

KAREN CHASE

THE VICTORIANS & OLD AGE (Oxford, 2009) xiv + 284 pp.

Reviewed by Sarah Bleakney

This noteworthy book joins a developing body of criticism that examines Victorian conceptions of aging and how the aged are portrayed in literature and the visual arts. Specifically, Chase's work joins two other books on its subject that have appeared this year: [Esther Liu Godfrey's, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth Century British Literature*](#) and [Kay Heath's *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian England*](#). All three further our understanding of Victorian ideas about aging and representations of it. In research on the Victorian era, contributions to humanistic gerontology or age studies (as this area of criticism has been called) have only recently inspired book-length efforts, though articles and chapters by critics such as Teresa Mangum in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* and the *Handbook of Humanities and the Aging* have been influential and important. So Chase's comprehensive approach is welcome. Using the "leading cultural manifestations of old age," such as the writing of Dickens, Trollope, Oliphant, and Wilde, the painting of Victorian artists like Herbert von Herkomer, and the historiographical representation of Queen Victoria, Chase examines the "threshold moments and landmark events," such as the Poor Laws, that "both defined and reflected the aging experience in Britain" (1). The Victorian era, Chase argues, marks the emergence of old age as an "established 'category' of scientific and political discourse" from which Victorians sought to "take age into full account" (1, 3). By examining how Victorians thought of age and tried to manage it, Chase draws the aged from the cultural periphery, illuminating both the nuances of their portrayals in Victorian culture and the larger social context that shaped these portrayals.

Portraits of age in the novels of Dickens, Trollope, and Morris, are situated within larger Victorian social contexts, including the historical one of almshouses and attempts to pass the Old Age Pensions Act. For example, Chase reads Dickens's portrayals of aging against what would have resonated with contemporary readers' consciousness: the growing awareness that the increasing number of elderly threatened to become an overwhelming financial burden on the younger generations (28). As Chase shows, many modern readers detect "sentiment" in Dickens's portrayal of Betty Higden's attempts to escape the plight of pauperism (that is, the urban and country poorhouses, or increasingly, insane asylums), and to retain her financial independence (29). Dickens's original readers, however, "had another context in which to place" this character, one reflective of the reality that aging intensified the vulnerabilities of those "whose economic position were precarious at best" (29, 30).

Compared with the work of other nineteenth-century novelists, Chase finds in the fiction of Trollope a more wide-ranging selection of characters who have reached mid-life and beyond. She uses these characters to explain how he uses the "rhythms of plot" and other "narrative vagaries" to denote age, which may not necessarily be signified by bodily or chronological markers (65). She then links Trollope's portrayals of the "instability of age" to the resurgence of the almshouse movement, which helped to define old age by setting the threshold age for occupancy (alternatively "50, 55, or 60"), thereby furnishing a topic that Trollope explores in *The Fixed Age* (77, 78). Likewise, Chase links the utopian vision of indeterminate age in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* to Charles Booth's attempts to gain the passage of the Old Age Pensions Act, which exemplified the Victorians' struggle to define both what "healthy old age [would] look like—physically, socially, economically, politically" and the economic strain that financially supporting the elderly would potentially impose upon younger Victorians (245).

Unsurprisingly, the complex and often vexed feelings that Victorians had towards increasing numbers of the old resulted in equally complex portrayals of the often seemingly uncanny and strange effects of aging. As Chase shows, authors like Oliphant and Gaskell use “the supernatural, the gothic, witches, and madness” in their short fiction to illustrate responses to aging (113). In their “supernatural tales,” Oliphant and Gaskell make heavy use of elderly women (“playing a part well exceeding the statistical norm”) to show how the aged can “disturb tranquility and . . . frustrate satisfaction” of the young (124, 128). But in the fiction of Oliphant and Gaskell, episodes of intergenerational tension haunted by “crones, hags” and “ghosts” alternate with more realist portrayals of aging (124). In *Cranford*, which Chase calls a “landmark text in the affirmation and celebration of old age,” Gaskell’s aging women create their own community against the threat of the dangers of speculation; in *Hester*, Oliphant’s portrayal of the elderly staunchly resists “a sentimental reading of the wisdom of age” (138).

According to Chase, the Victorian consciousness of what it meant to be old grew as much from the specter of an aging Queen as from the increasing numbers of the old. It may now be difficult to think of Queen Victoria as anything but a monolithic personification of an era. But as the Queen aged, she exemplified the experience and impact of aging within the public sphere. As she grew into an old age intensified by her protracted grieving for Prince Albert, the “mass distribution of images (photographs, engravings, cartoons)” that represented and imagined Victoria at all stages of her life, Chase writes, indicated a “sense of the nation’s preoccupation with its own age” (153, 154). In other words, according to Chase, “Victoria and the ‘Victorian age’ [became] emblems for the aging process during the last quarter of the nineteenth century” (160). In the writing of Victoria herself as well as of Margaret Oliphant (who linked her own “struggles and griefs” to those of Victoria and who represented aging “as an experience of

superfluity and emptiness” in her *Autobiography*), Chase finds a consciousness of the “tediums, miseries, pleasures, and pains” associated with aging (178, 183, 193). She also connects the public, official representation of Queen Victoria to “the status of queenship” in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books (162). The aging Queen, Chase contends, influenced both Carroll’s portrayal of female power (in figures such as Queen Alice) and his treatment of intergenerational conflict, a theme she also traces in New Woman literature.

As the “aging population became newly visible,” Chase argues, they emerged into “startling new prominence.” They take their place in what Chase calls the era’s “portraiture,” a term she applies not just to the painting of artists like Herbert von Herkomer but also to works of fiction such as Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (200). Dorian’s fear of aging, she contends, springs from the fear of its degrading effect as well as from its “visibility,” a factor that, in the case of Dorian, no matter his attempts, “constantly threatens exposure and humiliation” (Chase 204, 205). Besides exemplifying the link between sinfulness and criminality, Chase explains, Dorian’s turn to crime illustrates, the degeneracy that was increasingly associated with aging. Since aging is for Chase a bodily experience that cannot be escaped, she pairs Wilde’s creation of a “moral map of the decaying body” with explicitly visual representations of aging in the era’s fine art. Von Herkomer paintings of the aged—most famously in the poignant *Last Muster*—can be seen, Chase writes, as “signal events in the representation of Victorian age” (219). His works reveal not only the emerging numbers of the old but also their economic needs, both of which demanded “large-scale social and systematic assistance” (223). Paradoxically, their peripheral status enhanced their salience. Amplifying work done by Godfrey (see above), and Thomas R. Cole and Claudia Edwards (in their very fine chapter within Pat Thane’s *A History of Old Age*, 2005), Chase observes that paintings representing the aged often put them on the edges of the

canvas. Their seeming peripherality, however, allows them to offer commentary on the scene illustrated in the painting and to “often assume crucial functions, visually and socially” (226). In the works of Stanhope Forbes, William Powell Frith, and Frank Bromlet, they also take part in portrayals of intergenerational interaction that show how “tension among the sexes, classes, and generations might be overcome” (231).

Chase’s important text will strongly engage not only those interested in the textual and visual portrayals and conceptions of aging in the Victorian era, but also those who study the era’s treatment of other disadvantaged sectors of the population, including the poor and mentally ill. With Michael Levenson in a chapter of *The Spectacle of Intimacy* (2000), Chase has previously considered how a difference in age affects marriage in Dickens’s “A Cricket on the Hearth.” In this book she has further enriched the study of aging by showing how the Victorians conceived and represented—in pictures and words—what it meant to be old.

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