

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

### *The Rise of Midlife in Victorian Britain*

A man rakes his fingers through his beard as he peers into a mirror, startled by the possibility that a gray hair may have materialized on his face (figure 1.1).<sup>1</sup> Such images punctuate our daily lives to the point that we only half attend, barraged by advertisements and commercials that peddle the latest age preventative to our commodity-addicted culture. In this case, however, the familiar scene is Victorian, a *Punch* cartoon by John Leech published in 1852. Its comedy rests in the gazer's quandary about age identity as he jumps back and forth between relief and alarm: "Good gracious! Is it possible?—No! Yes! No!—Yes! Yes, by Jupiter, it's a grey hair in my favourite whisker!" The sketch's title, *Tempus Edax Rerum*, which appropriates the classical line "Time, the devourer of all things," lends a tragicomic air to the sufferer's plight, his fate hanging upon the appearance of a single hair. We are all too familiar with this dilemma. We know that the first gray whisker symbolizes much more than just loss of melanin, announcing the onset of a deterioration that leads first to old age and ultimately to death. And, from the perspective of our current youth-adulating consciousness, the prospect of facing the former can appear almost more difficult to endure than the latter.

Though this picture may seem routine to our early twenty-first-century eyes, it encapsulates an idea that emerged with great force in the Victorian era and changed Western concepts of the life course: the belief that the middle years begin an inevitable and calamitous decline.<sup>2</sup> As the cartoon pokes fun at aging, it also registers an anxiety about early signs of senescence that gained enough cultural authority in the nineteenth century to generate a new term, the word "midlife" first appearing in an English-language dictionary in 1895. "Middle age" had been a feature of the life course for centuries before the Victorian era, based on the Aristotelian notion of *akme*, the peak and "prime of life," dubbed "the perfect age of man's life" or "ripe age" in medieval Britain and often gendered male (Dove 6,

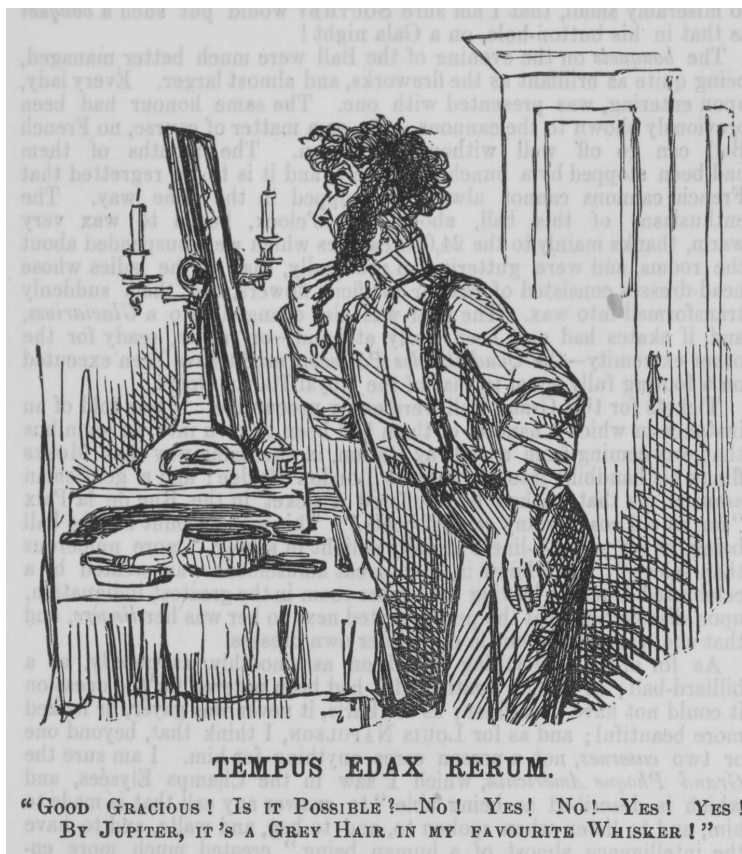


Figure 1.1. Cartoon. *Punch* (1852): 216. The Library of Virginia. Reproduced by permission.

29).<sup>3</sup> This concept differs strikingly from our construction of “midlife” as decline, the inception of loss and a sense that time is running out. The view of midlife as the beginning of the end, an inevitable slide into deterioration, is now commonly associated with the term “midlife crisis” first articulated in 1965 by French psychologist Elliott Jaques.<sup>4</sup> In *Aging By The Book*, I explore the nineteenth-century roots from which this theory grew.

Leech’s cartoon points to several issues of identity which form the territory of this study. The gazer is a typical British citizen according to Victorian notions of subjectivity, a white, middle-class male. Gender is a key component both to his age anxiety and this book—after all, the gray hair appears in his beard, a secondary sexual characteristic that is decid-

edly male.<sup>5</sup> What if the midlife sufferer had been a woman? How would a cartoon represent the first manifestations of her aging, and would such a joke have been considered funny in the same way? The man's clothing and surroundings suggest neither wealth nor poverty—how important is his middle station to the concern he feels? And, what if the man had been designated ethnically “other” in Victorian terms—perhaps Indian or African—would his race have any bearing on his concerns about age? The most uniquely midlife aspect of this cartoon and the feature most basic to my project, however, is the man's uncertainty, his sense of existing tenuously in an ambiguous, uncharted zone of the life course, a nervous need to understand his position in a liminal space between youth and age.

In order to answer the questions both explicit and implicit in this sketch and the cultural issues Leech suggests, I draw on sources such as medical literature, demographic data, and advertisements, but I center my attention most extensively on Victorian novels. The characters I examine are white and middle- or upper-class Victorians created with and depicted as possessing particular assumptions about gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, and social class. I consider ways in which these suppositions shifted and were shaped by the notion of midlife, an aspect of subjectivity intersecting with and complicating all other categories. *Aging by the Book* explores the rise of midlife in Victorian Britain as a new way of understanding the human life span, an age ideology that was fully deployed by the fin de siècle. Our current sense of midlife decline emerged in the nineteenth century, a credo that has only continued to gain power as Western cultures become ever more youth-oriented, increasingly devalue aging, and push back the years of danger to earlier stages in the life course. I argue that today's hyper age-consciousness, with its aura of a fate worse than death, is a dogma we have inherited from the Victorians, our predecessors in midlife trauma.<sup>6</sup>

### I.

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, academic studies in the humanities began to explore race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, state of health, and other such concepts as central to individual and collective identity. At the same time, healthcare specialists, social scientists, and historians began to consider the importance of age, but literary and cultural theorists have been slow to enter the discussion.<sup>7</sup> Helen Small's recent book *The Long Life* is a welcome exception to the scanty literary analysis of aging. As she points out, though many literary texts deal with the later years, it is “surprising that so few critics have read these works for what they have to say about age” (5). The few age-related studies of

the Victorian era are almost completely confined to explorations of childhood and old age, and in this field as elsewhere, midlife has been “the last portion of the life span to be ‘discovered,’” as anthropologist Margaret Lock insightfully comments about her own field of study (45).<sup>8</sup> To exclude the concept of age is not only to ignore, but also to deny, its pervasive influence on the way culture constructs our identity as humans and by such denial to remain unconscious of and therefore vulnerable to age’s hegemonic intensity.

Discussing midlife as a creation of certain twentieth-century cultures, age theorists point to its absence in many non-Western societies, a gap that makes obvious the culturally constructed nature of life stage theories.<sup>9</sup> We tend to view age uncritically as an unvarying and inevitable process, a stable element of being that is biologically determined in a uniform progression, occurring in virtually the same way in all places at all times. Only recently has age’s malleability begun to be recognized (Lock 47). Age is universal, a fact of existence for all living things, but one understood differently by each society and era. As sociologists Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth argue, we must look beyond viewing age as something “reducible to biological processes of physical decline which take place in some vacuum sealed off from social life” (“Images” 308). Culture prescribes how age should be and often is experienced—both biologically and behaviorally—through life course paradigms. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette points out, “whatever happens in the body, humans beings are aged by culture first of all,” placed by age expectations into categories that prescribe possibilities for identity (*Declining* 3). While a grandmother’s wrinkle in China is interpreted by her granddaughters as a marker of increased status, the same wrinkle in the West is read as a sign of lost youth and a proof of decay (Featherstone and Hepworth, “Images” 306). Western cultures place great stress on chronological years, and transition from one life stage to another often is discussed in terms of significant birthdays—are we “over the hill” at thirty? . . . forty? . . . fifty? Some cultures emphasize other factors. For example, progression through social roles according to community status, including alterations in the lives of one’s children, may be more significant than chronological age or biological symptoms (Shweder xi).

Though meanings assigned to age are culturally determined, in any study of age we must also acknowledge the physical body. Age theory always exists in a tension between biological essentialism and cultural cues. Kathleen Woodward argues that “a position of pure social constructivism” is not possible, because “[w]e cannot detach the body in decline from the meanings we attach to old age” (*Aging* 18–19). Gullette, however, wants to do exactly that, at least as far as possible, asserting, “I would like to be at a point equivalent to that argued by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, inter-

rogating aging as a ‘natural process’ altogether, but I think that the most age studies can do now is to urge a radical social constructionism that pushes ‘the natural’ out of context after context” (*Declining* 245–46).<sup>10</sup> Though we cannot escape the body altogether, we must be vigilant to examine formulaic interpretations, scrutinizing cultural assumptions. Only when we question what we see as “natural” about aging do we become aware of the ways in which our perceptions are fashioned by cultural cues. Though aging occurs in the interplay between physical facts and socially constructed meanings, any experience of its biological aspects is always filtered through how we have learned to perceive them.

The concept of midlife itself especially is difficult to define because it lacks clear cultural or biological markers of onset and cessation. Certain bodily changes may be associated with middle age, but none conclusively initiate or end this stage. Though theorists have attempted to use menopause as the inception point for women, it has proved an unreliable index, occurring as it does across a wide range of ages (Levinson et al. 24).<sup>11</sup> Key events in family and community status usually associated with the middle years—one’s children growing up and leaving home, parents dying, or grandchildren being born—can be unreliable indicators, because familial rites of passage are chronologically inconsistent and individually variable, such as children of older parents who are still young when their parents die, or parents past middle age raising teenagers (Woodward, *Aging* 186). Some cultures mark the advent of midlife by significant life passages. For example, Sudhir Kakar reports that in semirural India, one enters the Hindi stage of *burhapa* or abstinence at fifty (79), and when the first child marries the parents begin a “psychological transition . . . into middle age” (78). Some may even cease their sexual relationship, because “It is thought to be polluting and undignified for two generations to copulate under the same roof” (Shweder xi).

While biology and society may suggest certain midlife boundaries, none are conclusive and all are contingent upon interpretation, factors such as gender, class, and age cohort influencing how people define midlife. Surveys have shown that in late-twentieth-century Britain, men and the middle class were considered to enter midlife later than women and the working class (Benson 7). Women and men may define middle age differently, each group having one paradigm for itself and another for the other gender. In addition, as the adage goes, “old” is always twenty years beyond your current age, definitions tending to exist on a sliding scale determined by one’s own position. One example is a study by psychologists Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James that found people in their twenties locate midlife onset between ages thirty and fifty-five, while those in their sixties and seventies believe it occurs much later, in the forties to seventies (3).

Because middle age is most often defined as the chronological middle of the life span in Western cultures, changes in life expectancy should produce alterations in ideas about its onset and cessation. Lachman and James believe that midlife is not a recognized stage in cultures with shorter life spans and early onset of certain key life events, but as life expectancies rise, what was once considered old age becomes midlife (2). Jon Benson reports this phenomenon in Great Britain: between 1901 and 1930 middle age was believed to begin at thirty-five, but by 1950 a popular periodical claimed, "While it is true that people are living longer, it is also certain that they retain their youth much longer. A woman at forty is not middle-aged now as she was in Victorian times" (11). By the mid-twentieth century, the general consensus in Great Britain was that midlife began at age forty and lasted until sixty, a shift of a decade from census figures in 1851 and 1871 that defined midlife as between thirty and fifty (Benson 9).<sup>12</sup>

As Gullette contends, the inception of midlife cannot reside in a particular age or date, but is contingent upon our personal application of societal norms: "The middle years begin when the culture gets you to say they do" (*Declining* 159). Changes in health care and technology that enable us to increase longevity could, at least theoretically, push midlife back further and further. Obviously, neither chronological, biological, nor sociological factors alone are sufficient for defining midlife (Levinson et al. 322). Only by placing various aspects of midlife within a cultural context can we begin to understand its spectrum of meanings, the project of this book in regard to Victorian Britain.

## II.

What makes the Victorian era so important in the history of midlife? After all, "middle age" was not a new concept but for centuries had designated the apotheosis of adulthood. Medieval writings "exalt and glory in a middle age which . . . was represented as being possessed of exuberance, strength and maturity" (Dove 3). From the medieval period to the nineteenth century, steps-of-life drawings represented the life course with "remarkable consistency" as an arched stairway that accords with Aristotle's principle of *akme* or prime occurring after seven periods of seven years (Covey 18; Dove 28). A male stands on the top step labeled fifty while younger and older versions descend on his left and right in drawings that became the "standard bourgeois image of a lifetime" from 1500 to about 1850 (Cole 19).<sup>13</sup> As the examples in figures 1.2 and 1.3 illustrate, separate depictions appeared for men and women during the seventeenth century, emphasizing a proper gendering of the life span with an apex at fifty (Cole 28).<sup>14</sup> In the



Figure 1.2. Anon. Engraving. c. 1630. Folger Shakespeare Library: ART Box A265, No. 1. Reproduced by permission.



Figure 1.3. Pieter Nolpe. Engraving. c. 1660. Folger Shakespeare Library: ART Box A266, No. 2. Reproduced by permission.

nineteenth century, Americans Currier and Ives issued twin drawings that moved women's peak back to thirty, while men's remained at fifty (Cole and Edwards 260), but other nineteenth-century artists, such as the British James Baille, retained fifty as the high point for both genders (Covey 16–17). Though Peter Joerissen and Cornelia Will's *Die Lebenstreppe*, the definitive collection of steps-of-life images, contains examples produced throughout the twentieth century, the popularity of these prints waned in the nineteenth century. Chris Gilleard attributes this demise to rising levels of unemployment and privation among the elderly that moved decrepitude to earlier years during the Industrial Revolution (156).<sup>15</sup>

Susannah R. Ottaway argues that the eighteenth century was an especially crucial period in the history of age because demographic changes such as lengthening life span, earlier, more fertile marriages, and the emergent Industrial Revolution affected definitions of old age (6). The elderly began to be seen as a separate cohort in the overall population, age came to be defined chronologically rather than by functional capacity and fitness, and the concept of elders as dependents or "burdens" on society developed, setting the stage for nineteenth-century pension schemes (Ottaway 13). Due to the secularizing influence of Enlightenment thought, philosophical texts were less oriented around "the good death" and focused more and more on how to age well (Troyansky, "The Older Person" 51–52). Since the early modern period, longevity literature had focused on ways to extend a "green old age," which included lengthening life, preventing disease, and forestalling signs of age, but in the eighteenth century, "green" aging was addressed by a proliferation of new texts that detail methods of diet, exercise, sleep, and even proper breathing (Ottaway 24–25).<sup>16</sup>

While most theorists locate the genesis of apprehension about middle age in the twentieth century, midlife anxiety became fully expressed as a regular part of the life course in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Several factors shifted the problem of aging from longevity to midlife decline during this period. Rising life expectancy was a key component. During the preceding century, the life course had changed from a religious pilgrimage to a secularized journey, and age became a scientific issue with technical solutions (Cole 5). In the past, British people had not kept track of exact age, rounding the number to the nearest decade (Ottaway 45), but as the Enlightenment increased literacy in the eighteenth century, more emphasis was placed on record keeping, and ages became known with greater accuracy (Ottaway 53).<sup>18</sup> As Victorians compiled data at an unprecedented rate, the life course became a uniform system, and statisticians recorded significant demographic changes that affected concepts of midlife. The first census occurred in 1801, and a population surge across the century increased the count from eleven million in 1801 to thirty-seven million in 1901, a rise of



300 percent (Soloway 617). Longevity literature lost popularity when new demographic data, including insurance statistics, made its excessive claims seem “fanciful” to this growing populace (Katz 62).<sup>19</sup> Life expectancy also grew steadily—while the average life span in 1801 was thirty-six years, by 1901, males were living on the average forty-eight years and females fifty-two, an increase of over a decade for men and a decade and a half for women (Laslett 19). These numbers give a somewhat false picture of how long an adult in Victorian England expected to live, however. Though the average life expectancy may have been in the upper forties by the end of the century, this number must be corrected for a high incidence of infant and child mortality. Death rates for both males and females were extremely high from birth to age four, and although numbers climbed in midlife, they did not reach levels comparable to those of early childhood until sometime in the sixth decade (Mitchell 38–41). Most people who survived into adulthood lived at least into their fifties, and, if they had means, they could expect even more, as Victorian physician John Gardner points out: “The rich, or those exempt from the cares and anxieties of business . . . live longer than the middle classes, or the poor” (9).

When did midlife occur for Victorians? The greatly expanded life course affected the timing of middle age, but determining a chronological definition is a complicated process. Some nineteenth-century writers attempted to describe middle age as the exact numerical center of life; for example, an 1830 pseudo-medical treatise by “an Old Physician” claims that at thirty-eight half of life has been lived, which specifies a seventy-six year average life span (257), well above the census figures of forty-one years for 1831 (Laslett 19). This disparity between words and figures can be understood, however, in terms of personal experience rather than life expectancy averages. Despite what statisticians reported, Victorians knew individuals regularly lived to become octogenarians, and some even nonagenarians or centenarians. In addition, while the compilers of the 1871 census defined middle age as the period of years between ages thirty and fifty for both men and women (Benson 9), statisticians’ clear, gender-neutral, and seemingly definitive statement is challenged by fiction which indicates a much more complicated scenario.

As I show in chapters 2 and 3, literary evidence consistently demonstrates that women were aged into midlife earlier than men, due in particular to the concept of spinsterhood and medical theories of reproduction. The nineteenth-century novel routinely relegates single, thirty-year-old women into spinsterhood, a paradigm inherited from the eighteenth century when a woman was pushed across “the threshold from marriageable girl to old maid” at thirty, with a radical shift in status (Ottaway 43–44). Early in the nineteenth century, Jane Austen indicates the boundaries of female

marriageability when Frederick Wentworth comments in *Persuasion* (1818), “Yes, here I am . . . ready to make a foolish match. Anybody between fifteen and thirty may have me for asking” (86). Elizabeth, the eldest Elliot daughter, feels “her approach to the years of danger” at age twenty-nine (38), because she had, after all, been on the “market” for almost fifteen years. That spinsterhood automatically associated women with middle age is evident in Dinah Mulock Craik’s *Hannah* (1871) when the protagonist, at thirty, is described as both “an old maid” (27) and a woman “on the verge of middle age” (16).

While Victorian novels depict women nearing middle age at thirty, they present equivalent men as still young. When Jane Eyre first meets Rochester she notes that he “was past youth, but had not reached middle age: perhaps he might be thirty-five” (114). Craik’s *Hannah* says that “men are young still at thirty” (21), and Lady Laura in Anthony Trollope’s *Phineas Finn* (1867–69) observes that a “woman at forty is quite old, whereas a man at forty is young” (1.74). In contrast to women, men also remain marriageable in their forties. In *Phineas Finn*, the narrator specifically points out that Robert Kennedy at forty has all the requisites of a good husband: “Mr. Kennedy was an unmarried man, with an immense fortune, a magnificent place, a seat in Parliament, and was not perhaps above forty years of age. There could be no reason why he should not ask Lady Laura to be his wife . . .” (1.55–56). In Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*, Roger Carbury at forty is “still regarded . . . as a young man. They spoke of him at the county fairs as the young squire. When in his happiest moods he could be almost a boy” (1.130). Though Hetta Carbury joking calls Roger “old,” she specifically states he is marriageable, asserting, “Men a great deal older get married every day” (146).

As I discuss in the next chapter, Victorian novels depict male midlife onset in the forties. Arthur Clennam, forty at the beginning of *Little Dorrit* (55), describes himself as “in middle life” (59) and as having “lived the half of a long term of life” (86). Mr. Broune in *The Way We Live Now* is called middle-aged at fifty (1.287), and Mr. Maule, Sr. in *Phineas Redux* (1873–74) is described as “hardly beyond middle life” in his mid-fifties (1.183–84). Victorian fiction makes a finer distinction than the census designation of thirty to fifty, specifying a decade’s difference for men and women, with middle age occurring for females in their thirties to late forties and men in their forties and fifties.

Novels also depict men as at the height of their attractions in middle age while women are past their prime. Caroline Norton begins *Old Sir Douglas* (1868) with high praise for midlife men that contrasts with a critique of women: “There is no example of human beauty more perfectly

picturesque than a very handsome man of middle age,” with his “air of customary command, of mingled majesty, wisdom, and cordial benevolence” (1.1). However, “with the other sex it is different,” because, she explains, “bloom is an integral part of woman’s loveliness, and every day that brings her nearer to its withering takes away something of her charm” (1.2). As Amy M. King argues, Victorian female beauty was assessed by the botanical metaphor of “bloom” that assigned value to women in reproductive terms as sexually ripe and fertile (8). When women near the age of menopause, which was considered to occur in their mid-forties, they are described with images of lost “bloom,” withering, and fading, past their reproductive prime.<sup>20</sup> In his autobiography, Anthony Trollope implies that women in their fifties are elderly. Though his mother Fanny’s first novel came into print when she was fifty, he records that “till long after middle life she never herself wrote for publication” (*Autobiography* 20).

In addition to identifying midlife onset, it is essential to make a distinction between midlife and old age instead of conflating the two under “aging.” This fusion locks age studies into a binary of young versus old and frequently elides the middle years from the discussion altogether, while the concept of midlife questions and complicates such essentialism. Paradigms of old age also are vital to any discussion about the middle years, because the two are inextricably linked, as midlife is deeply influenced by a culture’s attitude toward generalized aging. However, determining when midlife gives way to old age is not a straightforward issue. Recent work in the history of old age reveals that onset of elderliness has been determined by a variety of means. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane describe three common methods of assessing elderliness in the British past: “chronological” old age, “functional” assessment of physical ability, and “cultural old age,” a combination of these measures along with other factors (4). Thane stresses that agedness was measured on an individual basis in preindustrialized Europe, by “appearance and . . . capacities rather than by age-defined rules” (“Social Histories” 98), though she also identifies sixty as the age most commonly associated with old age onset throughout British history (*Old Age* 16). Shulamith Shahar argues that during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, people were considered to enter old age at some point between sixty and seventy, though function was a more significant criterion than chronology (43). Ottaway confirms that sixty serves as a good average age of entry into elderhood during the eighteenth century, though “individual circumstances rather than strict cultural standards were the final determinants of when the decline of life began” (54). Janet Roebuck contends that before the nineteenth century, function was a more important age marker than chronology for poor law authorities, who considered the indigent elderly

to be those who could no longer support themselves and also looked old (419). However, with the establishment of pension and retirement age in the late nineteenth century, chronological age became more important as an official marker of elderhood.

For the most part, women not only aged into midlife earlier than men in Victorian England, but also were considered elderly sooner, an assessment that historical evidence suggests has been the rule since at least the Renaissance (Ottaway 35). Lynn Botelho identifies old age onset for women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries at around age fifty, due to physical signs of menopause such as “the wrinkled face and gobber tooth, the hairy lip and squinty eye, the stooped back and lamed limbs” (60). Ottaway, however, has not found similar associations of menopause and old age onset in eighteenth-century British women (40) and views markers of age as remarkably similar for both genders, but she adds that depictions of older women were more critical than those of older men (44). Teresa Mangum reports that in the nineteenth century, men were relegated to elderhood when they were unable to work, but women became “old” when they could no longer reproduce—which would have constituted a much earlier old-age onset for females (“Growing Old” 99).

Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth identify a shift in the imagery of aging in Great Britain and the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the elderly were categorized for administrative purposes, and a new stigma was attached to the aging process (“Images” 322–23). In the eighteenth century, though some pensioners began receiving benefits as early as age fifty, sixty was the most common age used for the inception of age-based subsidies (Ottaway 59). The development of poor law benefits and pensions during the nineteenth century necessitated establishing an official number for the beginning of old age. Janet Roebuck reports that responses to the Poor Law investigators of 1834 indicate that most local authorities considered people old if they were unable to support themselves and were fifty or older (418), but commissioners set sixty as the age at which special considerations were given to the inmates of workhouses (419). The Friendly Societies Act of 1875 established fifty as the demarcating year for old age, but that number was amended by the Royal Commission of 1895, which substituted sixty-five for fifty (420). Sixty-five was chosen to be the official pension age by the Old Age Pensions Committee in 1898 (421). The continual reassessment of old age onset by these commissions suggests not only the enhanced importance of chronological definitions for statistics-obsessed Victorians, but also an increased attention to aging in general, as the line of demarcation between midlife and old age was repeatedly refined.

*III.*

The distinguishing characteristic of Victorian middle age in fiction that delineates it from old age is liminality. Whereas old age is depicted as a final stage increasingly associated with the end of certain activities and identities—lessened marriageability, waning sexuality, and retirement from work—midlife plots stress the possibility that character's fortunes may go either way, from acquiescent decline to a sustained youthfulness. This border aspect of midlife is the subject of my project—examining a life passage whose tenor is determined by a combination of individual and cultural meanings—as subsequent chapters demonstrate.

Several cultural shifts in Victorian England had a significant impact on age construction, causing new apprehensions about decline. As I explain at greater length in chapter 2, revised concepts of masculinity increased age anxiety for men, a devaluation that affected aging for the entire populace, because until quite recently “the universal person” has been gendered as male in Western cultures (Butler 9). Early in the century, gentlemanliness was based on breeding and manners, and hallmarks of high social class determined a man's place in the masculine hierarchy (Tosh 86). These qualities were possessed for life—whether at eighteen or eighty, one could be the consummate gentleman—but this measure of a man became outmoded. As the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867 brought middle- and working-class men into the electorate, more respect and authority were conferred upon work as a man's identity, whether in the “professions” or by physical labor (Tosh 74–75), and manliness became the ideal, earned on an individual basis rather than bestowed by hereditary right (Tosh 86). Muscular Christianity began to take hold of the British imagination by mid-century, and manly muscle joined middle-class respectability as prime characteristics of manhood, including the first organized sports in public schools which stressed physical prowess over intellectual achievement (Vance 166). Elite males who lived off of inherited land and wealth appeared effete next to the hardworking householder, and independent self-reliance became important attributes of the true man (Tosh 86–87). The autonomy and physical strength required of the manly man are attributes compromised by aging, however, and while those at the height of vigor might have been able to fulfill the requisites of the new masculinity, as their bodies began to wane, men had reasons for age anxiety. The more that manliness became associated with physicality, the greater the threat to a midlife man's sense of mastery.

By the end of the century, age-based emasculation had increased further. Retirement schemes formalized the idea that a man lost power and status as he grew older, and men whose identities were invested in work saw their

standing wane as they were pensioned out of professional identity.<sup>21</sup> The scramble for Africa and anxiety about Britain's ability to maintain control in India put manhood on the defensive, because empire was considered a theater for the "making" of men (Tosh 209), a test of national "virility" (Tosh 193), and physical strength and endurance were considered necessary to maintain colonial rule (Tosh 195).<sup>22</sup> The New Woman's increasing autonomy also suggested that men were not able to retain gender-based authority (Tosh 205). For midlife men, the first signs of age could signal encroachments on their ability to meet the increasing demands of manliness as courageous adventurers in the colonies and masters over their womenfolk at home.

The *fin-de-siècle* preoccupation with degeneration in individuals and the general population also increased age anxiety. Age itself could be considered definitive evidence of degeneration as the human body began to devolve before one's eyes, a miniature version of the regression of the populace which was becoming feared.<sup>23</sup> This was exacerbated by the furor over homosexuality reflected in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which made private homosexual acts illegal, as well as Oscar Wilde's trials in the 1890s that created concern over increased effeminacy in the population and caused a new reserve about "too much effusiveness or physicality" between men that could be misread (Tosh 115). Some saw homosexuality in the populace as a sure sign of waning masculinity and rising degeneration (Hamilton 67). Midlife men who felt their sexual powers decreasing had even more reason to worry in a culture becoming increasingly focused on virility. The novels I consider in chapter 2 evince an increasing anxiety in midlife men about whether aging makes them lose masculinity and marriageability. By the *fin de siècle*, the physically tough younger man has a clear advantage over an older rival.

Two aspects of women's lives had special significance for midlife aging: an emphasis on reproductive function as the defining characteristic of womanhood and increasing legal rights. For centuries, aging women routinely had been maligned, but in the nineteenth century, as Linnaean botany inspired writers to characterize young nineteenth-century women with metaphors of "bloom" that emphasized their sexual ripeness and, therefore, marriageability (King 8), women were relegated to spinsterhood at thirty and typified by images of withering and sexual desiccation. Women's value came to be defined by their reproductive function, the growing science of gynecology characterizing female generative organs as vulnerable and diseased, completely different from those of males. Because women were considered hysterical beings governed by a wayward and pathological reproductive cycle, we might guess a logical corollary would be increased worth at menopause when this chaotic fertility ceased. However, all females

were seen as “potential mothers, actual mothers, or retired mothers,” whether they had children or not (Jalland and Hooper 5), and therefore the postmenopausal woman depreciated. She was expected to become sexless and focused only on fostering the younger generation’s search for a mate. From their mid-forties, when they were considered menopausal, women were depicted as increasingly less valuable.<sup>24</sup>

As women gained more rights during the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the position of the aging female was also enhanced, at least to a certain extent. Married women obtained legal means to divorce and retain wealth with the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, securing new authority and respect (Tosh 117). Though women still were denied equal status with men in many areas, including the vote, as their rights increased, fiction began to depict some as independent, with more options for their lives. For example, as I explore in chapter 4, Arabella Greenow in Anthony Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?* is allowed to marry the “wild” man for romance and frank erotic attraction rather than the “worthy” man who is moneyed and stable, while the younger women in the novel must make the less exciting, latter choice. Though Victorian fiction represents women as denigrated for aging, especially when their reproductive function ceases in midlife, sometimes their lot is improved by new freedoms, though they continued to be more harshly judged for aging than men.

Another important nineteenth-century development that influenced age ideology is a change in conceptions of time. As Mark W. Turner describes it, “the whole idea of ‘time’ was a problem for the Victorians,” because it both “slowed down” when considered in light of new discoveries that placed humankind at the very end of eons of geologic time but also “sped up” with emerging technology such as railway travel and the telegraph (“Telling” 122). Despite rising life expectancy, the expanded geologic time introduced by Lyell’s and Darwin’s theories created consciousness of a relatively short, insignificant, vulnerable human life span, transforming time from “a relatively stable continuum” to a volatile quantity in short supply which must be carefully attended (Murphy 10, 11–12). In the traditional agrarian economy, daily routines had been conducted according to natural cycles of day and night determined by the seasons, but in industrialized Britain, life became a scheduled round dictated by the clock (M. Turner, “Telling” 128). The exigencies of the railway demanded that people follow standardized schedules, and time-telling devices, both public and private, became a staple of Victorian culture, from the installation of Big Ben in 1859 to the increased availability and use of inexpensive watches (Murphy 13–14). Time was standardized throughout Great Britain in 1880 and demarcated by international time zones in 1884 (M. Turner, “Telling” 123). These new

ways of thinking about time as a limited commodity formed the basis for a new anxiety, that at midlife one's time and therefore opportunities were running out.

Thomas R. Cole and Claudia Edwards suggest several reasons why nineteenth-century industrialization contributed to a more pessimistic picture of aging. Social reform called attention to the harrowing plight of the aged poor, and artists' renderings of "ordinary people" were published widely in burgeoning nineteenth-century periodicals, often depicting their suffering as frightening (220). Because it was more difficult to be poor in the city than the country, when an agrarian populace moved to industrialized urban centers, the troubles of the lower class were worsened, especially the aging who were unemployable in new markets (Cole and Edwards 217). In addition, increased opportunities for wage-labor gave aging parents less control over their offspring as adult children became less financially dependent on their parents. Parental control over family inheritances waned, and the middle-aged lost power (Cole and Edwards 224).

Changes in material production and distribution of goods in the nineteenth century also had an impact on midlife ideology in a new commodification of the body. As the life span lengthened and mass produced and marketed products proliferated across Britain, manufactured goods became a means of age resistance, as I explore in chapter 6. The Crystal Palace exhibits transformed British subjects into consumers ready to educate themselves about and purchase the wide array of goods that had become available (Richards 5, 64–65). By the last decades of the century, an advertising boom metamorphosed age remedies from patent medicine quackery to credible beauty products, and the British populace embraced consumerism as a way to put into practice their growing belief that midlife is a decline that can and should be prevented.

As the idea of a predetermined life course gave way to a new preoccupation with forestalling outward manifestations of age, the medical community focused its attention on the physical aspects of aging, and aging became a "clinical problem" (Katz 66).<sup>25</sup> The elderly became subjects of medical study, and aging was medicalized, signs of age classified as either "morbid" or "normal." What formerly had been seen as normal effects of age, conditions such as thrombosis caused by thickening of the arteries, were listed as disease (Cole and Edwards 244). Though gerontology and geriatrics did not emerge as medical specialties until the twentieth century, Victorian physicians began to feel the need of such experts. Dr. John Gardner notes in the 1875 edition of *Longevity, The Means of Prolonging Life After Middle Age*, that "a distinct class of physicians" was now necessary to deal with the problems of the elderly, and he mentions several who had attained recent prominence (19). When Elie Metchnikoff coined the word



“gerontology” in 1908 during the course of his work at the Pasteur Institute in Paris (Achenbaum 23), he gave a name to aging as a problem that required specialized medical intervention, an idea that had been rumbling across Europe for several decades. As aging became medicalized, midlife increasingly was understood to be a time of incipient danger, an embattled frontier between youth and elderhood that announced the first onslaughts of decline.

#### *IV.*

Tamara K. Hareven delineates three phases that new life stages go through as they are “discovered”: in the beginning, “individuals become aware of the specific characteristics of a given stage of life as a distinct condition among certain social class or groups,” a concept that next is “publicized in the popular culture” and taken up in professional discourse. Finally, the emerging life stage is “institutionalized” and becomes the subject of policies and legislation specific to the needs of the new group (121). Because aging is a capacious, multifaceted aspect of identity with indefinite boundaries, I have chosen to focus this book on specific textual representations of Victorian midlife as manifestations of a new life stage in Hareven’s second phase, a decline ideology about the middle years that became increasingly evident in and popularized by print culture. I begin each chapter with an artifact of print culture—a cartoon, an advertisement, a poem, an essay—that serves as an example of the larger issue taken up in that section. Chapters 2 through 5 contain a series of chronologically ordered close readings of novels that demonstrate an increasing concern with and anxiety about midlife, while in chapter 6, I turn to advertisements as texts that reveal fin-de-siècle anxiety about the middle-aged body. By focusing on these genres, I am not claiming that a new midlife ideology emerged exclusively in novels and advertisements, nor am I saying that the few texts I explore in themselves provide conclusive evidence of a shift in age conscious. However, I do offer these examples of “aging by the book” as representative of many more texts that present a similar preoccupation. As I have presented parts of this project at conferences over the course of several years, one of the most frequent comments has been the suggestion of yet another novel to include. This multiplicity of possibilities demonstrates that midlife is a Victorian issue so ubiquitous it would not be feasible to cover even a fraction of eligible texts here and points both to the need and rich resources for further age studies of the nineteenth century.

Novels and advertisements are unique and provocative vehicles for age studies. Cultural construction of the life course lends itself to both genres,

because, as Gullette has observed, “Age ideology assails its victim in narratives and images” (*Aged* 79). An advertisement is a “carrier of culture” (Loeb viii), a circulating text that echoes and generates current ideas.<sup>26</sup> Novels and advertisements often appeared in proximity, because promotions for hair-restorers and youth-enhancing soaps were printed in the back of periodicals such as *The Graphic* that contained serialized fiction and also were bound into novels published in parts.<sup>27</sup> I consider representations of middle age in both genres not only as reflections of how Victorians viewed midlife, but also contributors of new ideas that augmented midlife redefinition.

Novels are problematic bearers of cultural freight. As many literary critics have noted, though fiction reflects culture, we cannot naïvely assume that novels provide a faithful mirror, because they also simultaneously introduce new concepts to readers and their world. Perhaps the single “fact” of which we can be certain is that fictive imaginings become culturally available upon publication, whether as new ideas or reflections of what is already there. In *How Novels Think*, Nancy Armstrong explains ways in which “the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same,” especially in British fiction where modern, individualized identity came into being and then spread throughout Western culture, “reproducing itself not only in authors but in readers, in other novels, and across British culture in law, medicine, moral and political philosophy, biography, history, and other forms of writing that took the individual as their most basic unit” (3). Elaine Showalter points out that fictional characters “become part of our cultural mythology” after having “leapt out of the pages of their books into popular culture. We know them whether or not we have read the books in which they first appeared” (15). Novels often are conduct books of the imaginary, tutoring readers in how to act, but also inspiring them about possible dreams. Though Lily Dale professes in *The Small House at Allington* (1862–64), “a novel should tell you not what you are to get, but what you’d like to get” (460), fiction fills both functions for real readers, instructing us about what we are as well as to what we may aspire.

In *Aging By The Book*, I focus in particular on midlife decline as a concern of the marriage plot, a primary structuring device in most Victorian novels (Dever 160).<sup>28</sup> Marriage is one of the primary methods used by Victorian characters to establish identity and attempt social mobility, the story of young lovers meeting, falling in love, and marrying on the final page a plot “so familiar as to seem ‘natural’ ” (Dever 161). Countless nineteenth-century novels repeat this pattern, a fairly youthful male protagonist and his always younger female counterpart achieving “perfect happiness” in early adulthood, the remainder of their lives merely a decline from an early apotheosis. Though the middle-aged usually appear as supporting

figures within stories about the continuing stream of young marriageable couples, they do appear as brides and grooms in nineteenth-century fiction, however, in subplots of midlife romance. Though young love may be considered normative and primary, I explore the alternatives offered in these secondary tales.

The “texts” I examine—novels, and particularly advertisements—focus on representations of the midlife body. Victorians believed that the body should represent a person accurately, an idea with a long history in British culture, as evinced by medieval and early modern sumptuary codes. An important aspect of the respectability so dear to Victorians was “being what you seem,” and, in novels, secret histories serve to prove a character’s flaws, from Willoughby’s hidden history of seducing young women and the clandestine Fairfax/Churchill engagement early in the century, to Dorian Gray’s covert debauchery at the fin de siècle. “Being what you seem” included displaying a body that registered a subject’s social worth and marriageability, upon which not only gender, race, and class but one’s age was made clearly evident. At the same time, however, Victorians became increasingly interested in preventing signs of age. Taking charge of age not only can seem liberating but also may produce great anxiety about disjunctions between seeming and being. The nineteenth-century novel is caught in a tension between desire for clearly read signs of age and a perhaps greater need to avoid such signs. Victorian fictions, including those purveyed in advertisements, record the psychological, emotional, and sociocultural history of an emerging decline ideology and its repercussions.

For this study, I have chosen novels that represent midlife aging as an essential aspect of a character’s subjectivity, even if only in subplots. Though I frequently turn to Dickens in these pages, and other novelists also play a part, as I’ve searched for nineteenth-century plots that feature middle-aged characters who struggle with the repercussions of age, I’ve returned again and again to the works of Anthony Trollope, both those that have received wide critical attention as well as one that has remained relatively unknown. Of all Victorian novelists, Trollope shows most interest in and sensitivity toward midlife issues. Trollope has long been identified as a realist writer—Nathaniel Hawthorne described his novels as “a great lump of earth hewn out and put on display,” a characterization Trollope calls “true in its nature” (*Autobiography* 96). His descriptions of numerous midlife struggles provide detailed and telling portraits of Victorian thought about age and its intricate relation to other concepts of identity. Though I’ve limited extensive analysis to only five of his forty-seven novels—*Can You Forgive Her?*, *Phineas Finn*, *Phineas Redux*, *The Way We Live Now*, and *An Old Man’s Love*—I have found a wealth of material with which to work.

## V.

As the masculine ideal became the hardworking, physically fit man of business and empire builder, novels register a new awareness of age-based decline for men, the subject of chapter 2, "No Longer The Man He Was: Age Anxiety in the Male Midlife Marriage Plot." Fictive midlife men ask themselves whether their "time of love has gone by," anxiously questioning their ability to retain erotic and affective power in their middle years, a scenario that appears repeatedly in Victorian novels that feature aging men who court much younger women. In the 1830s and 1840s, Frances Trollope and Charlotte Brontë created plots in which the suitor's age is at issue, but class is a far more significant factor of marriageability. At mid-century, Charles Dickens registered a change, focusing on male aging in several successive novels. Often the older suitor fails in his romantic quests, and only after experiencing an intense bout of age anxiety can he become the worthy husband of a younger woman. In the next two decades, Caroline Norton and George Eliot addressed the aging suitor in stories that reveal how much cultural capital he is losing, even, in Norton's case, when the author sets out to prove his desirability. In the last decades of the century, Anthony Trollope depicted middle-aged men as increasingly inadequate in two novels with plots of age that echo each other. The midlife man fails to make a conquest in either, but the latter text increases age devaluation and suggests a far greater stigma as older men compete against a younger manly ideal. The progression in these novels from worthy midlife husband to rejected, superannuated father figure shows an increasingly diminished status for aging men in Victorian marriage plots.

Nineteenth-century medical theorists such as Edward Tilt constructed male and female sexuality as entirely different, due to a new concept of incommensurability of the sexes that had serious implications for gendered aging. Menopause became increasingly linked to physical and mental illness, and postmenopausal women were seen as sexless androgynes. In the third chapter, "The Neutral Man-Woman?: Female Desexualization at Midlife," I use this theory to posit a Victorian paradigm of sexless service that requires menopausal women to relinquish sexuality and foster reproduction in the next generation in order to be deemed worthy midlife matrons. This model appears in several Dickens novels of the 1830s to 1860s in which midlife mothers are satirized as inappropriate love objects when they attempt to flirt and develop their own romantic possibilities instead of subsuming themselves in their children's marriage market quests. Charlotte Brontë valorizes a widowed mother who orients her life around her daughter's marital fortunes, but she protests against spinsters being obliged to practice the same self-sacrificing behavior. Elizabeth Gaskell upholds the sexless