

The Cultural Politics of Ageing in the Nineteenth Century: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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From 24 to 26 November 2011 an international and interdisciplinary conference focussing on the cultural politics of ageing in the nineteenth century was held at the University of Regensburg. Many of the questions that define current discussions about old age – social justice, quality of life in old age and elderly care – were first posed by the Victorians. Nineteenth-century debates about old age inflected social and political reforms and propelled the formation of new fields of scientific and juridical knowledge. The works of literary authors reflected these discourses and frequently intervened in them. The conference aimed to investigate medical, juridical, cultural and literary discourses and conceptions of ageing as they evolved during the nineteenth-century.

The first panel, „Periodising Victorian Concepts of Old Age“, served to provide a contextualisation of the conference’s topic. In the introductory paper LYNN BOTELHO (Indiana) challenged the common view that gerontology and geriatrics emerged as a distinct medical category only in the nineteenth century. She suggested a more comprehensive understanding of what caring for the elderly and curing geriatric diseases encompasses, a view beyond the dominant academic and professional discourses of the nineteenth century, including practical household medicine. Taking into account longevity literature and medical recipe books from the sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries, Botelho argued that old age had actually been identified as a distinct medical condition centuries before the term „geri-

atrics“ was coined in 1909. The following presentation by DAVID AMIGONI (Keele) centred on the performance of Victorian ageing as shown in Arnold Bennett’s 1908 novel „The Old Wives’ Tale“ and its theatrical afterlife, the dramatic adaptation of the novel by Joyce Cheeseman in the 1970s. Amigoni particularly emphasised the motif of laughter in the novel and read Bennett’s depiction of the two ageing female main characters as presenting ideas of „active“ or sometimes even „political“ ageing in the late-Victorian society portrayed in the novel. In the final paper of the panel, GRETA OLSON (Gießen) shed light on the legal „creation“ of old age and retirement during the nineteenth century, directing attention to the neglect of gender aspects in this process. The central issue addressed in her paper were the fundamental social transformations brought about by industrialisation and by the changes in British welfare legislation which affected the elderly, particularly the elderly poor, and that led, among other things, to the feminisation of older, „worn out“ men.

The shorter second panel dealt with „Old Age and Narratives of National Transition“. In the first paper of the panel, KATHARINA BOEHM (Regensburg) presented an analysis of old Indian characters in James Fenimore Cooper’s novel „The Pioneers“ (1823) and Elizabeth Gaskell’s tale „Lois the Witch“ (1858). Boehm illuminated how characters like Cooper’s Natty Bumppo function as cross-racial mentors, playing pivotal roles in the maturation of younger characters, and how the texts by Cooper and Gaskell can be read as a transatlantic dialogue both about ageing and, metaphorically, about the process of maturing as a nation. In the following paper ANNA FARKAS (Regensburg) also concentrated on a phase of national transition, Britain during the First World War, analysing the war plays of J. M. Barrie and the inter-generational relations portrayed in them. In the family dynamics of plays like „Barbara’s Wedding“ (1918) Farkas identified the emergence of an insurmountable generational gap between father and son as a major effect of the war, which can be interpreted as a conflict directed by the old and paid for by the young.

The third panel partly continued the topic

of the previous paper, focusing on „Victorian (Legal) Intergenerational Dialogues between Youth and Old Age“. REBECCA PROBERT (Warwick) opened the panel with a paper on the freedom of testation, of making wills, in Victorian England, particularly looking at how English inheritance law managed cases of testators with illicit family relations. Probert noted that there were no legal concessions to old age in making wills and she demonstrated in several case studies the workings of Victorian inheritance laws, also referring to literary examples like Anthony Trollope's „Ralph the Heir“ (1871), showing how the law's preference for legitimate family relationships was upheld as far as was compatible with the freedom of testation. The following presentation by JOCHEN PETZOLD (Regensburg) investigated the intergenerational dialogue in „The Girl's Own Paper“ (1880-1956), a weekly Christian penny paper, which aimed at the preparation of middle-class girls and young women for marriage and motherhood. Petzold explained how Victorian ideas of age and ageing were communicated through the paper to the young and how it offered instruction for girls not only how to nurse the elderly and treat geriatric diseases but in fact how to age properly as a woman, which „The Girl's Own Paper“ sees mainly as a matter of financial security and maintaining physical and spiritual health. NORBERT LENNARTZ (Vechta) concluded the panel and the first day of the conference with a paper on children as old people in Victorian fiction. Pointing at prematurely aged child characters in Victorian novels such as Dickens's „Dombey and Son“ (1848), Lennartz argued that the nineteenth century saw a process of dissolution of romanticist illusions about childhood brought about by harsh new living and working conditions and the impact of Darwinian ideas. Furthermore he referred to the „aged“ child figures in the late-Victorian works of Thomas Hardy, most notably „Jude the Obscure“ (1895), and how they can be read as pessimistically foreshadowing the destructive forces of modernity.

The fourth panel concentrated on „Victorian Narratives of Old Age and Productivity“. In her paper, ANNE-JULIA ZWIERLEIN (Regensburg) focused on ageing, energy and

productivity in nineteenth-century scientific and literary discourses. The paper examined the moral and legal discourse of self-help versus dependency in old age and the Victorian concern of optimising „the human machine“, i. e. delaying or even stopping the process of ageing. Referring to novels by Dickens, Collins, Hardy, Haggard and others as well as to scientific works of the period by authors like Lewes, Johnston and Huxley, the paper illuminated the development from discourses of vitalism, which constituted the basis for Romantic gerontology, to concepts of energy and utopian theories of „ergology“ and organic memory to, finally, the fear and fascination of degeneration at the fin de siècle. The topic of the following paper by BRIAN WORSFOLD (Lleida) was Edward Bulwer-Lytton and the „ageing truths“ in some of his writings, most notably „The Student“ (1836), „A Strange Story“ (1862) and „Caxtoniana“ (1864). The overview provided by the paper made evident the priorities and attitudes towards age and the process of ageing in Bulwer-Lytton's works, giving significant insights into the social, psychological and moral issues that influenced the quality of ageing in Victorian England. The concluding paper of the panel by GORDON MCMULLAN (London) investigated the invention of the „ageing“ Shakespeare in nineteenth-century literary criticism and challenged Edward Dowden's influential view on the „late“ Shakespeare by contrasting it to an earlier take on the topic by the German critic Hermann Ulrici, asking how our reception of Shakespeare's late works would be different, had Ulrici's view been persistent instead of Dowden's. McMullan demonstrated the difficulties of chronologising Shakespeare's works and attributing late creativity to plays, showing that Dowden's construction of the aged Shakespeare above all reflects a rather romantic Victorian view on late creativity.

The fifth and final panel of the conference investigated „The Gender and Sexuality of Victorian Old Age“. The opening paper by KAY HEATH (Lawrenceville) explored the changes of gender identities caused by the social and economic transformations of life in the nineteenth century, the emergence of the „new old man“ and the „neutral man-

woman" and of mid-life anxieties, a sentiment of time running out. Referring to literary examples by Trollope, Dickens, Gaskell and Brontë, Heath demonstrated Victorian alterations to ideas of masculinity, which caused the emasculation of the retired, non-working old man, and to femininity, relegating middle-aged and old women to a neutral men-woman state devoid of sexuality and sensuality. The following paper was presented by KAREN CHASE (Charlottesville) and investigated „senile“ sexuality. Chase argued that nineteenth-century ideas of elderly sexuality were rather static and reduced to stereotypes of asexuality or of sexual frustration and degeneration in images such as the „awkward spinster“ or the „dirty old man“. Noticing the common failure to fully understand sexuality in all phases of life Chase suggested a different approach to the concept of senile sexuality, an approach that sees it, parallel to Freud's model of infantile sexuality, as a distinct phase of development with its own psychobiological characteristics, detaching it from the paradigm of genital sexuality and instead stressing imagination, memory and, particularly, social relationships as loci of elderly sexual pleasure. The relationship between Silas Marner and Eppie in George Eliot's novel „Silas Marner“ (1861) was presented as an example of the „social“, not genital, nature of elderly sexuality.

In the second part of the panel, TERESA MANGUM (Iowa City) examined late-Victorian discourses of „rejuvenescence“, the renewal of youth, looking at the unnatural youth of the ageing fin de siècle „New Woman“. Discussing Besant's „The Inner House“ (1888), Hall's „The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore“ (1898) and Linton's „The Second Youth of Theodora Desanges“ (1900), Mangum showed how these novels respond to scientific claims of restoring youthfulness and how they negotiate physical and psychological boundaries of youth and age as well as ethical boundaries, reacting to Victorian debates about evolution, degeneration, eugenics and experimentation. The concluding paper of the panel and the conference was presented by HELEN SMALL (Oxford), who investigated the late arrival of ageing and old age as a topic in feminism, taking into

account the notion of a „double standard“ of the way men and women are permitted to age, voiced by Susan Sontag and also in Simone de Beauvoir's „La Vieillesse“ in the 1970s. The paper transferred the concerns of this idea of the double standard back to the Victorian age, examining the role of gender in shaping nineteenth-century concepts of old age and the continuity of these concepts into the twentieth century.

The interdisciplinary angle of the conference, bringing together literary scholars and legal as well as cultural historians, made it possible to explore comprehensively the animated struggles over cultural authority and over the legitimacy of scientific, legal and literary systems of knowledge in which debates about old age were embedded. The papers sparked thought-provoking discussions and provided a great variety of fascinating perspectives on the complex field of age and ageing in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Conference Overview:

Panel I: Periodising Victorian Concepts of Old Age

Chair: Jochen Petzold (University of Regensburg)

Lynn Botelho (Indiana University of Pennsylvania): A Respectful Challenge to the Nineteenth Century's View of Itself: An Argument for the Early Modern Medicalization of Old Age“

David Amigoni (Keele University): Re-assessing the „Old“ in the Lives and Afterlives of Arnold Bennett's „The Old Wives' Tale“

Greta Olson (University of Gießen): The fin-de-siècle's Literary and Scientific Discovery of Ageing

Panel II: Victorian Old Age, Place and the Law
Chair: Inge Kroppenbergh (University of Regensburg)

Katharina Boehm (University of Regensburg): Old Age and the „Transatlantic Indian“: Cross-Racial Mentorship in Narratives of National Belonging

Anna Farkas (University of Regensburg): „The World Is All Being Remade“: Interagen-

erational Conflict in J.M. Barrie's War Plays

Panel III: Victorian (Legal) Intergenerational Dialogues – Youth and Age

Chair: Katharina Boehm (University of Regensburg)

Rebecca Probert (Warwick University): Freedom of Testation in Victorian England

Jochen Petzold (University of Regensburg): „Poor Mother's Growing Old“: The Representation of Ageing and Old Age in „The Girl's Own Paper“ (1880-1900)

Norbert Lennartz (University of Vechta): Worst Agers: Children as Old People in Victorian Fiction

Panel IV: Victorian Narratives of Old Age and Productivity

Chair: Anna Farkas (University of Regensburg)

Anne-Julia Zwierlein (University of Regensburg): „Exhausting the Powers of Life“: Ageing, Energy and Productivity in Nineteenth-Century Scientific and Literary Discourses

Brian Worsfold (University of Lleida): „The True Morality of Fiction“: Ageing Truths in Some Writings by Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Gordon McMullan (King's College London): The Invention of the „Ageing“ Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century: Late Style and German Critics

Panel V: The Gender and Sexuality of Victorian Old Age

Chair: Anne-Julia Zwierlein (University of Regensburg)

Kay Heath (Georgia Gwinnet College): The New Old Man and the Neutral Man-Woman: Gender and Ageing in Victorian Fiction

Karen Chase (University of Virginia): Senile Sexuality

Teresa Mangum (University of Iowa): The Unnatural Youth of the Old „New Woman“

Helen Small (Pembroke College, University of Oxford): Was there a Victorian „Double Standard“ of Ageing?

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