

## Book Reviews

These quibbles suggest the complexity of Kennedy's undertaking. Within this perhaps over-ambitious frame there is much of interest. There are good readings of sentimental deathbed scenes in Charles Dickens's works and in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, showing how graphic physical detail can be used to build a form of spiritual transcendence. The chapter on clinical realism in the Victorian periodical makes good use of the electronic index of book reviews in the *Athenaeum* to explore the extraordinary number of nine hundred reviews completed by Edwin Lankester, mostly on scientific and medical topics. It also draws on the work of the Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical project for its analysis of science in the *Cornhill* and *Macmillan's Magazine*. In neither case, however, does it actually cite the electronic source; Kennedy no doubt assumes that both sources could be easily found, but I would like to make a plea for the full referencing and bibliographical citation of electronic sources.

The book concludes with a chapter linking the work of Freud with that of Rider Haggard, following up Freud's suggestion in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that *She* (1887) was 'a *strange* book, but full of hidden meaning... the eternal feminine, the immortality of our emotions' (quoted p. 190). Although much has been written on Freud's methodology, particularly from a literary perspective, Kennedy offers an interesting re-working of notions of romance, drawing on Northrop Frye, to outline the imperialist, romantic quest figured in Freud's language of exploration. As suggested earlier, however, the fact that *Revising the Clinic* has not looked at nineteenth-century psychiatric narratives means that Freud is rather taken at his own estimation as a figure who overturns preceding practice. Clearly there are many novel elements in his work, but they would emerge more starkly in an analysis that took into account his immediate predecessors. Kennedy concludes that at the beginning of the twentieth century 'the novel and its insights had become altogether unavailable as a discursive model for medical prose' (p. 202).

This is, I believe, an overstatement of the case, and overturns some of the complexity mapped out in the text, returning us to a rather standard model of the triumph of clinical objectivity at the turn of the century.

*Revising the Clinic* has much to offer the reader. Whilst its more sweeping claims are not always convincing, it is always engaging, and offers new ways of thinking about the relationships between literary and medical narrative.

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**Karen Chase,** *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. xiv + 284, £58.00, hardback, ISBN: 978-0-19-956436-1.

Karen Chase is a literary scholar who here examines how old age was represented by some prominent nineteenth-century authors, in particular Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and Lewis Carroll, but also Charlotte Brontë, Wilkie Collins and Elizabeth Gaskell. She adds a very limited discussion of visual representations of old age at this time.

She points out how pervasive older people were in the writing of the period, and how overlooked they have been by scholars. Also, how realistically varied are the characteristics of these older people and their interactions with younger people, especially in the writings of Dickens and Trollope. They are not stereotyped as helpless or inactive. Trollope apparently employed more older characters than any other nineteenth-century fiction writer. In particular, Chase offers an interesting analysis of Trollope's satire *The Fixed Period* (1882), which often seems an anomaly in his work. The story involves a fictional British colony in which people are required to retire at the age of sixty-seven, whereafter, they must spend one year in an institution before compulsory death to ensure

that they do not block the promotion or prosperity of the younger generation or burden them with the costs of their support. She convincingly represents this as a critique of the notion that was spreading at the time that, at a certain age, people became useless, as compulsory retirement at sixty spread through the civil service (where Trollope had once worked) and state pensions were proposed for the remainder of the population; and of Trollope's own fear of being unable to work. Not long after, more optimistically, William Morris' utopia, *News from Nowhere* (1890) represented older people as long lived, vigorously working and fully integrated with their community.

Sometimes the argument is hard to follow for readers not intimately familiar with the works under discussion. Chase's grasp of the historical context is uneven. Good in parts, but she accepts too readily Laslett's now much-challenged argument that, because older and younger generations did not normally share a household through centuries of English history, there was little inter-generational support. Support and exchange – from older to younger as well as the reverse – was perfectly possible, and normal, when they could afford it, across the boundaries of separate households in the nineteenth century, as before.

Also, perhaps because she knows more about the nineteenth century than about earlier periods, her claims that from the 1870s, the 'public was aging and, for the first time in numbers and influence great enough to constitute a dominant perspective', and that society and culture were 'only just beginning to take old age into full account' and 'the aging population was newly visible' are overstated. People aged over sixty were only about five per cent of the UK population at this time, an exceptionally low proportion compared with ten per cent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rapid increase through the twentieth century. She also underestimates the presence of older people in society and in visual and other cultural forms in earlier periods.

The book culminates in a discussion of the work of Charles Booth and the proposals for the first state old-age pensions, to which he contributed at the end of the century, taken as emblematic of the changing perceptions of older people. However, Booth's writings on poverty in old age cannot, as Chase suggests, be seen as seeking to represent the situation of *all* older people. His primary concern was with poverty and the need to remedy the poverty of too many older people, hence he, among others, proposed pensions. The pensions debate was not, as she claims, simply 'masculinised'. The plight of men who worked hard for years, only to end their lives in poverty, was a cause of concern, but so was the fact that most older people were female and tended to be poorer than men. When state pensions were introduced in 1908, they took the form they did – non-contributory, not insurance based – because most women could not afford insurance contributions; and Booth was not 'politically conservative'.

The pensions debate was not a product of an unprecedented preponderance of older people or symptomatic of their unusual cultural prominence, but a reformulation of a very old concern about impoverished, marginalised older people, and a sign of the belief that the wealthy country Britain had become, in which poor people were gaining a stronger political voice (aided by Booth among others), should do better by them. The spread of pensions and retirement in the twentieth century did increase age stratification and division, but this was an unintended consequence of a cluster of changes, including a real increase in numbers.

This book contains real insights into the literary representation of older people in the nineteenth century. It is less reliable in other respects.

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