker’s review of Frances Burney’s final novel, *The Wanderer*, is a hostile diatribe: Burney’s “feeble” book “has a total want of vigour, vivacity, and originality,” and the author has lost “the vigour of her youth.”

Devoney Looser has written an extremely important book that sensitively explores ageism and the literary marketplace just when the Mothers of the Novel were writing their final chapters. Looser characterizes the elderly Bluestockings as women of immense imagination and publishing savvy, who wrote because they loved writing and knew they were good at it, who sought financial independence through productivity—and who were mocked. Gendered ageism exists today, of course, and Looser raises larger questions not only about how we consider the “late careers” of women writers but how we interpret the characters of old ladies—like Miss Bates—in fiction.

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