

Erin J. Campbell, ed. *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations*.

Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. x + 218 pp. + 28 b/w pls. index. illus. bibl. \$94.95. ISBN: 0-7546-5083-9.

This intriguing, occasionally maddening, volume attempts to broaden the range of examinations of age and aging in the early modern world. It largely succeeds, adhering to the editor's stated goal of examining "cultural representations of old age in early modern Europe" (1). As with many collections, the topics vary widely, as does the quality: happily, most of its eleven essays reward the reader. Closer editorial supervision would have eliminated repetitions throughout, particularly of the various schema for categorizing old age or stages of life, and of gender differences.

The editor might also have avoided exaggerating the novelty of both subject and methodology. Everyone since Creighton Gilbert has acknowledged that perceived ability, or lack thereof, determined age as much as actual years lived. Moreover, if we characterize the "necessity to reconcile the tension between the positivist methods of social historians and the relativist positions of culture historians" as "newly realised," or need Paul Johnson's reminder "to re-emphasize 'the situatedness of historical text within ambiguous and multiple constructions of meaning'" (3) we have simply forgotten the basics of historiographical analysis, and should refresh our memories.

Fortunately such pretensions do not pervade the collection as a whole. Several essays present closely-argued analyses that reward even the nonspecialist with their insight and subtlety. Nina Tanton's essay falters initially but then gains impetus when the author turns to *Coriolanus*, emphasizing that the old men "fail to match

up to these ideals of the wise *senex*" (28), but that "the play does contain an image of wise old age and, unexpectedly, it is invested in a woman," Volumnia (31). Philip D. Collington's readings of Othello, Prospero, and Lear in "Sans Wife: Sexual Anxiety and the Old Man in Shakespeare" convincingly explore levels and nuances of age-induced fear.

Stella Achilleos's "Youth, Old Age, and Male Self-Fashioning: The Appropriation of the Anacreontic Figure of the Old Man by Jonson and his 'Sons'" is a real tour de force, presenting a political as well as a subtle literary reading of the Anacreontic genre. Kevin P. Laam also shines in "Aging the Lover: The *Posies* of George Gascoigne," which carefully guides us simultaneously through Gascoigne's poetry and the frameworks the poet fashioned for it. Aki C. L. Beam's contribution, "'Should I as Yet Call You Old?': Testing the Boundaries of Female Old Age in Early Modern England" suffers from the same insubstantial framing as Tanton's essay, but it too rewards the reader once engaged with her sources, namely female diarists in early modern England. Different in subject and tone is Daniel Schäfer's examination of the interactions between medical and nonmedical texts addressing aging, which illustrates the confusion in both professional and lay thought on the subject.

Visual representations of old age in all its ambiguity are also well-served. "Thematic Reflection on Old Age in Titian's Late Works," by Zbynek Smetana, uses the themes of hubris and humility to analyze Titian's most enigmatic self-depictions, as King Midas and as Saint Jerome. Mary E. Frank's "Visible Signs of Aging: Images of Old Women in Renaissance Venice" adds to a growing body of evidence proof that women, even old women, were significant actors in a theoretically patriarchal society.

The three remaining essays, by Maria Teresa Ricci, Erin J. Campbell, and Allison Levy are neither as cogent nor as rewarding as the majority. Ricci leads Castiglione's *Courtier* down a tortuous path of Aristotle and Plato, real and ideal — intriguing, but ultimately tangled. Campbell posits a now-missing young male counterpart to *La Vecchia*, hanging her argument on a slender thread of evidence. Levy becomes too caught up in her own imagery and wordplay. Over-enamored perhaps with her first focus, widowhood, she states, for example, "Necessarily phallic, definitively fetish [*sic*], the widowed black leg also overcompensates" (172). This and many other arbitrary assignments of meaning generate only exasperation, not illumination.

Last, and linked to the above comments, is a plea regarding cultural studies: male anxiety, particularly as linked to female sexuality and death, appears frequently in the volume. Too often it is posited as a self-evident and sufficient explanation for all kinds of behaviors and expressions: it is not. The most successful essays in this collection begin with texts or artwork and then tease out their various implications, while the least assume certain *mentalités* and impose them on the sources.

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